

**POLICIES AND
PRACTICES**

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Media on Migrants: Reports from the Field-I

**Pandemic-Induced Return of the Migrant Workers :
Response of the State Government (West Bengal)**

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**Pandemic-induced Return of the Migrant Workers:
Response of the State Government (West Bengal)**

Debashis Aich

2020

Pandemic-induced Return of the Migrant Workers: Response of the State Government (West Bengal)

Debashis Aich *

The Return Journey of Migrants has Started

“We will have to ensure these migrant workers do not have to leave the state in search of a job. They have suffered a lot; at places they have not even received proper food. We do not want them to suffer any more. There is no dearth of opportunities here.”

— Mamata Bandopadhyay, Chief Minister, West Bengal. June 3, 2020¹

The migrant workers are on the move again. They are leaving. Mahibul Biswas of Raninagar in the Murshidabad district of West Bengal has left as well. At the age of 18, Mahibul carries the yoke of the whole family on his shoulders. His father sells goods on the streets; his mother is sick with ulcers; he has two young sisters and a brother. Four months before the lockdown, he had gone to Kerala to work. On May 7, he managed to return home after dishing out a large sum of money.

I met Mohibul in Domkal on August 3. Nur Islam Mandal from Domkal had arranged a bus that would take the workers back to Kerala. Nur had distributed handbills, pasted printed posters in the town. They carried the following message:

“Dear brothers and friends, a bus will leave Laskarpur for Kerala on Thursday, August 7, 2020. You have to keep your Voter ID card and Aadhaar card with you. To book your ticket today, contact this number...” The colourful advertisement poster had a large picture of a super luxury bus and, to attract viewers, the following was written in large font: “Want to go to Kerala?” followed by, “Ticket fare 6,500 rupees.”

Mahibul had come to book his ticket. Three months had passed and he was still without a job. His father managed to get work for a few days under the NREGA or the 100 days’ work scheme. Mahibul had already spent all his savings.

“I’ve to leave. There is no other way. Mother has a bleeding ulcer. I’ve to leave for the sake of my brother and sisters,” said Mahibul. He still looked like a schoolboy. I could not stop myself, and commented, “You ought to study in a Higher Secondary school.” He lowered his head and answered, “What can I do? I’ve admission to Rabindra Bharati Open University — Higher Secondary. I went to a school headmaster and he underlined the chapters that I should study.”

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I don't know what the workers migrating to distant lands carry in their bags hanging from their shoulder or sitting on their head or their back, but Mahibul was surely carrying books underlined by the headmaster, and some pens and copies with him.

Mustakin Mandal of Laskarpur village, Domkal and Enamul Malitha of Sahebrampur, Jalangi, had left as well. There is no work in the villages. Mustakin could earn only 250 rupees a day by cutting jute plants in his village during the pandemic; the wage for digging soil was 200 rupees a day. He used to earn 700 rupees a day in Kerala. Enamul worked in a rubber factory in Kerala. He earned 15 thousand rupees per month. He too went back when the owners asked them to return to work.

Not just Nur Islam Mandal or his young business associate, Mohammad Moinul Hasan, before Eid ul Zuha, a busload of workers came from Kerala to Jalangi in Murshidabad and elsewhere. After Eid ul Zuha, another group of workers got on the same bus and returned to Kerala. The agents or labour contractors of different companies from different states are also sending buses after contacting the workers in different districts of the state. Sometimes the company arranges buses or sends train tickets to the workers willing to migrate back. Large construction companies or their contractors are even chartering planes to take back construction workers from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal. According to a *Business Standard* report published on June 10, various real estate, automobile, construction and textile industries are expecting workers to return in one-and-a-half to two months. Larsen Toubro has sent senior executives to Howrah, Ranchi, Darbhanga to bring back the workers with added incentives. They had a target of taking back 2,30,000 workers in the next 40 days after June. On June 11, *Hindustan Times* quoted Murshidabad District Council President Mosharraf Hossain, "More than three lakh workers had returned to Murshidabad district. Many came back from abroad also. But with the situation slowly returning to normal the migrant workers are returning back to their workplaces." Before migrating back, the workers had to collect a fitness certificate from the government health centres.²

The *Anandabazaar* newspaper on June 25 quoted government sources saying, according to a preliminary list, 12 lakh migrant workers had returned to Bengal and about 80 percent did not want to go back to the other states.³ My experience and fieldwork tell a different story. I visited the migrant workers in Ashina village in the Falta block of South 24 Pargana on July 26, East Gurguria in Kultali block on July 26 and 27, Domkal in Murshidabad district on August 2 and 3 and Changail in Howrah district on August 19. I talked to the workers and artisans who had returned home due to the pandemic-induced lockdown. I did not feel that "80 percent of the migrant workers" were reluctant to go back. Rather, they were eager to return to their workplace and had already started migrating again. The process started with the running of special trains from June 1. Since this time the police did not lathi-charge or make them do sit-ups on roads, nor was there any spraying of chemicals to sanitize them or any visuals of dead bodies lying on railway tracks or highways; the returning migrant workers did not make any news. The over-80 percent unorganized workers became invisible once again.

State after State Declares Lockdown — The Beginning of the Migration

"...a carpenter called Ramjeet, who planned to walk all the way to Gorakhpur near the Nepal border (said) 'Maybe when Modi decided to do this, nobody told him about us. Maybe he doesn't know about us.' — #MigrantLivesMatter, Arundhati Roy.

"Today from 12 midnight, in the whole country, listen carefully, in the whole country today from 12 midnight, there is going to be a complete lockdown in the entire country. Remain wherever you are in

the country. In view of the COVID situation there will be a lockdown in the country for 21 days or three weeks.” — Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Doordarshan, 8 pm., 24 March 2020.

On May 25, in a televised address to the people of his parliamentary constituency of Varanasi, the Prime Minister said “the battle of Mahabharata was won in 18 days; we have to try to win the war against Corona in 21 days.”⁴ Millions of migrant workers in the country, who were by then desperate to return home, didn’t believe in those words. They had already begun to return to their states and villages. Countless people were on the streets all over the country. After the announcement of the lockdown by the Prime Minister, the fleeing migrant workers were detained at various state borders and on the highways. Many got stuck at the railway stations. Majid Ali Mollah, of East Gurguria of Kultali, along with more than 300 people trying to return to West Bengal, were among them. They had left Kerala before the lockdown was announced and reached Chennai Central Station on March 22, only to find that no train was running.

Amallesh Bhuiyan of the same village, however, was able to return home. He left Telangana by train on March 2 and returned home on March 23 after enduring indescribable hardship. Similarly, Basudeb Basanta, a resident of Manasatala in East Gurguria, returned home from Washim in Maharashtra. Arriving at Akola station from Washim in Maharashtra, Basudeb boarded a train on the 19th, accompanied by five other people from this state. They had bought general compartment tickets for 360 rupees each. Basudeb could not even cross the door of the overcrowded train compartment. After travelling for about a day and a half, he returned home on March 21, surviving on water, dry bread and pulses on the way. Rafiqul Sheikh (26) used to sew jeans for children at a factory in Badarpur in Delhi. The factory was shut down four days before the lockdown. Three thousand rupees was due to him as wages. “I didn’t get the due wage even after lots of pleading. I bought a current ticket, travelled in an unreserved bogey, and came back,” informed Rafiqul. He had returned home on March 24.

Dostagir Sheikh (32), of Falta in South 24 Parganas, however, was paid full wages before he returned home. He received his salary on Friday and returned home after boarding a train from Chennai on Sunday morning (March 22). On asking why he came back, he said, “I heard that the virus was coming...it was spreading...it was a contagious disease. I took the wages, informed the *Ostagar* and left for home.” Dostagir, a Zari-artisan, used to work in a boutique in Poonamallee near Chennai.

On March 19, Narendra Modi, in a televised speech had announced a nationwide ‘Janata Curfew’ on March 22 and, after the end of curfew, he also suggested people bang cups and plates and other utensils. Just a week before that, on March 13, Love Agarwal, Joint Secretary at the Union Ministry of Health had claimed, “This (COVID-19) is not an urgent health emergency.”⁵ However, on March 11, the Central government decided to advise the states to enforce the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897. The Secretary of the Union Ministry of Health, Preeti Sudan, gave this information to journalists after a meeting with the ministerial group formed to deal with the COVID situation.⁶

In such a situation, the West Bengal state government ordered the closure of all educational institutions from March 16 to March 31. On March 22, the Union Cabinet Secretary and the Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister held discussions with the Chief Secretaries of States through video conferencing. According to media reports, each state agreed on the need for a lockdown. Shortly afterwards, the Central government advised the states concerned for a complete lockdown in 75 districts of the country. In the case of this state, a complete lockdown was suggested in Kolkata and North 24 Pargana district. The state government not only heeded that advice, it extended the lockdown area further and announced a four-day (March 23 to March 26) temporary

ban on all activities and movements in all major towns and cities including Kolkata, and several parts of each district, asking people to “stay at home”. The next day, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, after assessing the situation, informed that from the same day, that is, from 5 pm on March 23, the entire state was brought under lockdown and it was extended to March 31 from the earlier announced date, March 27.⁷

By this time, not only in West Bengal, a complete lockdown or imposition of Section 144 CrPC was already declared in all the 32 states and Union Territories. A full lockdown was announced in Punjab from March 22, and in Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Delhi and Kerala from March 23 till 31 March.⁸ On March 20, the Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Uddhav Thackeray, announced that everything except the essential services and institutions would be closed all over the state till March 31. People were advised to stay indoors. From the evening of the same day, people, including the migrant workers started flooding the railway stations in Pune, Kalyan and the Lokmanya Tilak station in Mumbai. There was so much rush to board the trains and return home that in addition to the 48 scheduled trains, the officials of Central Railway had to run 16 more special trains.⁹ On March 20, Habibur Rehman, a migrant worker from Changail, travelling to West Bengal, boarded the Geetanjali Express to return home. Habibur started at 4 am from Baikulla, boarded a local train and reached CST in Mumbai. The station was extremely crowded with no space to move around at all. He pushed his way through the crowd, reached the platform and boarded the train. Though he had reserved a seat in the sleeper coach in advance over a month back, he barely managed to sit, and travelled the entire journey back home that way.

The Hindu reported on March 25 how migrant workers like Moumita Majumder of Nadia, Nagpur, Ruby Acharya, a cardboard factory worker from Chennai, Khawar Ulapar, a contract worker from Mangalore port, Krishna Mahali and Mohammad Azim of Tezpur, Assam, (arrived on March 22) and others were stuck for 40 to 96 hours in an inhuman environment without food, water and bathroom at the overcrowded Howrah station. This was not only due to all the trains getting cancelled but also due to the lockdown situation in West Bengal, where all the buses and other vehicles were off the road as well. According to Sukanta Karmakar, Inspector-in-Charge, Howrah Station, thousands of people from Assam, Punjab, Chennai, Kerala, Bihar and Odisha, who were working and living in various parts of the state came to Howrah Station in the hope of boarding train to travel back to their native places. The railway officials had no account of the number of such people. However, according to the police, the Howrah district administration and state transport department had arranged for 130 people to be sent to North Bengal and 291 to Odisha via Midnapore till Tuesday.¹⁰

In other words, the exodus of workers, who were hit by the pandemic and left jobless, began at least two weeks ago. Among the surveyed inter-state workers, Ashraf Mondal of Falta’s Ashina village returned home on March 13 from Telangana, after paying a bus fare of Rs 5,000. And Enamul Malitha of Jalangi, Murshidabad, returned from Kerala on March 15. The ‘great exodus’ of daily wage earners and unorganized sector workers, patients, pilgrims and students stuck in different states began with the imposition of a complete ban on normal public life and economic activities imposed by various state governments, and, of course, the ‘contagious virus’ added to the panic. At the same time, it is important to note that from March 22 midnight, 48 hours before the countrywide lockdown came into effect, the Ministry of Railways had already suspended all long- and short-distance passengers, local and metro trains until midnight of March 31. Only the trains that departed before 4 am on 22 March were allowed to reach their destination. The train service was cancelled on March 22 to ensure the success of the ‘Janata Curfew’ announced by the Prime Minister. It should be kept in mind that 13.5 thousand trains run in the country every day. The country’s most important

lifeline was under lockdown till May 1, when the Shramik Special trains (special train for workers) started running. This single decision took away the main and, at that time, the only means to return home for millions of jobless, creating panic among people stuck in various states.¹¹

Earlier on March 21, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee demanded a ten-day ban on trains entering the state from outside. And the state itself banned inter-state bus services. State Chief Secretary Rajiv Sinha,* on March 21, sent a letter to Railway Board Chairman Binod Kumar Yadav marked 'Most Urgent' and 'Immediate' in this regard.¹² (*He has since been replaced by State Home Secretary Alapan Bandyopadhyay. The current report includes information prior to September 30).

There is no data in the public domain regarding how many workers and their families were part of this pre-March 25 migration across the country. There is no information about the number of workers who returned in buses, trucks or other vehicles at that time. Also, there is no data about the millions who, in desperation, walked on roads and highways, a week after the nationwide lockdown began. The Railway Board could give an estimate of the numbers only until March 24. But where can one find the number of desperate workers who have walked down the roads since March 25? We can only guess by sorting some scattered news.

(A) A report in *Indian Express* on March 24 states, quoting a statement from the government officials in Bihar, that in the last seven days i.e. from March 17 to March 23, an average of three to four thousand people returned every day to Bihar on the Alappuzha–Dhanbad Express. On Sunday alone, i.e., March 22, 4,000 people returned to Bihar on the Pune–Danapur Express.¹³

(B) On March 26, *The Hindu* reported that 30,000 tribal workers had left Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra following the news of the lockdown. At least 30,000 more indigenous workers are still trapped in those states.¹⁴

(C) Workers from all over the country, particularly from the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh walked six hundred, seven hundred and thousand kilometres on foot to reach their native places. Huge crowds flooded the bus stations in Delhi. ANI and Congress leader, Rahul Gandhi, tweeted videos of innumerable people as against only a few buses waiting at the Delhi Bus Terminus. It took four days for the union government, Arvind Kejriwal, the Chief Minister of Delhi and Yogi Adityanath, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, to realize the gravity of the situation. On March 29, the Uttar Pradesh government sanctioned 1,000 buses to repatriate workers from that state, while the Delhi government sanctioned 200 buses. Union Home Minister Amit Shah issued a warning that workers should not be allowed to cross the state borders. He issued an order to stop the workers on the highways and put them in camps.¹⁵

(D) On April 5, news agencies reported, quoting Punyasalila Srivastava, the Joint Secretary of the Home Ministry, saying that food had been provided to 7.5 million people. He further added that 12 lakh persons, including workers and other needy people, had been sheltered in 23,924 camps. It had been achieved through the joint efforts of the states and Central government and volunteers.¹⁶

No questions were raised in this state about the cruel lockdown. In a letter to the Chief Ministers of 18 states, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee requested the state governments to provide accommodation, food and medical facilities to the workers of West Bengal stuck in those states, as "it was not possible for the state government to send aid at this moment".¹⁷

Locked in Homes without Wages, the Helpless Migrant Workers Return Home

“Whether or not we agree with the migrant workers, the rationale in leaving was absolutely sound. They know — and every hour we are proving — how untrustworthy, inconsiderate and cruel their governments, factory owners and middle-class employers like us are. And we are proving that with laws to restrict their freedom of movement.”

— P. Sainath, Founder-Editor, PARI.¹⁸

(1) Amalesh Bhuiyan, 21

Address (WB): Purba Gurguria, Saupara, Kultali, South 24 Parganas

Address (Migrating State): Ramaguddam, Peddapalli, Telangana

Work and Wages: Amalesh went to another state to work for the first time when he was 18 years old. Before the lockdown, he was a centring labourer in a private company. The wage was 350 rupees a day, but the contractor used to take a commission of 20–25 percent of the salary. The accommodation was free. Amalesh lived in a labour ‘colony’, which simply comprised rows of tin sheds at the construction site, with an uneven brick floor. The workers spread papers, sacks or bedsheets on the floor for sleeping. The rooms get extremely hot during the day. If someone wanted a fan, he had to buy his own.

Returning Home: Amalesh started for home on March 21 from Telangana. At the end of a painstaking journey, he finally reached home on March 23. The railway station was jam-packed. He had bought a general compartment ticket, but it was impossible to board the train. So he got into a comparatively less, but still extremely crowded, reserved (sleeper) compartment. The TT fined him Rs 100 for that. He stood on one leg with a bag on his head till Kharagpur. He did not get his salary for the month of March, though, the contractor gave him 1,000 rupees for the ticket and other expenses on the way.

(2) Basudeb Basanta, 35

Address (WB): Purba Gurguria, Manasatala, Kultali, South 24 Parganas

Address (Migrating State): Washim, Maharashtra

Work and Wages: Basudeb was a construction worker. Before the lockdown, he worked as a centring labourer in a private company named Custom Infra (Custom Home Infra and Developers Pvt Ltd). His wage was 600 rupees a day. He did not have to pay for food or accommodation, which was provided at the construction site, living in temporary tin sheds.

Returning Home: On March 19, Basudeb left the construction site at 1 am and went to Akola railway station. He had worked for 18 days that month. The contractor did not pay him anything but gave him Rs 1,000 for the return trip. He bought a general compartment ticket for Rs 360, but was unable to board the compartment. He too got onto a sleeper compartment. The TT fined him 500 rupees. He had only some rotis and chickpeas to eat during the train journey. He was able to manage a little space to sit near the bathroom and could not move at all from there during the entire journey. Someone gave him a bottle of water. He reached home on 21 March.

(3) **Majid Ali Mollah**, 36

Address (WB): Purba (East) Gurguria, Kultali South 24 Parganas.

Address (Migrating State): Thalasseri, Kunnur, Kerala

Work and Wages: Majid and his wife, Ajmira, had gone to Kerala through a labour contractor in Nadia. He lived in a room and the rent was 3,500 rupees per month. The working hours were from 8 am to 4 pm. The wage was 350 rupees per day, 60–70 rupees per hour extra for overtime. For a skilled worker this wage is quite low. Majid agreed and said, “I’ve been doing this job for just two years. Since I am new, maybe I am getting less.”

Ajmira used to work as a domestic help at the house of a Malayali family. She did all sorts of household work from eight in the morning till two in the afternoon. The wage was 300 rupees daily. She was served tiffin once. The contractor had provided her the job; Ajmira and Majid suspect they were paid less by the contractor. Ajmira had received full wages at the time of returning home, but Majid did not receive Rs 16,000 that was due to him from the contractor, which amounts to about 1.5 months or 48 days of his salary.

Returning Home: On March 21, Majid and Ajmira, along with 27 others from West Bengal left for Chennai to return home. When they arrived at Chennai Central Station on March 22, the trains had stopped running. The lockdown started at March 24 midnight. The Tamil Nadu police chased away the passengers, who were mostly migrants stuck at the station premises, with sticks. In the end, Majid and the team from Bengal were forced to take shelter at a lodge near Egmore station. The daily rent of a room for two was 350 rupees. Majid still did not know how long the lockdown was going to last. The cost of a vegetarian meal consisting of only rice and pulse was 60–70 rupees. Within 8–10 days, all their money was spent. The lodge owner said, if they didn’t pay the rent, they would be thrown out. They were in a precarious situation. Fortunately, a local human rights organization, CPDR, came to their aid. They sent Rs 45,000 in two instalments in Majid’s bank account for paying room rents and food for the 30 people in the team.

Meanwhile, the workers used to gather in front of the Chennai Corporation building and demonstrate. According to Majid, “One day I saw a notice (advertisement) of a bus service in the building. I took a picture of the advertisement and talked to everyone. The owner of the bus came while the owner of the lodge was also present. The bus owner demanded Rs 10,000 as fare for each passenger. At last 30 of us returned home travelling in the bus following all the health protocols. The journey was not without problems. The bus was not allowed to stop anywhere in Odisha. We could not eat. For one whole night and a day we were without food. Even the bus driver, despite pleading, got only a cup of tea. At last, I returned home after three days and nights of travelling by bus.”

(4) **Samar Roy**, 26

Address (WB): Purba Gurguria, Bhasa, Kultali, South-24 Parganas.

Address (Migrating State): Balangir, Odisha

Work and Wages: Samar was working at ‘Glaze Trading India Private Limited’ in Balangir town in Balangir district of Odisha. In his words, his work is ‘direct selling and marketing’. There were no TA and DA allowances. The salary was paid on a commission basis on total sales. The monthly income was about 10–12 thousand rupees. At times, it fell to as low as Rs 5,000.

He used to live in a rented house in Balangir. At times, seven people shared one single room. The rent amounted to about 600–700 rupees per head per month. With the announcement of the lockdown from March 25, both the company and the office were closed. Neither Samar nor any of

his team members got their salary for the work they did in March. Everyone was stuck till June 22. Samar said, “The municipality gave rice, pulses, potatoes, oil and biscuits twice in a month. I used to buy vegetables and other necessities when the market was open for a while in the morning. Later on, I had to seek help from home.”

Returning Home: Samar said that the Odisha government had not approved trains and buses for migrant workers. Private cars were charging 30–40 thousand rupees per person. Samar said, they had heard that thousands of migrant workers from Odisha were returning from other states, which was why workers from other states struck in Odisha could no longer be given food rations. The Patnaik government, though initially reluctant, was finally compelled to allow the workers to return by trains and buses. Examples of the Odisha government’s role can be seen in the video messages of the workers shared on social media and in the anxious posts of netizens, journalists and social workers.

On April 29, one of the elderly members of a migrant workers’ team posted a video on Facebook asking for help while he was in quarantine at a primary school in Chuhat in Odisha’s Mayurbhanj district. The main point in his video appeal was that the local Panchayat chief had informed them that everyone should leave the state by May 3. That was an order of the Odisha government. Thirty-one workers from Birbhum and Murshidabad appealed to all, including the West Bengal government, to take them back to their homes. The video went viral courtesy of the social organization Bangla Sanskriti Mancha (BSM).

On May 1, the group was suddenly forced out of the Chuhat Quarantine Centre by the local villagers. The videos and stills taken on mobile phones of their eviction were spread once again through social media. Journalist Swati Bhattacharya shared posts about the helpless situation of these migrant workers on Facebook.¹⁹ Finally, when the news was brought to the notice of Jhargram MLA Sukumar Hansda and Superintendent of Police Amitabh Bhar, they intervened and arranged to bring them to Jhargram by bus on May 2.

Let us come back to Samar’s case. He said, “The local doctor and even the police suggested I should walk or cycle back to home. The risk of catching an infection from the virus will be less.” Samar and some others like him started looking for a bicycle. They noticed an advertisement on the wall of Balangir Municipality, and seven bicycles were purchased at Rs 2,300 each. They had to arrange the money from home. Finally, on June 22, “Seven people — four from Kakdwip, one from Maipith, one from Raidighi and I left for home.” All seven of them left Odisha for home on that day at 5 pm. They packed bread, flattened rice, bananas and water. The distance from Balangir to Kolkata by road is 720 km. From Kolkata, Kultali is another 64 km, Maipith 96 km, Kakdwip 90 km and Raidighi about 60 km. They ultimately reached home after midnight on June 26.

(5) **Sabir Molla, 26, Rehena Molla, 21**

Address (WB): Purba Gurguria, Saupara, Kultali, South 24 Pargana

Address (Migrating State): Pandiampalayam, Erode, Tamil Nadu

Work and Wages: Sabir and Rehena worked in a coco-block factory in Pandiampalayam. When asked about the name of the company, they called it Gopal Mill/Nadu Mill. Their job was to grind coconut husk in a machine. The ground husk was used for making coco blocks of various sizes. On average, their daily wage was 450 rupees each and the working hours were from 7 am to 7 pm. Sabir began to travel to other states for work 6–7 years back, though they had joined the current job only six months back. For ground coco husk enough to fill a lorry, the total income was Rs 5,500. This was divided among 16 workers, comprising eight families including married couples. Sabir produced almost two-and-a-half sacks, or 18 kilograms of ground coco husk. Together, they produced enough

to fill one-and-a-half lorries. The company owner lived in a house adjacent to the factory. The eight families lived in the same building, in eight different rooms, for which they did not have to pay rent.

Rehena's Statement: Rehena's work was not limited to 12 hours of factory work. She had to wake up when it was still dark, cook and also feed her daughter. She could rest a little in the evening after work until it was time to make dinner again. The day ended around midnight with the washing of utensils. She had to wake up at 4 am.

Since the work was 12–13 hours long, they had to drag their three-and-a-half-year-old daughter to the factory. The little girl played on her own inside the factory, breathing the factory air filled with coco husk powder. Working in such conditions led to skin itching and a burning sensation in the eyes — even frequent fever, cold and cough. They had taken up the work hoping to earn well.

Returning Home: The 16 workers got their weekly payments for the first two weeks of March. Then they were stuck in the workplace for two-and-a-half months during the lockdown. They received a plate of rice each, once a day, with some gourd curry. The quantity did not even meet half of what they required. Whether this food came from the government or some volunteers' group, Sabir did not know, but it was not provided by the factory owner. The neighbours sometimes helped with rice, vegetables and other food and even small amounts of money. Sabir felt they were living like beggars.

They never relented in their efforts to go home during these two-and-a-half months. They went around trying to find a way, from the local police station to the 'Talukdar's office'. They even sent words to their village. The local political party said that the government would provide buses, even took their Aadhaar numbers, but nothing happened. Sabir and Rehena tried taking a bus on their own but the bus-owner asked for two lakh rupees, whereas the two of them barely had a few thousand left from their savings. Finally, they got to know about the train (Shramik Special) from the Talukdar's office. They boarded a bus to go to the station and the Talukdar's employees helped them board the train. On the way back, the water that was provided was undrinkable and the food was insufficient, with no provisions for children. For Rehena, it was also difficult to travel in the general compartment since, in addition to the hardships, she was uncomfortable travelling with so many unknown men.

(6) **Ashok Mondal, 27**

Address (WB): Purba (East) Gurguria, Saupara, Kultali, South 24 Parganas

Address (Migrating State): Adani Port Road, Mundra, Kutch, Gujarat

Work and Wages: Ashok Mandol had been going to work in other states for the last six years. When the lockdown started, he was working as a contract worker in the Adani Port in Kutch. His job was to pack various food grains such as rice, pulses, sesame, nuts etc. into sacks and seal the sacks with the help of a machine. He was paid 25 paise per packet. Ashok and other workers sealed about 1,800–2,000 packets per day, earning about Rs 450–500 per day, but the contractor took away a part as commission or *bhaaga* (if a team of eight was working, then their total wage was divided into nine parts — the ninth part going to the contractor, which means, a contractor earned Rs 50–55 per day from each worker under him). Eight workers stayed in a single room for a total monthly rent of Rs 12,000.

Work had stopped completely during the first phase of the lockdown. Ashok received a salary for the first two weeks of March. However, they were stuck there for two months. In May, they worked for only five days. According to Ashok, the contractor did not help them at all. All their money was spent paying for food, even after reducing their meals to two a day. They also reduced

the quantity of foodgrains to about 300 grams of rice per day — half of the normal quantity they consumed after a hard day's work. The local Panchayat head once gave him three kilograms of rice and one-and-a-half kilograms of wheat. No other help came from anywhere.

Returning Home: Ashok reached home on June 9. He caught the Shramik Special train on June 7. His name was registered at the local police station that provided these workers forms for availing the train. Ashok packed some savouries and biscuits for eating on the train but could not eat since there was a scarcity of drinking water.

(7) **Mahibul Biswas, 18**

Address (WB): Godhanpara, Dakkhin Ghoshpara, Raninagar, Murshidabad

Address (Migrating State): Aluva, Kalamassery, Kerala

Work and Wages: Mahibul was a construction worker, a helper in plastering work. His daily wage was 650 rupees for an 8 am to 5 pm working day. He had started going to other states for work just about four months back. He heard about the imminent lockdown from the news on his mobile phone and others. According to Mahibul, the government should have at least given the workers a week or more to go home. For the first 21 days of the lockdown, he was jobless. Then work resumed slowly. However, he did get paid for work done in the month of March

One room was taken on rent by four workers, for a rent of Rs 100 per head. During the lockdown, they received rotis from the municipality every evening and once received a sack of rice (25 kg), for all four of them. Food was difficult to get, but at least they did not have to go without food.

Returning Home: Mahibul's parents were anxious for him to come home. But there was no way he could return. They heard some rumours about the train, even gave their Aadhaar numbers to someone, but nothing came out of it. Finally, they got to know about the possibility of travelling in a bus to home, for 7,200 rupees per head, and decided to go for it. They boarded the bus with some food, 12–14 litre of water and some medicines. However, after reaching West Bengal, as soon as it became known that they returned from Kerala, no restaurant was ready to serve them food.

(8) **Mustakin Mondal, 23**

Address (WB): Naskarpur, Ramnapara, Domkal, Murshidabad

Address (Migrating State): Angamaly, Ernakulam, Kerala

Work and Wages: Mustakin was once a construction worker. Now, he ran a mowing machine. Office-lawns, boulevards, grassy patches next to footpaths were where most of the mowing work was done. Then there was also some pruning work done with machines — all done under a contractor. The wage was 700 rupees per day and the working hours were 8 am to 5 pm. The machine belonged to the contractor and he rented it out for Rs 2,200–2,400 per day, out of which Rs 700 went to the labourer.

Mustakin had changed his job as a construction worker since it was risky, and uncomfortable due to the heat in summer. Mowing was much comparatively more comfortable. Also, the wage was almost the same in both the jobs. He lived in the Chirakkal Lodge in Angamaly in Kerala. Most of the boarders in the lodge were migrant labourers — almost 170 of them. Mustakin paid a monthly rent of Rs 1,100.

During lockdown, which kept getting extended, he was quite worried, and distressed about getting insufficient food. The room-owner provided the food — but he didn't even get 200 grams of

rice and was served only a little amount of vegetables. But they at least got paid for whatever amount of work they had done.

Returning Home: Living in such adverse conditions, Mustakin and his co-workers were dying to return back to home. They created ruckus at the police station and visited the railway station to get information about the train. The police used to beat them up and chase them away, but they kept going. The police said that they would inform them if there was a train. Mustakin and his fellow-workers did not get any help from their home state during this entire period.

In May, finally came the moment for returning home. Each of them received a laminated photo-identity card with both their home and workplace addresses, signed by the Police Superintendent. This card was in fact the ‘passport’ for boarding the train back home. Almost 1,200 workers, including Mustakin, boarded a train to Farakka, after showing this card. They were given drinking water and, according to Mustakin, an insufficient amount of white rice in the name of ‘biryani’. So, they ate biscuits, bread and puffed rice on the train.

(9) **Sekh Nazbul Hassan**, 30

Address (WB): Chengail, Mallikpara, Uluberia, Howrah

Address (Migrating State): Madanpura, Grant Road, Mumbai, Maharashtra

Work and Wages: Nazbul worked under an *Ostagar* (master artisan under whose supervision many labourers work) in Momin Bhai’s factory. He began working in other states eight years back. Forty of them lived in a large hall for a monthly rent of 150 rupees per head. Their weekly wage was 2,000–2,200 rupees.

They worked during the first two weeks of March and received the wage. The lockdown started on March 24 midnight for 21 days, but it was only when the second phase of lockdown started that they began to get worried. They were running out of money and food was becoming a problem. Even twice-a-day meals were slowly getting curtailed. This went on till June 12.

Returning Home: Nazbul caught a train on June 13, but it was not a Shramik Special train. Twenty pairs of special trains began running in May and perhaps some more since 1 June. He came to know through someone that trains had started running despite the lockdown. The ticket price was 725 rupees, whereas the same ticket for the general compartment was usually 453 rupees. Nazbul took the train along with 34 others. The train was jam-packed. They somehow found a place to stand.

(10) **Nijam Mondal**, 56

Address (WB): Chengail, High Madrasa, 1 no. Madhyampara, Uluberia, Howrah

Address (Migrating State): Bhendi Bazar, Mumbai, Maharashtra

Work and Wages: Nijam worked under Baba *Ostagar*. Just like most of the workers and craftsmen surveyed for this article, he also did not know the name of the firm that he worked for. Since he lived in the *Ostagar*’s house, he did not have to pay rent. He has been working as a zari-worker for 42 years, out of which, the last 35 years, he has even gone abroad many times. His weekly wage was 1,500–1,600 rupees, not really much, as it is the custom among Zari-workers who get paid less as they get old, and, hence, become less efficient.

Nijam was stuck at his workplace till the first week of June due to the lockdown. At times, he did not even have money to buy food. He says, “*Ostagar* provided us some food; we didn’t really have any money. Food was served twice a day, it wasn’t sufficient.” He also says that his younger co-

workers could not even drink tea for the entire two-and-half months — the conditions were tough. But the local neighbours sometimes helped with food.

Returning Home: He caught a Shramik Special train on June 6. The journey was free. He did not need to dish out money to buy the train ticket.

(11) **Morsalem Mallik** (57)

Address (WB): Chengail, High Madrasa, 1 no. Madhyampara, Uluberia, Howrah

Address (Migrating State): Bhendi Bazar, Mumbai, Maharashtra

Work and Wages: Morsalem worked under Hafiz Zariwala. He lived in the factory and did not have to pay rent. He received his salary for the period before the lockdown started. Just like his neighbour Nijam Mondal, his *Ostagar* provided him food twice a day. Sometimes, he also received food from the neighbours living in the same lane or locality.

Returning Home: After visiting the local ‘Police Chowki’ (police station) many times for information about the train, Morsalem finally got a form that he submitted in the police station. On June 26, as he was having his food, he came to know that a train was due to leave that same day. So he left his food on the plate and ran to catch the train. He paid 150 rupees to a local doctor for a medical certificate and registered his name along with others in the police station. They were taken to the local Haji Ali Race Ground, where a bus picked them up for 10 rupees each, and headed towards Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminal Station. They boarded the train. They did not have to pay for the train ticket.

Morsalem had noticed that some people were cheating workers in the name of getting them train tickets. He describes how 20–25 workers in his own factory paid Rs 1,600–1,800 for catching the train. His guess is that the money went to the police and the touts. On the train they received khichdi, cakes, biscuits and drinking water. In Bengal, they were not allowed to get down at the scheduled stops and were finally dropped at an unknown station. Then they were taken first to Santragachi station, and later to the Uluberia CIPT College (Calcutta Institute of Pharmaceutical Technologies, Howrah) quarantine centre.

(12) **Arafat Rahman Majhi**, 31

Address (WB): Chengail, Karunapara, Ward no. 13, Uluberia, Howrah

Address (Migrating State): HCL MB Colony, Gayatri Nagar, Hyderabad, Telangana

Work and Wages: Arafat worked under an *Ostagar* in Bauria. The *Ostagar* took work orders from Madame Boutique for the artisans under him to work on. The factory and the room Arafat lived in were next to each other. 12–4 workers stayed together. He paid Rs 200–250 per month as rent. Arafat has been going to work in other states for the last ten years. His weekly wage was about 1,500 rupees. Other migrant zari-workers working in Hyderabad informed us that their daily wage was about Rs 500–600. Arafat informed that part of their wage income went to the middlemen as they were not direct employees of Madame Boutique. Their work was stalled since 25 March due to the lockdown, and he was stuck in Hyderabad for two months. When asked if his *Ostagar* gave him food, he complained that not only did the *Ostagar* make them pay for their food, but he also stole the money Madame Boutique had sent for the craftsmen.

Returning Home: As per the Telangana government’s arrangement, the local police station first tried to coordinate their train travel and even gave them letters of permission for going to the station.

But finally, buses were arranged. On 19 May, Arafat, along with 42 others, reached West Bengal on a bus. According to him, they did not have to pay anything for the trip.

(13) **Mohammad Mashiur Mollah**, 31

Address (WB): Daibakhali, Ward 14, Chengail, Uluberia, Howrah.

Address (Migrating State): Bandra, Yogeshwari, Mumbai.

Work and Wages: Mashiur had been going for work in other states for ten years. He worked and lived in a factory in Mumbai owned by a man named Gopal *Ostagar*. So he doesn't have to pay any house rent. His current wage was 1,900 rupees per week. Work stopped a few days before the nationwide lockdown. They were paid for the few days of work in March. "*Ostagar* gave me food but at times I had to go to a far-off *langarkhana* (free charitable food serving centre) for food. The police thrashed us on the way. There I had to stand in a queue for hours. Food was served to everyone. Sometimes I didn't get food. I had to return back...hungry," said Mashiur.

Returning Home: Mashiur's return to home was quite dramatic. He left Mumbai on May 25 and finally returned home on May 29. "I heard that a bus would leave. So, I took a ride in a 'tempo' to catch the bus. The tempo took 80 rupees. I spent one whole night on the road. Food was served. I boarded the bus. The Chhattisgarh police pulled me off from the bus. They put me in a truck carrying onions. In that truck I reached Odisha. There I had to get down. Again, I sat and waited on the road for a whole night. Then I took a bus and reached Kolaghat by three o'clock in the afternoon," informed Mashiur. Who arranged the bus to Kolaghat? Why was he made to get down from the lorry? Mashiur could not tell.

(14) **Saiful Majhi**, 42

Address (WB): Chengail, High Madrasa, Karunapara, Uluberia, Howrah.

Address (Migrating State): Charminar, Babanagar, Hyderabad, Telangana.

Work and Wages: Saiful had been working as a zari-worker in different States for the last 11 years. This time he had gone to work in *Ostagar* Altaf's factory some four months before the lockdown. There were four or five people living in a room and the factory was in another house. The house rent was a thousand rupees per head. This time Majhi has taken his son too along with him. Saiful used to earn four to five thousand rupees a month and his son Amanuddin Majhi (18) used to earn three to three and a half thousand rupees. He had consulted with *Ostagar* as there was work pressure and asked his wife and young son to come there too. They — his wife Suriya Begum (33) and youngest son (14) — reached there on March 20. And on Sunday, March 22, the Telangana Chief Minister K Chandrashekhar Rao announced that all transport vehicles and commercial activities would be completely shut down across the state from March 23 to April 3 except for emergency services, to prevent the spread of coronavirus.²⁰ As a result, all work stopped.

Saiful and other workers were paid wages until the lockdown period. He had just 4,000 rupees with him. And now they were four people. He used to get food in the morning and, at night, from a *langarkhana* in the local *mohalla*. Saiful said that the quantity of food he got was never enough for four people. His *Ostagar*, once or twice paid him 500–1,000 rupees. "A local resident said the Telangana government would pay Rs 1,000 for rice and pulses. I gave him a Xerox (photocopy) of my Aadhaar card. But we didn't get the money, though many got it," informed Saiful. According to the newspaper, the Telangana CM had announced that every white ration cardholder (for the people

below the poverty line) would be given 12 kg of rice and Rs 1,500 in cash. However, migrant workers were not covered under the scheme.

Returning Home: Despite the police's highhandedness, Saiful used to go to the local police station to inquire about returning home. Finally, on June 5, he was able to get train tickets for four of them on 02604 Secunderabad–Howrah special train for June 24. The fare for general compartment (D2) was 1,617 rupees per head. The auto took 1,000 rupees to take them to Secunderabad station from Charminar. He reached Chengail through Uluberia after renting a Maruti car. Safiul said, he had to spend another 1,000 rupees for that.

(15) **Jiarul Sheikh, 26**

Address (WB): Ashina, Falta, South 24 Parganas. Address

Address (Migrating State): Road 12, Banjara Hills, Syednagar, Hyderabad, Telangana.

Work and Wages: When asked which company he works for in Hyderabad, Jiarul replied 'Vaishali'. Later I learned that he actually worked in a boutique named 'Vaishali'. He resided in a house shared by six other people. He was paid 500 rupees for 8 hours of work. He had to pay 2,000 rupees per month as house rent. After the curfew was imposed by the state government to keep people indoors, his work at the boutique came to a standstill. And then the national lockdown was announced. Although he had bought a train ticket to reach home dated March 23, the train services were stopped before that. His wages for March were paid in full. Soon he ran out of money by buying food and paying rent. His wife had to borrow money and she sent him 10,000 rupees to meet his expenses. He was literally under house arrest till May 18. During this period, the locals had given him ration for only two days. He visited the police station to plead for returning home. The police officers told him to call after 11am and if there was any news about trains or buses, they would inform him. The police station wrote down his name and address. He used to call the police station almost every day.

Returning Home: Finally, the much hoped for news came on May 16. He received a call from the police station and the police made him board a 'special train' to home. Jiarul said, "It didn't cost me anything." The train dropped them off at Malda station in West Bengal. Although he faced no issues in the train, after getting down at Malda early in the morning he had to wait till evening to get a bus. Jiarul said "At Malda we had to take out a protest rally and make the video of it public; only then the bus arrived. The video of returning workers demonstrating for a bus set the local administration into action." Jiarul reached Baruipur by bus and from there he travelled to home on his own.

(16) **Ashraf Mandal, 36**

Address (WB): Ashina, Falta, South 24 Parganas.

Address (Migrating State): Banjara Hills, MPT Nagar, Hyderabad, Telangana.

Work and Wages: Ashraf used to work in Madame Boutique in Hyderabad. He has been working there for five years. Four of them shared a single room. The total rent was 4000 rupees per month. He was paid 500 rupees a day for eight hours of work. He got the wage for the month of March. After that, he was stuck in the house till mid-May. Ashraf said there was no problem in getting food during the lockdown. "Madame would give me food. I got help."

Returning Home: On May 13, Ashraf and 24 others boarded a bus from Hyderabad to return home. The bus took 5000 rupees per person as fare. After making enquiries, *Ostagar* had fixed the bus. Everyone was allowed to board the bus after following all the health protocols. He said they faced no problem on the way. Just had to buy food to eat. The bus arrived at Kharagpur (WB) at 6

pm. The police surrounded the bus and did not let them come down. “I reached Diamond Harbour at 6 am the next day. We were given flattened rice (*chire*) and water,” said Ashraf. At Diamond Harbour another medical check-up was done and we were driven to Harindanga (Falta). We told the police to take us to our homes. The police said, ‘Do you want to go home or stay in quarantine?’” Frightened, they went home on their own from there.

(17) **Nasir Sheikh, 32**

Address (WB): Ashina, Falta, South 24 Parganas.

Address (Migrating State): Banjara Hills, Hyderabad, Telangana.

Work and Wages: Nasir worked for a boutique for four to five years. He could not tell the name of the boutique. Get a daily wage of 450 rupees. Five people lived in a single room for a rent of 1,000 rupees per head. He was paid all due wages but did not get any help during the lockdown from the *Ostagar* or the boutique owner. He got 12 kilograms of rice and 500 rupees once from the government. He also said, “The local MLAs used to distribute food near the colony. But there was such a huge crowd that it would be difficult for people from other States to get food. If the crowd made any ruckus, the police beat them with sticks. There would be a long queue from morning till four in the afternoon.” Nasir too collected food from there. However, it was not enough to quench his hunger.

Returning Home: There was no definite news about the train. One day at the municipality office, after hearing an announcement, he went to a local school and registered his name. He said, “I got onto the bus carrying puffed rice, cucumbers and water. The bus dropped me off at Diamond Harbour.” He reached home on his own from there.

Migration and Hygiene

All the 26 migrant workers, who were surveyed for this article, said that they had complied with the government’s epidemic-related health rules. Twenty-four of them underwent a mandatory 14-day quarantine at home. One was at the government quarantine centre, and another in a local madrasa. The government directives were implemented through the police and panchayats, and there was also surveillance by the villagers. However, everyone said that the neighbours did not suffer from panic or show any hostile attitude towards them. The workers said that the Asha workers used to visit them and monitor their health. However, it was not possible for many to maintain physical distancing at home. For example, Jiarul Sheikh of Ashina. He was in the same room with his wife and two young children.

The workers informed me that almost everyone underwent a medical check-up before boarding the train or bus. Health check-up was also done after reaching the destination point. In most cases, body temperature was measured with a thermal gun. Morsalem Mallik of Changail said that he had to get a medical certificate from a local doctor before boarding the train. For that he paid a fee of 150 rupees. He returned from Mumbai on May 27 on the Sramik Special train. Nijam Mandol from Chengail in Howrah too had to collect a medical certificate from a local doctor before returning from Mumbai.

Dated On: 06/05

MEDICAL FITNESS CERTIFICATE

I Dr. Mund. Rakeey certify that I have carefully examined Mr. Mrs. Morsalem Mallik, Son/Daughter of Talib Mallik, address: Chengail, Howrah, West Bengal-711308 whose Aadhar number is 49451389895 and mobile number 9291574969 signature is given below.

At the time of examination / screening his / her temperature was 98.2 F, and also presented with no history of Cough & Cold.

Patient also confirmed NO travel history for the past two months.

Based on the examination / screening, I certify that he is clinically & physically fit.

Mark of Identification:
Signature: 

Sincerely
FATIMA CLINIC
DR. MOHAMMED RAFEI
M.D. (ALTY) D.O. (M.B.B.S.) D.E. (P)
Regd. No. 13013
Dr. Degree: 195117-6, Zinda Wood Street, Shop 1
Registration Madrasa Azad Road, Madanpura,
MUMBAI-400 028.
mobile: 9891674669

Ticket for Outdoor Patient

Ward No. 19 U-PHC No. _____ Reg. No. _____ Date _____

Name Nizam Mondal Age 55yr Sex M

Address Chengail

Height _____ Weight _____ BP _____

Diagnosis Mumbai, D.O.A. - 11/6/2020

Date	Treatment
ILI - <u>NA</u>	Released today based on medical examination and advised to remain 14 (<u>6/16/2020</u> to <u>20/6/2020</u>) days strict home quarantine.
SARI - <u>NA</u>	
Temp - <u>NA</u>	

Date: 6/16/2020

As per request of local councillor (M. Mudda) the mentioned person is being released in asymptomatic condition. [over phone]

HEALTH DEPT.
ULUBERIA MUNICIPALITY



www.nhm.gov.in/nhrm/nuhm.html

Medical Certificate for Craftsmen coming from Maharashtra

After deboarding at Santragachi from the train, Morsalem was checked for fever with a thermal gun and then sent to the government quarantine centre at Uluberia CIPT College (Calcutta Institute of Pharmaceutical Technology & Allied Health Sciences, Howrah). He was there for four days. Morsalem said “The food at the quarantine centre came on time. Chicken was served. Doctor came to visit.” After that, he spent three days at Chengail High Madrasa and the remaining few days at home. Nizam Mondal, who had returned from Mumbai, also stayed in the High Madrasa for seven days with 12–13 other people. The remaining seven days he was quarantined at home. A person in charge of the health condition of the workers at the High Madrasa said that as the two government quarantine centres in Uluberia was becoming increasingly crowded, arrangements were made for the returning workers to stay in different schools and madrasas after medical check-up at the sub-divisional hospital. The local councillor Badsha Midda took the responsibility of feeding the workers twice a day. A ‘watchman’ was kept for surveillance. The councillor arranged for his wage. Doctors used to come from the municipality. Many were advised to stay in home quarantine after the check-up at the sub-divisional hospital. For example, Sheikh Nazbul Hasan of Chengail, after home-quarantining himself for 14 days, again underwent a medical examination at the hospital. He said that a prescription with a stamp certifying ‘fit’ was given from the hospital.

Imam Mallik and six of his companions, however, did not immediately return home. They stayed in two rooms in Falta (Baruipara) for 14 days. On his return, Dostagir Sheikh had to go to Falta Hospital. Dostagir said, “I had a fever. People in the neighbourhood asked me not to enter my house. I went to Falta Hospital and saw a doctor. After that I was at home for 14 days.” Dostagir said thermal checking was done at Howrah station. So, it must have been their negligence.

Almost all the surveyed workers of Kultali returned to their village after undergoing medical examination at Jamtala Primary Hospital. All were home-quarantined for 14 days. Amalesh Bhuiyan

of East Gurguria had a fever on the train. He took a taxi from Howrah station and went to Belehata ID Hospital to consult a doctor. After that he bought medicine as advised by the doctor. He said that he stayed in a separate room at home for 14 days. Sabir and Rehena Mollah of the same village had heard that they had to get medically 'checked' before entering the village. So they first went to Jamtala Primary Hospital for a medical check-up and then went home. The husband, wife and their three-and-a-half-year-old daughter stayed in the same room in their mud-house for 14 days.

Shramik Special Train: Centre-State, Inter-State Discord

The city is seen as a means to an end of providing for the family back home. In times of distress whether a recession or a pandemic, 'home' is the native place and migrants set off ... it's a natural tendency to be with parents and extended family back home during times like these.

— Chinmay Tumble.²¹

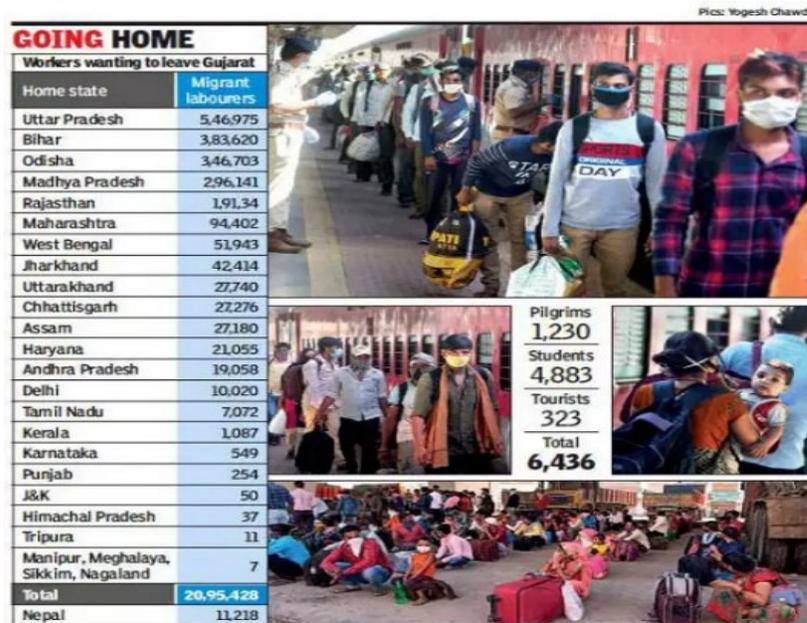
There is no income. The shelters, run by the government and private organizations, are hardly habitable. The foods served in *langars* are either distasteful or don't fill the stomach. The same distress prevails in construction sites and factories. Labourers are huddled in a single slum-room and yet they have to shell out a steep rent. Foregoing all personal comfort, the people, who used to send their hard-earned money home, now sustain on the cash collected by their families either by selling off or mortgaging their land, crops and ornaments. And that's it. Most of them don't have the money to go back home. The volume of this inter-state remittance market is 20 billion dollars or Rs 14,73,99,00,000. Eighty percent of this amount reaches villages.²² No government has ever kept in mind this section of people.

A survey conducted by Stranded Workers' Action Network among 11,159 migrant labourers reveals that between April 8 and 13, 96 percent of those labourers didn't get the ration they deserve. After a lockdown was proclaimed on the midnight of March 24, the stranded labourers didn't get more than 89 percent of their wages. Seventy-four percent of these labourers were left with only half of the wages they had earned, yet they had to spend Rs 2,000-3,000 on house rent every month. They had to recharge their mobile phones and buy soap, oil, sanitary pads and medicines. When the survey was being conducted between March 27 and April 13 at least 70 percent of them had a cash of only Rs 200. Of these 11,000 labourers 17 percent are daily wage earners and factory and construction workers. Eight percent are house assistants, drivers, vendors and hawkers, whose per capita daily earning is Rs 402.²³

Naturally, the distressed labourers waged a revolt from the day of lockdown. Between March 29 and May 9, Surat alone recorded nine incidents of labour unrest. Migrant Workers' Solidarity Network has prepared a workers' resistance map recording 158 such incidents that took place across the country till May 20. According to an estimate of this organization, at least 10,011 workers took part in these demonstrations. While tracing the reasons for the demonstrations, the organization has found that 42 such incidents took place over the demands of wages (43), food (37), homecoming (123), shelter (13) and other reasons (42). This map is not bereft of the picture of unrest among the immigrant labourers in West Bengal. (www.mwsn.in/resistancemap/)

Within eight days of the lockdown being declared, *Wbtrackmigrants.com* recorded the names of 50,172 help-seeking migrant labourers. During this period, a socio-cultural organization 'Bangla Sanskriti Mancha' (BMS) recorded the names of 20,000 labourers. Bangla Sanskriti Mancha has informed that the details of 34,000 inter-state labourers from Bengal, stranded in other states, were sent to the chief minister's office on April 17 and an appeal was made to bring them back and

arrange for their food and shelter. The same request was made to union home secretary, Ajay Bhalla, as lists of 45,000 and 70,000 labourers were sent to him respectively on April 25 and May 8. Samirul Islam, president of the organization, has alleged that neither side acknowledged their initiative.



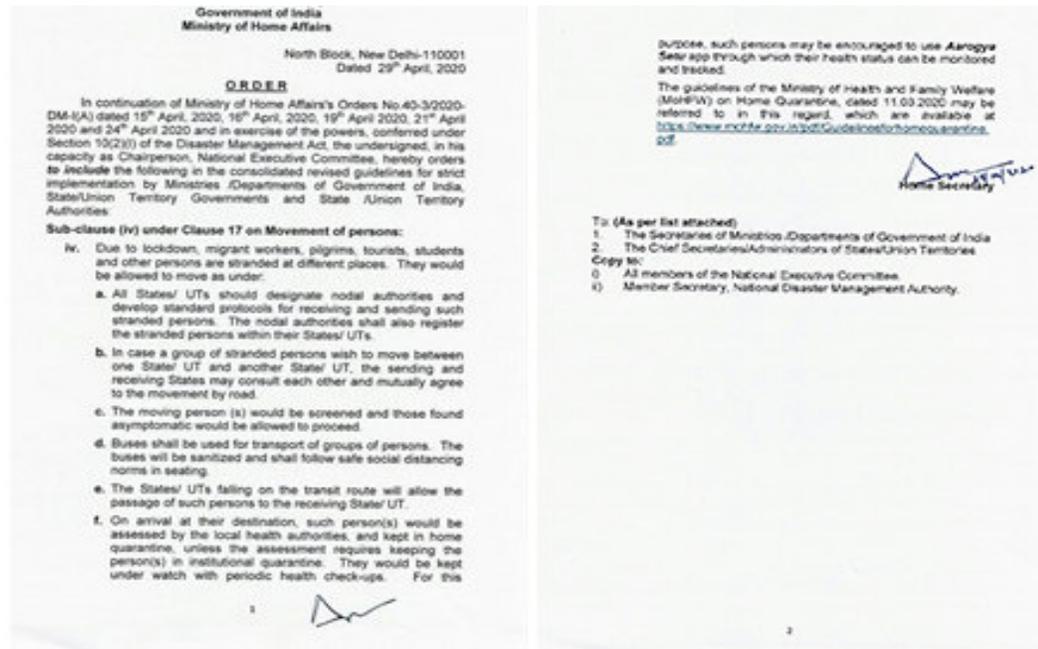
Graphics: Times of India, May 3, 2020

How desperate were the labourers to come back home? The *Times of India* reported on May 3 that 20,95,428 labourers belonging to 25 states had enrolled their names to return to their homes from Gujarat. Of them, 51,943 people wanted to return to this state. The estimation of the state administration is that as soon as the train services were resumed, 28,000 labourers in 23 Shramik Special trains went back to their homes in Odisha, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh between May 2, Saturday and May 5, Tuesday morning. This makes it evident, just how eager labourers from Bengal were to come back home, much like their counterparts from other states. But in the first stage, the West Bengal government did not approve running trains for reaching the state.²⁴

The second phase of lockdown started after 21 days on April 15. On the other hand, the Union Home Ministry, acting under the pressure of industrialists and chambers of commerce, issued two sets of directives in two phases to reopen small and big industrial establishments, under the condition of maintaining certain rules. On April 13, the government approved the reopening of tea gardens in this state under the condition of 25 percent staff deployment and the staff abiding by certain health rules. Albeit with a smaller workforce, 60,000 establishments resumed work by April 21 in Gujarat alone.

In the tug-of-war between the Centre and the states, debating whether to slowly reopen the factories or help the workers to return home, what finally won was the stubborn attitude of the workers. By the middle of April, the demand for bringing back home students studying in Rajasthan's Kota had gained momentum in states. When a statement made by the chief secretary of West Bengal raising questions over health issues and transport problems was met with criticism from the

Opposition, the chief minister remarked on the situation. On April 27, the chief minister, Mamata Banerjee, said that the state government would start taking ‘all possible steps’ to bring back the people stranded in other states.²⁵ Despite her assurance, it took many days to initiate the ‘steps’. She ensured full state-support for the students to return in buses, but no such efforts were made for the labourers. At last, the union home ministry issued directives on April 29 and May 1 for the return of the fuming labourers across the country. (Spokesperson, Ministry of Home Affairs, “GoI issues order to State/UTs to facilitate Inter-State mvmt of stranded people inc. #MigrantLabourers, in the country....” [@PIBHomeAffairs, April 20, 2020]).



Union Home Ministry's Directive on April 29

The Shramik Special trains started running on May 1.

The Union Home Ministry issued yet another set of directives on May 3 for the homecoming of labourers. Seen in the context of the earlier directives, this one seemed to have brought to the fore the tacit understanding between the union government and industrialists. While explaining the first two directives, the second section of the new one said: “The objective of the first two directives is to help out those stranded labourers who had left their homes and workplaces just before the lockdown but could not return as a result of restrictions on vehicular movement and commutation. But these directives are not for those who naturally live somewhere beyond their original home for the sake of a job.”

AJAY BHALLA, IAS



गृह सचिव
Home Secretary
भवन संसदीय
Government of India
North Block,
New Delhi

D.O.40-10/2020-DM-I(A)

3rd May, 2020

Dear Chief Secretary,

Kindly refer to Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) Order No. 40-3/2020-DM-1(A) dated 29th April, 2020 and 1st May, 2020, wherein movement of migrant workers, pilgrims, tourists, students and other persons who are stranded at different places due to lockdown, have been allowed.

2. It is clarified that the MHA orders are meant to facilitate movement of such stranded persons, who had moved from their native places/ workplaces, just before the lockdown period, but could not return to their native places/ workplaces on account of restrictions placed on movement of persons and vehicles as part of lockdown measures. The facilitation envisaged in the aforesaid orders is meant for such distressed persons, but does not extend to those categories of persons, who are otherwise residing normally at places, other than the native places for purposes of work etc., and who wish to visit their native places in normal course.

3. I would like to request all State / Union Territory Governments to facilitate the movement of such distressed stranded persons as allowed under MHA's Orders.

With regards,

Yours sincerely

(Ajay Bhalla)

To
Chief Secretaries of all States
(As per standard list)

Union Home Secretary Ajay Bhalla's Letter to the State's Chief Secretary on May 3

What is the crux of the argument? It is really confusing. One may suspect that the objective of this directive was to confine as many labourers as possible. The reason for this suspicion lies in the fact that this directive was issued on May 3 and the chambers of commerce's report titled 'Strategic note on resumption of economic activities in industrial areas', which was sent to the central government, came to the people's notice on May 4. Is there any link between the two? Apparently, no. But the complicity between the Centre and industrialists was laid bare in a decision of the Karnataka government. After a meeting with the Confederation of Real Estate Developers Association (CREDAI), the B. S. Yediyurappa-led government cancelled all the Shramik Special trains scheduled to go to different states from May 6. The government's decision was made known in a letter sent by Karnataka's principal secretary, Manjunath Prasad, to the general manager of the South-Eastern Railway. However, the Yediyurappa government had to finally beat a retreat in the face of intense labour unrest and criticism all over the country.

about the state government making no response even after several voluntary organizations gave detailed reports about the stranded labourers.²⁸

The special trains started running on May 1, but why was there no initiative on the part of the state? Fear of infection on the one hand and lack of health infrastructure and preparedness on the other are being supposed to be the main reasons. Since the incidence of infection was comparatively higher in the states like Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Delhi and Tamil Nadu, the West Bengal government was perhaps hesitant to take back the labourers, apprehending the spread of the virus deep into the rural belt. A statement made by the state's chief secretary on May 4 lent support to this line of thought.²⁹ Even though no trains were available, the workers started coming in hordes on their own in buses and trucks. After several states complained about West Bengal's hesitance, Union Home Minister Amit Shah on May 9 alleged: "The West Bengal government is not allowing the trains carrying migrant labourers to enter the state. This results in more distress for them."³⁰ Trinamool MP Abhishek Bandopadhyay vehemently protested. He said what the union home minister had said was a "basket of lies to mislead the people".³¹

However, the state government, in the meantime, declared in a circular on May 7 that the 'automated e-pass system' for all those people, stranded in the state and outside had been uploaded on 'Egiye Bangla' portal. After the necessary information is provided by accessing the link, one will get the E-pass. It was also informed that communication can be set up by texting 'Hi' on the WhatsApp number 8017845555, and SMS number, while detailed information would be available by calling the toll-free number 1070.³² Bengal may have gone ahead in issuing e-passes, but it took one more week to allow trains to come to the state. The chief minister announced on May 14 that the government has arranged 105 'additional special trains'. According to media reports, till the 14th the state allowed only 10 trains to run. *The Hindu* reported on May 16 quoting the state's home secretary, Alapan Bandopadhyay, that the information about 17 lakh people from the state, stranded in different parts of the country was in the state's database. These people included labourers, students, tourists and pilgrims. These 105 trains would be used to bring back to home the state's people from 16 states over a month between May 17 and June 15. The maximum number of trains (28) were earmarked for Kerala while 18 were from Maharashtra and 10 for Tamil Nadu. A few hours after the chief minister's announcement came a provocative tweet by the railway minister about inadequate trains which started a political discord. However, according to the facts presented by Bandopadhyay, there should be no controversy that the trains were inadequate in number at the time. He told *The Hindu* that 2,90,000 helpless people had appealed to the state government to make transport arrangements for coming back home.³³ It can be supposed that these people were able to get their names recorded through government applications or non-government organizations. Initially, a decision was taken that one train would carry 1,200 passengers. This meant 2,55,000 people would have been able to come back in a month. The figure is short by 35,000 from the number of total applicants. If the government wanted to make the passage home for all the 17 lakh people recorded in its database, it required the services of 1,000 trains. In a report on May 18, the *Economic Times* said that 'group entry' and 'group exit' e-pass guidelines had been prepared for the people entering or leaving the state in groups.³⁴

The implementation of this planning and the cautious 'Go Slow' policy received a jolt once again by the unilateral announcement of the railway ministry. Not only West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Chattisgarh too had been following the 'go slow' policy in their efforts to bring back labourers especially from Mumbai, Gujarat and Delhi. Under these circumstances, the Centre announced on May 19 that no permission of the destination-state would be required in running special trains.³⁵ After this, it has been alleged, trains heading for different

states were run indiscriminately. Kerala's chief minister, Pinarayi Vijayan, vehemently opposed this.³⁶ After 11 and 17 trains reached the state respectively on May 27 and 28, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee told journalists, "The Centre is sending trains at random to disturb the state politically." She also questioned, "How would we screen so many people?" Banerjee, who said that previously there were no COVID patients in Bengal's rural areas, warned the Centre against indulging in any 'politics'. She claimed that "25 percent of the labourers, who had returned to the state, were COVID positive". The Chief Minister also announced that labourers returning from five particular states would have to be under mandatory quarantine. These states were Maharashtra, Delhi, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. She informed that besides making arrangements to house these labourers in different school buildings, a special task force was set up in every community block.³⁷

How many people have finally returned home? Railway Board Chairman Vinod Kumar Yadav informed the news agency ANI on June 6 that more than 58 lakh migrant labourers were taken to their destinations in 4,286 Shramik Special trains run between May 1 and June 6.³⁸ Quoting the railway ministry, the *Indian Express* reported on July 10 that till that date 63.07 lakh labourers had returned to their respective states on 4,611 trains. This backflow of labourers may be divided into three categories: the pre-lockdown stage; the first week of lockdown; and the situation in which lakhs of people swarmed the streets after the Centre's announcement on April 29 and their homebound journey in trains and buses. Many of them also used bicycles or even simply trudged on foot to return to their places. The full estimation of all the labourers is yet to be made.

While refuting arguments of the opposition at a meeting with district and state officials on June 3, Banerjee said, "...if we are not allowing migrants to return, then how come 10.5 lakh have entered Bengal by June 10?" She informed during her speech that 2.4 lakh people had returned till June 4 and 1.5 lakh more were to come in trains by June 10 while 6.5 lakh people had already returned by road. This puts the total at 10.4 lakh. Referring to the financial aids, she informed that 4.57 lakh migrant labourers, stranded in different states, received a one-time grant of Rs 1,000 each. She said Rs 3 crore³⁹ was spent daily for the government-run quarantine centres and Rs 25 lakh was spent as train fares for the migrant labourers.

The Chief Minister's account makes clear that all the labourers who returned just before the lockdown and those who returned on their own by train, bus, truck or cycle or even by foot are not included in the figure she gave. Workers' organization CITU claims that the figure is between 27 lakh to 30 lakh. It is learned that the CITU has organized migrant labourers and prepared a databank of their names, addresses and details of their occupation. CITU's state president, Subhash Mukhopadhyay, has said the organization aims to reach out to every migrant labourer and uphold their demand for a job. Till August 6, about 300 workers wrote to the chief minister demanding a job.⁴⁰

Many sociologists and economists have already said that migrant labourers should have been taken into consideration before declaring a blanket lockdown. During the monsoon session of Parliament, the nation observed with surprise that migrant labourers were not in the consideration of the Central government even during the lockdown period. The factsheet on the death of labourers and their unemployment was also blank. While replying to the questions of three MPs in Parliament on September 14, the union labour minister, Santosh Kumar Gangowar, only gave the facts about the return of labourers to their respective states.

LOK SABHA

UNSTARRED QUESTION NO. 174
TO BE ANSWERED ON 14.09.2020
MIGRANT WORKERS RETURNING TO HOMETOWN

174. SHRI K. NAVASKANI:
SHRI BALUBHAU ALIAS SURESH NARAYAN DHANORKAR:
ADV. ADOOR PRAKASH:

Will the Minister of LABOUR AND EMPLOYMENT be pleased to state:

- (a) whether the Government has the data of migrant workers who returned to their own states from various states during the national lock down period and if so, the details thereof, State-wise;
(b) whether the Government is aware that a number of migrant workers lost lives during their return to the hometown and if so, the details of the same, State-wise;
(c) whether the Government has provided any compensation/economic assistance to the victims' family and if so, the details thereof;
(d) whether the Government has done any assessment of the job loss among migrant workers due to the COVID-19 crisis and if so, the details thereof;
(e) whether the mostly migrant workers returned to their home by walking due to no arrangements by the Union Government in time; and
(f) if so, the details thereof and reasons therefor?

ANSWER

MINISTER OF STATE (IC) FOR LABOUR AND EMPLOYMENT
(SHRI SANTOSH KUMAR GANGWAR)

- (a): A statement is enclosed.
(b): No such data is maintained.
(c): Question does not arise in view of (b) above.
(d): No such data is maintained.
(e) & (f): The Indian Railway has operated more than 4611 Shramik Special Trains for convenience of the workers. More than 63.07 lakh migrant workers have been shifted to various destinations located in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and other States. Food and water was also provided free of cost to the workers during their journey.

Statement referred to Part (a) of Lok Sabha USQ NO. 174 due for reply on 14.09.2020

S.No.	Name of the State	No. of Migrant workers who have returned to their home state*
1	Andhra Pradesh	32571
2	Andaman and Nicobar	-
3	Arunachal Pradesh	2871
4	Assam	426441
5	Bihar	1500612
6	Chandigarh	-
7	Chhattisgarh	-
8	Dadra & Nagar Haveli and Daman & Diu	43747
9	Delhi	-
10	Goa	-
11	Gujarat	-
12	Haryana	1289
13	Himachal Pradesh	-
14	Jammu & Kashmir	48780
15	Jharkhand	530047
16	Karnataka	-
17	Kerala	311124
18	Ladakh	50
19	Lakshadweep	456
20	Madhya Pradesh	753581
21	Maharashtra	182990
22	Manipur	12338
23	Meghalaya	4266
24	Mizoram	-
25	Nagaland	11750
26	Odisha	-
27	Pondicherry	1694
28	Punjab	515642
29	Rajasthan	1308130
30	Sikkim	-
31	Tamil Nadu	72145
32	Telangana	37050
33	Tripura	34247
34	Uttar Pradesh	3249638
35	Uttarakhand	-
36	West Bengal	1384693
	Total	10466152

*As available till date.

The Union Labour Minister's Reply in Parliament on 14.09.20

Conclusion: Observations and Opinions

(1) Despite the sympathy and goodwill of the chief minister, migrant workers continue to return to their workplaces. Amalesh Bhuiyan and Ashok Mondal, surveyed on September 25, returned to Telangana from their village East Gurguria. Ashok used to sew grain-sacks in the Adani port area in Gujarat. Seeing no possibility of returning to work in Gujarat at present, he left for Telangana to work as a construction worker. On the same day, 35 people from East and Central Gurguria went to Telangana. Amalesh informed, since last June, one bus after another filled with workers, left Kultali for Tamil Nadu, Telangana, even Manipur and Assam. The labour contractors are arranging the buses. They are paying the fare. The people leaving are mainly construction workers. Due to the scarcity of trains, the news of workers returning to Surat, Tamil Nadu and Kerala by bus or even plane has been published in various news media.

(2) In general, the workers are choosing to go back. The primary reason is wage. Whether construction workers or Zari-artisans, they get at least double wages in the migrating states compared to here. Besides, the skilled workers and artisans are reluctant to work in MGNREGA (100 days' guaranteed job scheme), especially in unskilled jobs like digging soil, repairing ponds and canals etc. For example, Imam Mallik, a zari-worker from Ashina said, "I can't do those jobs." Rafiqul Sheikh fell down while carrying soil-sacks on his head and was injured. Dostagir Sheikh left work after 2-4 days. Those who have, for generations, mastered the traditional skills of fine crafts are not

comfortable cutting soil and doing agricultural works. However, due to the lack of normal train movement and recession in almost every sector including construction, manufacturing and hotel in the country, many of them are unable to go back. On being asked why the workers or artisans want to go back, Sheikh Nazbul Hasan, a aari-worker from Chengail, Howrah, said, “The work I do is not available here. What can I do?”

(3) If one of the reasons the workers migrate to work in other states is higher wages, then the other one is the availability of regular work throughout the year. The interviewed zari-workers told me that by working eight hours in a boutique in Hyderabad, Chennai and Bangalore they can earn a daily wage of Rs 500. If you want to get that same wage, you have to work twice as long in Kolkata. The average wage here is 200 rupees per day. Also work is not available round the year. The reasons are the same in the case of migrating construction workers.

(4) The workers are mainly employed by a contractor attached to a village or by an acquaintance from the village working in another state. In general, they avoid answering any unpleasant questions regarding the contractors. Most of these labour contractors are not licenced and registered with the government. In the past, they went to work in other states, they learned the local language there and since they have contacts in their native villages, many of them play the role of co-contractors. The system is the same for the artisans. When asked about ‘inter-state migrant labour laws, construction workers’ laws or social security laws for unorganized workers, they said in unison, “This is the first time they’ve heard of such a law.” They also gave the same answer about the social security schemes of the West Bengal state government.

(5) An extreme example of the ignorance of the workers is that they are almost acquainted with no one other than the contractor or the *Ostagar* who has brought them. It goes without saying that they do not have much social interaction due to language and cultural differences. Not a single worker/artisan could tell the full name or full address of their company. Even in cases where they know the name of the organization, it is distorted in their pronunciation. An artisan would say he worked in ‘Madame’, or he worked in ‘Vaishali’. Searching on the internet it is found he is working at ‘Vaishali Designer Boutique’ in Hyderabad or ‘Madame Boutique’ in Chennai or Bangalore. Even the zari-artisans working in Mumbai could not tell the full name of the original owner of the factory. Similar results were found in other cases. The surveyed workers can only tell the name of the big cities and states correctly. In the case of migrant workers employed in South India, except for the capital cities like Hyderabad, Chennai, Bangalore etc., they could not clearly and accurately tell the names of the small towns, districts, police stations or railway stations where they are working. All the names of places mentioned in the report had to be found after searching online and tallying them with the names they spoke or pronounced.

(6) Nur Islam Mandal, a long-distance tourist bus driver from Domkal, said, “You will be amazed to see the houses of the migrant workers from Kerala. The development in the village is because of them. They have tiled floors and motorcycles.” Nur wanted to point out the financial well-being and stability of the migrants working in Kerala. Sujauddin Biswas, a journalist with the *Anandabazar* newspaper and a resident of Domkal, wrote in a recent report that one unemployed migrant worker after another is mortgaging their bikes or are being compelled to sell them for lack of money.⁴¹

Workers or artisans regularly send back home at least half of their income. Some even send one-third of their income. The migrant workers informed that there is no entertainment in their lives except the mobile phone. There is little opportunity for social interactions. Mahibul Biswas, who has joined a construction company in Kerala for only four months, used to earn Rs 16,000 to Rs 17,000 a month. And he used to send home 10 to 12 thousand rupees per month. Basudev Basanta of East Gurguria worked as a construction worker in Maharashtra. He did not have to pay for food and

lodging. As a result, after keeping a small amount for himself, he could send his entire salary to his wife back home. The workers/artisans surveyed in East Gurguria, Ashina or Changail do not own bikes or 'amazing' houses. Many still live in mud houses. But, a noticeable change has happened in their eating habits as a result of working outside. They eat vegetarian food or relatively expensive food items, multiple vegetables, pulses and other nutritious foods. If they are sick, they can afford to visit a doctor, educate their children and arrange tuition for them. During festivals, their children and wives can buy and wear new clothes. If they need extra money they can borrow because their job and income are guaranteed.

Enamul Malitha of Jalangi and Nur Islam Mandal of Domkal drew attention to two more aspects. One is an increase in the social respect of an individual and the other is the improvement in the law and order situation. Enamul said, "Our conversation style and language has improved. People have become more civilized culturally by talking to many people while coming and going to many different places. We have gained knowledge. Are getting educated. We learn different languages. Where would I get that honour if I was in the village?" This statement of Enamul can be seen as an example of the upward social mobility of a migrant worker. On the other hand, Nur said, "Theft and snatching have stopped because people are now going to work outside. Their income has increased. So snatching of vehicles and robbery have stopped. Earlier vehicles were frequently attacked on NH 34, Baharampur–Kandi Road. It has now decreased." At the same time, he warned, "It will increase again. It is already increasing."

(7) With the loss of jobs, the more expensive and nutritious food items have disappeared from the diet of the migrant workers. There have been multiple studies on this subject. The depth of this food crisis is greater in tribal or remote areas. A survey of 5,000 families in 47 districts of 12 states, including West Bengal, from April 26 to May 2, found that — fifty percent of the surveyed households have reduced the number of daily meals. The number of food items has been reduced by 68 percent. Seventy-four percent have become dependent on the public food distribution system and 36 percent on the 'take home' rationing system; 24 percent have borrowed food grains from the relatively well-off families in the villages; 12 percent have received food distributed by *langarkehanas* or volunteers. In other words, rural India is eating less number of times and less amount of food. Even now the situation has not changed much. The survey was conducted by six non-governmental organizations, including, BAIF, Pradan and Aga Khan Rural Support Program.

The districts and villages surveyed were fairly close to major roads and towns. A survey of the Sabor tribes of Purulia in West Bengal also gives an account of the exact nature of the crisis of the marginalized people. From April 4 to 6, the West Bengal Kheria Shabor Welfare Society and Partners in Change conducted a survey on the effects of COVID-19 in 33 Sabortola among 30 Sabor families. It has been found that most of the Sabors are dependent on daily wages but most of them have received wages. They managed to eat twice a day during the lockdown by borrowing food or by taking money in advance or with the help of various non-governmental organizations or individuals. The survey also found that various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) had to distribute food grains to Shabarpalli in June as well. Although they received rations but their wages from the 100-day work scheme have remained unpaid for several months. From 13 April to 23 May, Azim Premji University conducted another survey of 5,000 people in 12 states on the livelihoods of unorganized and daily wage workers during the lockdown period. This survey named 'COVID-19 Livelihood Survey' was conducted in West Bengal by the 'West Bengal Khet Mazdoor Samity'. The main findings from the survey in this state are as follows:

- 78 percent said they lost their livelihood during the lockdown.
- 48 percent of households do not have money to buy essential items for a week.
- 93 percent said they were eating less than before.
- 94 percent said they received a ration.
- 51 percent did not receive any financial assistance.

The same reality has emerged from the survey of the workers and artisans done for the present report.

(8) Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee announced on March 20 that free foodgrains would be provided for six months. Free ration distribution started in the state from April 1. Later, the Central government also announced a free ration for three months. But, the required rice reached the state almost by the end of April. The people we surveyed had no complaints about getting rations. In addition, migrant workers have received extra rations at least once, even if after some delay. Saiful Majhi of Changail, who returned from Hyderabad along with his wife and two sons, received 40 kilograms of rice and one kilogram of gram as ‘special’ ration. Enamul Malitha of Jalangi said that he got 26 kg of rice and five-and-a-half kg of flour as ‘special’ rations. Majid Mollah later said that migrant workers in East Gurguria were also given 10 kilograms of rice and 250 grams of gram per head in September. At least 80 million people have benefited from the state government’s decision to provide free rations.

Under the State Food Security Act, 54, 70,862 consumers and 5,47,17, 342 special priority families are eligible under Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY). In addition to this, there is State Food Security Scheme-1, State Food Security Scheme-2. In all the schemes, except Scheme-2, the price of rice is 2 rupees per kg and wheat is 3 rupees per kg. The combined number of people under central and state food security schemes, however, is 7.6 crore. Later, the people under Food Security Scheme-2 were also included in the free food scheme.⁴²

The state government has also announced ‘Sneher Paras’ — a one-time financial assistance scheme — of Rs 1,000 for migrant workers stranded in other states. On June 3, the Chief Minister said that 4,56,000 workers have benefited from this scheme of the state government. However, none of the 26 people we surveyed has received any money under this scheme. Many did not even know about the existence of this scheme. Majid Mollah of East Gurguriya, however, said that he took the initiative to help 30 people fill up the online form, but he did not get the money even though 26–27 people did receive the money under the scheme. Ashina’s Ziarul Sheikh said that three persons had received the money. However, he did not get it. There was no opportunity to talk to those who received it to verify this information.

In addition to the lockdown, the cyclone Amphan on May 20 had devastating effects on the state, especially in the coastal districts. The plight of returning workers and their families in these districts seems to have quadrupled, especially for those whose non-pucca houses were damaged. Nine out of the 19 people from two villages in the South 24 Parganas surveyed for this article were affected in one way or another. Majid Ali Mollah’s mud house was reduced to rubble, but he has no compensation till September. Some of those whose asbestos roofs were blown away have received a *tripol* (a plastic sheet) but many have complained that they didn’t get even that.

(9) Economists, sociologists, especially experts on migrant workers, agree that these unorganized workers, who are completely ignorant of their rights, have remained an invisible force in the vast economy of the country. Even if there is a law for them, they remain outside the laws and therefore have no rights. Even if there is a government policy, it exists just on paper. Priya Desingkar, a

professor in the Department of Migration and Development at the University of Sussex, has described the response to the pandemic as having:

- No systematic understanding of the scale of circular migration.
- Indifference to the plight of the poor.
- Hugely problematic targeting and implementation of any relief effort.
- Also a belief that they are so desperate for work that they will somehow hang on.

At the same time, she thinks, even though they were initially prevented from returning home for fear of spreading the virus but were later told to stay put where they are for the fear of hurting the economy, which relies on cheap migrant workers. But a huge number of workers, about 1 crore as per government estimates, have returned home.⁴³

While 'source states' like West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh spent a lot of time repatriating their own workers, industrialized 'destination states' such as Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Delhi, Maharashtra, Gujarat tried to retain as many workers as possible. We have discussed this in the previous section. On the other hand, even though the workers' special train was introduced, at least forty percent of the workers returning home did not get a chance to board these special trains. According to the latest government estimates, out of the 14 million who have returned to their home states, only 83 lakh workers have availed special trains.

It was not unreasonable to fear that the return of millions of workers to rural areas will spread the virus. However, the state governments adopted a 'go slow' policy in this regard and spent invaluable time before preparing the required infrastructure and formulating the overall plan for the return of the migrants. In addition to setting up quarantine centres, the police-administration has had to tread cautiously to transform the nursing home into COVID hospitals as they faced many obstacles from the local people while doing this in different parts of the state. The administration was forced to close the quarantine centre at Dhupguri in Alipurduar under the pressure of local people and shift it to the BDO office. These obstacles also played an important part in the state administration not being able to build infrastructure in time.

Migrant workers have to pay the price for all this. Asif Iqbal Mandal, 22, from Murshidabad, who was working in Kerala, committed suicide out of depression on May 9, after his train was cancelled twice. A lorry overturned on May 16 in Auraiya, Uttar Pradesh. Three/four workers of Bankura, who were compelled to travel on the lorry, lost their lives in the accident. A total of 26 workers were killed in accidents while returning home. Yar Mohammad, 52, of Birbhum, succumbed to exhaustion when he reached Baleshwar (Odisha) after walking for 10 days from Hyderabad. Most of the workers returned home after enduring endless hardships and borrowing money to pay exorbitant fares. Many cycled thousands of kilometres to reach home from Gujarat in the west to Tamil Nadu in the south. Hundreds of workers were harassed on their way back to the state on the borders of West Bengal and Jharkhand, Odisha or Bihar by the state police. Numerous such allegations are documented in social media.

The chief minister claimed that 10.5 lakh workers have returned to the state by the first week of June. This number definitely does not include all the workers who returned on the train-bus-truck-bicycle and by walking on their initiative, from the period before the main lockdown was announced till the last week of April. The total number of workers from West Bengal who returned home would be at least twenty lakhs.

On June 3, the Chief Minister directed the district magistrates to set up a database of the returning workers. She asked the district officials to make a list of what each worker is skilled at, how

skilled they are and accordingly try to make plans so that work can be arranged for them in the state. Work to set up such a database has started in the districts.

(10) Students, civil and human rights organizations and different trade unions in the state have played a very important role during the lockdown period and up to the present time. Many organizations have been formed only to help the marginalized people and the migrant workers during the lockdown. Such organizations are still active in many ways. From establishing textbook libraries in villages and towns to building cheap food canteens for labouring peoples in various districts, including Kolkata, to delivering relief to Amphan Super Cyclone-ravaged Sundarban region, they took numerous initiatives during the pandemic period. According to an estimate, about 700 food canteens are currently in operation across the state. Although mainly Leftist students and youths took the lead in these initiatives, they would not have achieved the desired success without the help of numerous non-political volunteers and ordinary citizens.

Webtrackmigrants.com is an online portal set up by such volunteers. The Track Migrant Group developed a software to respond to the calls of stranded migrant workers. At least two dozen computer-skilled volunteers have been working day and night to document the needs of migrant workers. In the first week itself, the number exceeded 52,000. They later handed over the information to P. B. Selim, the state's nodal officer for migrant workers. They even arranged for the software to be used by government officials. Initially, the information from this portal was the basis of various initiatives of the state government. In addition to collecting information and pressuring the state government to take necessary action, the volunteers involved in this initiative also played an important role in helping workers fill up the online forms to register for returning home and to get money from state government launched schemes like 'Sneher Paros'.

In the last week of March, a Facebook page titled 'Public Monitoring Initiative' was launched. The purpose of this group was to inform and supervise the general public about the ration system, and to help the migrant workers stuck in various states. Kasturi Basu, Jyotishka Das, Dwaipayan Bandyopadhyay of this initiative said, "At first we thought we would connect our migrant brothers with the nearest source of help from amongst our friends living in various parts of the country and abroad. In this context, government, non-government, even general people came forward and stood by this initiative."

At least 2,000 people have been directly benefited by this initiative. Besides, migrant workers who returned home after cyclone Amphan were helped. Rs 3,72,343 has been raised and Rs 3,72,050 was spent.

A public library was set up in Ashina village in South 24 Parganas. Textbooks, pens and copies were given to the children of the migrant workers who had returned home. Jyotishka Das, who led this initiative, said that there are many more villages from where requests for such help are coming, the workers are saying "If I don't have work for two months, I will eat less and manage, but if the children stop studying, can it start again? Please do something."

Standing firmly in solidarity with the migrants is *Bangla Sanskriti Mancha* — a cultural and social organization. From compiling a list of workers stranded in various states to delivering food to the stranded workers, the Mancha worked in collaboration with various other sympathetic social organizations. According to the Mancha, initially, food was distributed to 36,000 people and, later, with the help of the 'Migrant Solidarity Network', the number stood at 56,000. The president of the forum said that Teesta Setalvad and the Citizens for Justice and Peace helped them a lot in this work in Maharashtra. The police and administrative officials in Kerala, Jharkhand, Odisha and Birbhum, Murshidabad and Malda in the state have also come forward to help when contacted. Similarly, the 'Chennai Citizens COVID Fund for Migrants' too came forward to help the migrant workers from

Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh who were stranded in Tamil Nadu. Madhushree Basu, of this initiative, said, “We were able to reach out to 6,000 to 8,000 migrant workers.”

The mention of these initiatives is important because if there were no such civic initiatives across the country, the real state and the plight of the migrants and information regarding them would not have come into the public domain. In addition, as a result of these initiatives, the workers received social solidarity in addition to the much-needed food and financial assistance during their difficult time. That the Central and state governments will not disclose any uncomfortable truths in this matter has already been proved. The government’s police and bureaucrat-centric initiatives would have failed miserably to address the problems of the migrants. They would have suffered much more. These public initiatives and their work during the pandemic need proper documentation and recognition.

Pandemic Induced Return of the Migrant Workers (WB): A Quick Survey Based on the Interviews of 26 Workers

Sl. no.	Name	Age	Permanent address	Local address in state of migration	Type of work	Wage	Type of local residence / Rent	Duration of migration	Due wage during lockdown	Expenses for return	Quarantine: Govt. / Personal	Ration / Sneher Parash	Available work in the village after return / Wage	Whether will resume work as migrant worker
1	Jjarul Sheikh	27	Village Ashina, PO Makhna, Block: Falta, S 24 Parganas	Banjara Hills, Road 12, Syed Nagar, Hyderabad, Telangana	Zari work	8 hrs/d, Rs 500	1 room, 6 workers, Rent Rs 2000 per head	3½ yrs	Received wage until lockdown started	Shramik Special Train: free boarding	Thermal checking on the way and 14 days home quarantine	Ration: Yes Sneher Parash: No	Avalled 100 days wage employment for 5 days at Rs 200/d	If work is available at home state, will not resume
2	Imam Malik	26	"	Bijapur, Karnataka	"	"	2 rooms, no rent	—	"	"	"	"	Did not avail 100 days wage employment due to inability	Will not resume now
3	Ramjan Sekh	28	"	Bijapur, Karnataka	"	Rs 500/600	No rent	10 yrs	Received full wage	By train: 2 days before lockdown started bought ticket himself	14d home quarantine	"	Avalled 100 days wage employment for 8 days at Rs 230/d	No work available in the home state; will resume if opportunity comes
4	Doshgir Sekh	32	"	Poonamallee, Thiruvallur District, TN	"	Rs 500	No rent	1 yr	"	Came home just before lockdown	Thermal checking on the way / in the station; later health checkup in the Falta Gramin Hospital (self-initiative) followed by 14d home quarantine	"	Avalled 100 days wage employment for 4 days at Rs 200/d	Undecided
5	Ashraf Mondal	36	"	Banjara Hills, Hyderabad, Telangana	"	Rs 500	Rented apartment, 4 workers, Rs 1000 per head	5 yrs	"	By bus on May 13: Rs 5000 per head	Thermal checking on the way / in the station; 14d home quarantine	"	Did not work after coming back	"
6	Shariful Sekh	39	"	Tiruppur, TN	"	"	—	20 yrs	"	By bus: Rs 6500 per head	"	"	"	Undecided
7	Nasir Sekh	32	"	Banjara Hills, Hyderabad, Telangana	"	Rs 450	Rented apartment, 4 workers, Rs 1000 per head	5 yrs	"	Factory closed 4 days before lockdown started, came home by train in the general compartment	"	"	"	"

8	Rafikul Sekh	28	-	Badarpur, SE Delhi, Delhi	Tailor	Sewing jeans pants for children aged 5-15 yrs; Rs 10/ piece, 12 hrs work, Rs 400/d	Rented apartment. 3 workers, Rs 1000 per head	3 yrs	Due wage: Rs 3000	By train: before lockdown started, bought ticket himself	Thermal checking on the way / in the station; checkup in the Gramin Hospital followed by 14d home quarantine	Ration: Yes Sneher Parash: No	Availed 100 days wage employment for 6 days	Will resume
9	Amalsh Bhuayan	21	Village Purba Gurguria, Saupara, Block Kultali, S 24 Parganas	Ramagundam, Peidipalli District, Telangana	Construction worker (centering)	Rs 350	Tin hut in construction site: No rent	4 yrs	Didn't get wage, received Rs 1000 for return journey	-	Had fever, visited Belaghatta ID Hospital, took medicine and maintained 14d home quarantine	-	100 days wage employment not available in the village. Sowed paddy for a few days.	During the survey, unwilling to resume but went back to his workplace on Sept. 25
10	Basudeb Basant	35	Village Purba Gurguria, Manasatala, Block Kultali, S 24 Parganas	Washim, District Washim, Maharashtra	-	Rs 6000/m + Food & lodging	-	4 yrs	Worked for 18 days in March, received Rs 1000 from contractor for return journey	By train: before lockdown started, bought ticket himself - Rs 360	Did health checkup in Jaysagar Gramin Hospital followed by 14d home quarantine	-	Caught fish and crabs in the river, but not too deep into the river due to the restrictions incorporated by the Forest Department	Will resume
11	Majid Ali Molla	36	Village Purba Gurguria, Saupara, Block Kultali, S 24 Parganas	Thalasseri, Kunnur District, Kerala	Construction worker (centering, helper)	Rs 350/d	Rs 3500, stayed with his wife	5 yrs	Tried to return just before the lockdown, received wage for 15-16 days in March	By bus: Rs 10,000 per head	Stayed in his in-law's place in Ghattharami Village for 20 days	-	Sowed paddy	Wants to resume
12	Ajmira Molla (wife of Majid Ali Molla)	30	-	-	Domestic worker	Rs 300/d, everyday 8am to 2pm	-	5 yrs	Received wage	-	-	-	House-work	-
13	Sabir Molla	26	-	Pandiyampalayam Erode District, TN	Crushing coconut husk to make cocopeat powder	Rs 450/d on an average	Lived within factory premises, 1 room allotted to each family.	6/7 yrs, the cocopeat work began about 6 months back	Received wage for the first 2 weeks in March	Shramik Special Train	Did health checkup in Jantala Gramin Hospital followed by 14d home quarantine	-	Whatever work is available	Wants to resume
14	Rehena Molla (Wife of Sabir Molla)	21	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	House-work	-

15	Ashok Mondal	27	-	Mundra, Kachchh, Gujarat	Packing	Rs 500 on an average	Rent Rs 3000 per head	6 yrs	Have received wage for 15 days in march, have worked for 15 days in April-June	Shramik Special Train on July 7	Rented room in Petkulchand, 4 in one room	Ration: Yes Sneher Parash: No	Farm-work	Have gone to Telangana on Sept. 25
16	Samar Roy	26	Village Purba Gurguria, Bhasa, Kultali, S 24 Parganas	Balangir, Orissa	Sales	Commission / Rs 10-12,000/m	Rent Rs 700 per head	7/8 yrs in total and 3 yrs in Balangir	Have not received wage in March	By bicycle, starting on June 22, each cycle cost Rs 2300	Returned home directly, did health checkup after 12-13 days in the Gramin Hospital	-	Farm-work	Will resume
17	Mahibul Biswas	18	Gobardhampara, Dakshin Ghoshpara, Rani Nagar, Murshidabad	Aluva, Kalamassery, Kerala	Construction worker	Rs 650/d, 8am-5pm	5 workers, rent Rs 1100 per head	Began this year	Have received wage	By bus, Rs 7200 per head	Did health checkup in Rani Nagar Pvt Hospital, followed by 14d home quarantine	-	Did not get any work	Have returned to workplace on August 6
18	Enamul Malitha	30	Sahelrampur, Thana, Jalang, Murshidabad	Kerala (could not provide address)	Mechanic: machine man in rubber powder machine	Rs 15,000/m	Rent Rs 3000/m	15 yrs in total, the latest work began 9 months back	Returned home on March 15, have received wage	Train	Was not necessary	-	Did not get any work	Have returned to workplace on August 10
19	Mustafin Mondal	23	Naskarpur, Ramnapara, Domkai	Angamaly, Ernakulam, Kerala	Runs a grass cutter machine	Rs 700/d, 8am-5pm	Rs 1200/m	Joined this work a year back	Have received wage for March	Shramik Special	14d home quarantine	-	Farm-work	-
20	Sekh Nazbul Haque	30	Chengall, Mallikpara, Uluberia, Howrah	Madanpura, Grand Road, Mumbai, Maharashtra (Momin Ostagar's factory)	Zari worker	Rs 2000-2200/week	Rs 150/m, 40 people in one chawl	8 yrs	Received wage for first 2 weeks in March	Shramik Special Train on June 13, a broker took Rs 725 per head	Did health checkup in Mahalauma Hospital, followed by 14d home quarantine	Have not received govt. help, have received ration regularly	Municipality area, no 100 days wage employment available	Will resume
21	Habibur Rahman Malik	43	-	Trisha Fashion Arts, Shade 2, Jetha Compound, Babasaheb Ambedkar Rd, Byculla East, Maharashtra	-	Rs 500/d	Rs 1000/m, 10 workers stayed together	25 yrs	Received wage for 20 days in March	Gitanjali Express on March 20	14d home quarantine	-	-	-
22	Nijam Mondal	53	Chengall, No. 1, Madhyampara, Uluberia, Howrah	Bhendi Bazar, Mumbai, Maharashtra (Baba Ostagar's factory)	-	Rs 1500/w	Lived within factory premises, no rent	35 yrs	Received wage for first 3 weeks in March	Shramik Special Train on June 6, no ticket was required	7 days in Uluberia CIPIT College Quarantine Centre, 7 days in a Madrasa	-	-	-

23	Morsalem Malik	57	..	Madampura, Hara Masjid, Bhaji Galli, Mumbai, Maharashtra (Halizi Jariwala's factory)	..	..	..	30 yrs	Received until lockdown	Shramik Special Train on May 26, no ticket was required	Did health checkup in Mumbai before taking train and was in CIPT for 3 days, in a Madrasa for 3 days, at home for 7 days	..	..	..
24	Arafat Rahman Majhi	31	Chengail, Karunapara, Ward no. 13, Uluberia, Howrah	Gayatri Nagar, Hyderabad, Telangana (worked in Madam Boutique under an Ostagar in Bauria, Howrah)	..	..	Rent Rs 250/m, 12 workers stayed together	10 yrs in total, last 7 months in Hyderabad	Received wage for first 3 weeks in March	By bus on May 19, didn't have to pay for ticket	14d home quarantine	Received an extra amount of 10kg rice and 250gm chickpea once as ration	..	..
25	Md. Mashur Molla	31	Chengail, Daibakhali, Ward no. 14, Uluberia,	Jogeshwari, Bandra, Mumbai, Maharashtra (Gopal Ostagar's factory)	..	Rs 1900/w	Lived within factory premises, no rent	10 yrs	Received wage for first 17/18 days	Hitchhiked in buses and trucks for 4 days and finally reached WB on May 29	14d home quarantine	Ration: Yes Financial help from govt: No	..	..
26	Saiful Majhi	42	Chengail, Karunapara, Uluberia, Howrah	Charminar, Baharagar, Hyderabad, Telangana (Ostagar Alta's factory)	..	Rs 15-1600/w		11 yrs in total, last 4 months in Hyderabad	Received wage till March 21/22	Bought ticket in special train on June 24	..	..	..	..

Field survey: July 25, 2020, Ashina, Falta, S 24 Parganas; July 27-28, 2020, Purba Gurguria, S 24 Parganas; August 2-3, Domkal, Murshidabad; August 19, Chengail, Howrah.

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- 4.35 p.m.: Just now they informed over the phone that the Odisha border police has detained them near the Chaksuliya border. The police are asking them to go back because there are no orders to let them enter West Bengal. But they are scared to return after being harassed and evicted from the village. They are sitting on the road. Their question is what will happen to us?
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“It won’t be proper to allow lakhs of stranded migrants labourers all in one go. They need to be brought back in phases because detailed planning has to be made. Else every effort made till date will go down the drain.” Rajiv Sinha, Chief Secretary, West Bengal. Snigdhendru Bhattacharya and Joydeep Thakur, “Bengal allows 2 trains to carry back stranded people; opposition targets it for going slow”, *Hindustan Times*, May 4, 2020.

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