



Right to Food Campaign (Secretariat)

24, Block A, Adhchini, Sarvodaya Enclave, New Delhi – 110017, India

Date: May 8, 2020

Right to Food Campaign Demands Free Rations, Transport Facility and Dignity for Stranded Migrants

This morning, 15 migrant workers were harrowingly run over by a train in Maharashtra while sleeping on railway tracks due to exhaustion. Another couple from Chhattisgarh were also run over on the highway while cycling home. Migrant workers are the backbone of India's labour force and should not have to risk their lives and make fatal decisions to travel back home on foot and cycles. Instead, governments should make travel arrangements to ensure stranded migrants reach home safely with dignity.

Instead, as the third phase of the lockdown prolongs, four state governments - Karnataka, Punjab, Haryana and Gujarat have apparently urged the Uttar Pradesh government to cancel trains and buses. A few days ago, after a meeting with construction companies and real estate builders, Karnataka had also cancelled 10 outstation trains. Though after intense pressure a few of these trains may be re-started, but destination states are also foot-dragging on consent for arrival. Rajasthan, for example, has abruptly sealed its borders and those without passes are not being allowed to enter due to lack of quarantine facilities in the state. Odisha has disallowed migrants who test COVID positive to enter its borders. Uttar Pradesh has also flagrantly suspended labour laws for three years. These are cruel, arbitrary and unjust decisions which tantamount to forced labour of migrants and violate several constitutional provisions including Article 19(1)(d) which safeguards the right to movement.

On the 29th April 2020 the Ministry of Home Affairs issued an order allowing migrant workers, pilgrims, tourists, students, and other persons who are stranded at different places in the country to return to their home states. But the entire exercise smacks of hypocrisy as it seems that industrial states are directly and indirectly dissuading labourers from travelling, as they want them to complete construction activities before the monsoon. Receiving states are disowning their own people, making them stateless, treating them like unauthorised refugees and pushing them into untold misery, widespread hunger and forced labour. Instead state governments should make all the necessary arrangements to quarantine returnees with food, clean drinking water and sanitation both at various points during the journey and in their respective destinations.

Before the lockdown Indians stranded abroad were airlifted free of cost. Now the central government has planned the world's largest evacuation by air. But with acute class bias, more than 10 million stranded inter-state migrant labourers continue to be ill-treated at every step of the way. Ferrying them home on buses and trains would cost the exchequer only a fraction of the ₹8458 crore spent on [two lavish new Boeing aircrafts](#) in the Prime Minister's fleet. Despite the lockdown, for more than forty days, thousands of migrants have been traversing on foot, cycles, buses and trains desperate to reach their homes.

Sonia Gandhi has even offered that the opposition political party will pay stranded migrant labourers their fare. Activist Medha Patkar has also launched a hunger fast. Though the government claims that migrants across India can travel for free, they continue to be charged exorbitant fares and bribes. Further across states, migrant workers have been queuing at police stations to register themselves for repatriation, but are being fleeced for medical certificates. Instead free COVID-19 tests are necessary to ensure the safety of all migrant labourers.

Migrant workers all over the country are in acute distress. The Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN) [report](#) indicates that 64 percent of workers are left with less than ₹100, only 6 percent received full wages and only one in five have rations during the lockdown. Also, several migrants in slum areas with high density of population and especially in the month of Ramzan have urged that they should be provided dry rations instead of cooked meals. But the only provision that several states have made for migrants and homeless people is cooked food from community kitchens, even if they do not wish to shift to overcrowded shelters with high risk of infection.

In these trying times, in the midst of a national emergency after more than forty harrowing days under lockdown at the very least the government can ensure that migrant labourers are treated with dignity. Also, despite the order by the Home Ministry many of them continue to be charged rent from their landlords and live in unsanitary hovels, several to a room, with dwindling supplies of food and fuel.

The 'One Nation One Ration' scheme is also a misnomer as migrants usually prefer to leave their ration cards with their families in villages. Also after the acute ill-treatment meted out to migrants during the lockdown, many are unlikely to "plan" to return to industrial cities in the near future.

We therefore urge the central and state governments to ensure that all labourers, who are the backbone of the Indian economy be treated with dignity, if there is any hope for economic revival. The Right to Food campaign demands that the following measures to support migrants are immediately implemented:

1. **Free Travel:** Commission Special Shramik trains from all states to ensure that all migrant labourers who wish to return are provided free travel and food during their journey. No state can prohibit migrant labourers from returning home or cancel trains. Train schedules need to be published on the IRCTC website to ensure full transparency in bookings. Information must also be quickly shared with workers so that they do not travel by foot or bicycles. Similarly state buses need to be regularised and fares waived for a period of at least a month to facilitate reverse migration. No borders should be sealed, but instead all migrants should be facilitated to at least reach their villages where panchayats and school bhavans can serve as quarantine facilities where they should be provided adequate food and hygienic facilities. Workers stranded within states should also be provided free transport to reach their home districts and villages.

2. **National Helplines:** Different states have adopted different procedures for registration of migrants. This has created excessive confusion alongside increased police brutality and corruption by middlemen. Creation of a national helpline and help desks at every police station with the support of trade union and/or labour rights organisation representatives with uniform procedure to support all migrants is therefore essential. The registration of workers should be unconditional. At present many states are only allowing migrants who have been detained on the way in shelter homes, schools or other kinds of accommodation provided by the government. No conditionalities should be attached and registrations should

be only based on the workers' choice to return home and not the will of the state on who should move.

3. **Free COVID Tests:** In several states, labourers are being forced to procure medical certification. But this is an entirely meaningless exercise as 50-80 percent of COVID positive cases in India are asymptomatic. Private clinics should also be banned from charging exorbitant sums for this certification. Instead all migrants should be tested and medically screened for COVID-19 free of cost in neighbourhood government clinics, before their travels. Apart from thermal screening, state governments should also ensure mandatory swab tests of all the returnees. Further, separate isolation facilities should be made for suspected or symptomatic workers.

4. **Free Universal Rations:** Provision of dry rations each month in addition to access to community kitchens is essential for migrant labourers. Telangana and Kerala are the only states which have uniformly provided foodgrains to "guest" labourers or migrants. Instead of 'One Nation One Ration', the central government should immediately universalise the public distribution system and specifically allocate additional free foodgrains to all states, to support migrants and all those without ration cards for the period of at least six months.

5. **Wages and Cash Support:** All labourers need to be paid full wages for the 40 days of the lockdown either by their employers or unemployment allowance from the government. The Principal Employer should be responsible for paying full wages and the responsibility should not lie with the labour contractors or thekedars. In addition, migrants in particular need cash support from the central government, over and above initiatives by state governments where the cash transfer should be done either through Jan Dhan accounts. In case the Jan Dhan accounts are not functional or not working the Panchayats or the Municipalities should be responsible for cash transfers.

6. **Universal Employment Guarantee:** Last year only 7 percent of rural households received their full guarantee of 100 days of NREGA work. After the lockdown every effort should be made to ensure that 54 million active NREGA households in 2019-20 receive at least 200 days of work. For the forty days of the lockdown they should also be paid full wages. Also, as already initiated in Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan, it is essential that with physical distancing norms, NREGA worksites are immediately activated in all green zones, with fixed daily wages rather than piece-rate payments. There is also a strong demand to initiate a similar urban employment guarantee.

(Aysha, Gangaram Paikra, Kavita Srivastava and Dipa Sinha)

On behalf of Steering Committee, Right to Food Campaign