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An Information Booklet

CONTINUING PERSECUTION OF BENGALI SPEAKING MIGRANT WORKERS

By
Calcutta Research Group
&
Know Your Neighbour



"I was crying and singing 'Jana Gana Mana...', but it couldn't save me."

1. INTRODUCTION

Between June and July 2025, a trickle of news alleging that Bengali speaking migrant workers, with origins in West Bengal are being harassed, detained, and in some cases, exiled into Bangladesh turned into a veritable flood. Everyday newspapers started to carry interviews with families of migrants and migrants themselves, recounting horrific experiences of forcibly being identified as Bangladeshis, persecution due to language, attire and religion, confinement for durations ranging from a day to ten months, being forced to cross the border into Bangladesh and of extortion.

According to a report in The Hindu, over 1,200 people have been pushed over from just one sector of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border since May 2025. Delhi Police alone has deported at least 120 people since January, followed by Maharashtra (110), Haryana (80), Rajasthan (70), Uttar Pradesh (65), Gujarat (65), and Goa (10). An Indian Express report estimates that since January 2025, more than 2000 people have been pushed into Bangladesh.

Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group (CRG: www.mcrg.ac.in), a research organisation invested in the working and living condition of migrant labour and forced migrants across the world, and Know Your Neighbour (KYN: www.knowyourneighbour.in), a facilitating group invested in communal harmony and in literally, knowing one's neighbour, have created this brief information booklet a brief overview of the present moment and its history, along with certain recommendations for redressal.

2. Who are the migrant workers? What are the constitutional guarantees of their work? What are the legal frameworks dedicated to their welfare?

In common parlance, the term (internal) 'migrant worker' in India refers to the millions of people who work away from their homes in different Indian states, in irregular sectors, often for very low pay. In India, the largest number of migrants come from the economically under developed states, with Bihar, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh accounting for more than half of the total number of Inter-state migrant workers in India according to the 2011 census (4,14,22,917). They typically lack job security, secure or written contract, regular pay, social security, paid leave and other benefits of the regular/ service sector.

Bengali-speaking migrant workers work in different parts of India, including states like Haryana (Gurugram), Gujarat, Rajasthan, Kerala, Odisha, Assam, Tamil Nadu, etc. During the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown, a rough estimate indicated approximately 1.1 million migrant workers were from Bengal. However, the Trinamool Congress (TMC) suggests a figure of 2.25 million, while the BJP claims the actual number could be as high as 6 million. Depending on the destination state, they are typically employed in construction, domestic work, hotel industry, agricultural, garment and other ancillary production, as security guards, drivers, waste pickers and other forms of low-paid manual work.

Article 19 of the Constitution of India offers certain rights to its citizens, It states,

- (1) All citizens shall have the right-
- (d) to move freely throughout the territory of India;
- (e) to reside and settle in any part of the territory of India; and
- (g) to practise any profession, or to carry on any occupation, trade or business—which are understood as giving the migrant workers the right to reside in any place within India and to eke out their livelihood.

The Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979, is expected to regulate the employment of the migrant workers in their places of work, which lays the responsibility of their welfare on both the government at the place of origin and at destination. Despite specific provisions for crucial (including occupational) protection, recording of departure and arrival,

payment of adequate and timely wage, and displacement allowance, the Covid 19 lockdown and the resultant long march of the migrant workers proved that neither were its provisions adhered to, nor did it help the migrant workers in time of distress. Five years after the lockdown, the situation remains unchanged: comprehensive data about migrant workers continues to be unavailable, their transit remains unrecorded, leaving them open to multiple vulnerabilities, of which, in the current moment, persecution on suspicion of being undocumented foreigners becomes the most stark.

The primary districts in West Bengal contributing to the out-migration include Murshidabad, North and South 24 Parganas, Nadia, Birbhum, Malda, Cooch Behar, Purba Bardhaman, Uttar Dinajpur, and Dakshin Dinajpur. Individuals from Muslim-majority areas and those belonging to Scheduled Tribe (ST) and Scheduled Caste (SC) populations, who face additional layers of socio-economic vulnerability, also constitute the largest share of such workers. In the persecution, detention and forced exile of migrant workers, such marginalised groups continue to be over represented.

3. Long history of persecution of Bengali-speaking migrant workers

For a long time, certain ideological forces in the country have flagged the figure of the infiltrator, the undocumented immigrant, as one of the chief enemies within. The undocumented immigrant, since the 1990s has been the chief figure of this rhetorical attack, termed 'illegal', '*ghuspetiya*', '*onuprobeshkari*'. In 1992, the Delhi government carried out 'Operation Pushback', an elaborate exercise in which undocumented Bangladeshis, including some residents originally from West Bengal, were rounded up and sent to Bangladesh.

Since then, the figure of the undocumented Bangladeshi has found regular space in political speeches, election campaigns and governmental action. In each of these instances, Bengali speaking migrant workers, primarily Muslims, have borne the brunt of targeted attack, ranging from violence, demolition of habitation and forced deportation. For example, In 2017, Bengali migrant domestic workers were targeted as Bangladeshis, after an altercation with their employers in the NCR region. In 2019, 329 suspected undocumented Bangladeshis from Karnataka were sent to the Bangladesh border in a bid to push them into Bangladesh, an exercise strongly contested by Border Guards, Bangladesh which claimed this to be an exercise in illegal entry. In 2022, after communal violence in Delhi's Jahangirpur Colony, Bengali migrant workers' residences were demolished, claiming these were undocumented people, inhabiting unauthorised structures.

In 2023 similar attacks were carried out on residents in Haryana's Nuh while migrants Palash Adhikary and family (including a child) were detained in Karnataka, for ten months, under similar suspicions in 2022-2023.

4. What has happened since May?

After attacks on tourists in Kashmir's Pahalgam district, India undertook "Operation Sindoor", Since then, different Indian states also started to undertake widespread detention and forced expulsion of Bengali-speaking migrant workers. Launched on May 7, 2025, it has reportedly resulted in over 2,000 Bengali-speaking migrants being covertly exiled into Bangladesh, and thousands fleeing their place of work voluntarily.

The methods of deportation are particularly alarming. Individuals are rounded up from various states, including Gujarat, Delhi, Haryana, Assam, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and Goa. They are then flown by Indian Air Force aircraft to border states such as Tripura, Meghalaya, and Assam, where they are held in makeshift camps. Subsequently, they are "pushed back" across the border into Bangladesh by the Border Security Force (BSF), often within hours.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports corroborate these findings, confirming arbitrary expulsions, a severe lack of due process, and allegations of threats, beatings, and the seizure of personal documents, including phones and identity cards. Elaine Pearson, HRW Asia Director, has explicitly stated that the BJP is "fuelling discrimination by arbitrarily expelling Bengalis from the country, including Indian citizens". Lama Fakih, Acting Deputy Executive Director at HRW, further emphasized that "Expulsion without due process violates fundamental human rights". These expulsions are reportedly carried out without judicial oversight, formal orders, or access to legal aid, directly contravening Indian law and international obligations.

Specific incidents highlight the widespread nature of these practices:

- **Odisha:** Between June and July 2025, 447 Bengali-speaking migrant workers, including masons, daily-wage labourers, and street vendors from districts like Birbhum, Murshidabad, and South 24 Parganas, were rounded up by police in areas such as Jharsuguda and Khurda. Many of these individuals had been working legally in Odisha for several years, but police reportedly refused to accept their Indian documents. Over 200 were detained on suspicion of being Bangladeshis.
- **Gurugram, Haryana:** A police verification drive targeting undocumented immigrants led to the exodus of hundreds (estimated between 300 and 400) of Bengali-speaking migrant families from shanty settlements in July 2025. This mass departure was driven by fear of detention and harassment, even for those possessing valid documents like Aadhaar and voter cards. Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini defended the campaign, declaring "no place for Bangladeshi infiltrators in Haryana".
- **Maharashtra:** At least seven Bengali-speaking individuals were initially pushed into Bangladesh, only to be later confirmed as Indian citizens and repatriated through legal and diplomatic intervention. Members of the Matua community, a Dalit religious minority of Bengali origin, were also detained in Pune on suspicions of being undocumented migrants.
- **Chhattisgarh:** Nine Bengali-speaking masons from Krishnanagar, West Bengal, possessing valid documents and recruited through a verified contractor, were picked up from a school construction site in Kondagaon. They were detained, denied contact with their families, and allegedly put on buses and sent back to Bengal without any court order authorizing their removal.
- **Delhi:** Residents of Jai Hind Colony in Vasant Kunj, a settlement housing hundreds of Bengali-speaking migrant workers, reported being targeted with evictions, electricity and water cutoffs, and routine police harassment despite possessing valid documentation. Nearly 700 alleged undocumented migrants were deported from Delhi to Bangladesh in the last six months as part of an intensified "pushback" strategy.
- **Rajasthan:** Amir Sheikh, a 22-year-old Malda resident, was jailed for two months on suspicion of being a Bangladeshi citizen before allegedly being pushed into Bangladesh by the BSF, despite his family possessing land documents proving their residence in Malda since before the Independence of India. Amir is still missing. In another incident, thirteen migrant workers from West Bengal, including children, were held for nine days solely because they spoke Bengali, despite being Indian citizens.
- **Uttar Pradesh:** Six residents of West Bengal were detained by Uttar Pradesh Police in Deoria district on suspicion of being Bangladeshi nationals, despite having valid photo ID cards. This situation was resolved after swift intervention by the Murshidabad Superintendent of Police. 30 migrant ragpickers from Nadia were detained at Surajkund, 27 of them released after intervention of the MP from Itahar.
- **Gujarat:** 17 workers were confined inside the factory they worked in, in Surat. They were released after intervention by the West Midnapore police.

5. Who are the workers who were detained and / pushed into Bangladesh?

(this incomplete list has been collated from media reports)

1. *Jhantu Mondal* from Hooghly,
2. *Islam Sheikh* from Bankura,
3. *Gulias Shah* from Purulia,
4. *Nazimuddin Mondal, Mehboob Sheikh, Minarul Sheikh, Mostafa Kamal Sheikh* from Murshidabad;
5. *Safiqul Islam, Manishankar Biswas, Nayan Biswas* from Nadia
6. *Fajer and Taslima Mondal, Arush Adhikari*, wife and child from North 24 Parganas
7. *Danish Sheikh, Sonali Bibi* and 5 year old *Sabir, Sweety Bibi* from Birbhum
8. *Sabiqul Islam, Mominul Islam, Sadat Hossain* from Uttar Dinajpur
9. *Anshul Ali, Alam Ali, Noor Alam, Mukul Ali, Amir Sheikh* from Malda
10. *Asit Sarkar* from Dakkhin Dinajpur

6. Forms of violence: detention, stripping, beating, gagging, extorting, demolition, abduction

(dates indicate the dates on which the reports were published in the media)

1. **July 26:** Md. Kabir from North Dinajpur, working in Haryana, was tied with ropes, gagged and beaten in Panipat Police Station, being repeatedly asked to admit that he is an undocumented Bangladeshi national.
2. **August 5:** Babai Sardar from Bishnupur, South 24 Parganas, was detained for several days in Mumbai before his whereabouts could be ascertained by a team from Bengal.
3. **July 30:** Hemanta Barman from Coochbihar was forced to prove his religion by stripping, in Haryana's Gurugram.
4. **July 31:** Sajinur Rahaman from Delhi alleged that her one and a half year old child was slapped by Delhi police.
5. **August 1:** Junaid from Goalpokhor in North Dinajpur was denied medical treatment in Bihar's Kishnaganj, alleging that he is a Bangladeshi national.
6. **27 July:** residents of Bengali Market in Gurugram Haryana allege that they are routinely picked up by passing numberplate-less cars and forced to admit that they are Bangladeshi nationals.
7. **July 25:** Alam Ali from Chanchal in Malda claimed that they were not given any food to eat while detained by Haryana police, and were allowed to wear only their undergarments.
8. **April 26 onwards:** thousands of Bengali-speaking Muslims, part of 12,500 homes that were demolished in Gujarat's Ahmedabad became homeless, in a drive to break up 'illegal' structures and get rid of undocumented. Majority of those rendered homeless are Bengali speaking migrant workers who had been living in Bangali Vas near Chandola Lake in Ahmedabad
9. **July 2025:** Electricity and water cut off in Delhi Jai Hind camp, informally known as Jai Hindi Bangali BAsTi—under suspicion that the residents are undocumented Bangladeshis. They are all Bengali Muslims, primarily from Coochbihar, most of them residents in Delhi for several decades, across three generations.
10. **July 25:** A video message from Amir Sheikh, currently somewhere in Bangladesh claimed that he had been kept in imprisonment in Rajasthan for close to two months, after which he was brought to the Bengal Bangladesh border and pushed inside Bangladesh, across the border, via a payload
11. **August 5:** Popy Maishal from Purba Medinipur was taken to a police station in Mumbai and kept overnight, without the presence of a woman police personnel, under suspicion of her being an undocumented Bangladeshi.

12. **August 5:** Danish Sheikh, and his pregnant wife Sonali Bibi continue to be missing. They were last heard of on June 26, their phones switched off.
13. **August 7:** Mohammad Kabir from Uttar Dinajpur had his legs fractured by Panipat police after he refused to admit to being a Bangladeshi national. Kabir is one of three individuals who have alleged the same.

7. Atmosphere of Fear: Fleeing from Gurugram

In July 2025, a significant number of Bengali-speaking migrant workers left Gurgaon due to a fear of detention and deportation under suspicion of being undocumented Bangladeshis. Most of these migrant workers from Malda, Murshidabad, Nadia and South Dinajpur in Bengal, and Assam live with their families in slums. Men work as labourers, janitors in MNCs, ragpickers, sanitation workers and delivery agents while women work as domestic workers and caregivers in the nearby highrises. They included: Rahimuddin, a construction worker, had been living in Gurgaon for over five years. He worked on several building projects, including residential complexes and commercial spaces; Soma Das, a domestic worker, had been employed by several families in the area. She took care of household chores and looked after children; Kamal Hossain, a vendor, sold fruits and vegetables in the local market. He had a small stall and catered to the needs of the local residents. Anjum Khatoon from Millennium City in Gurgaon became scared when her son was rounded up by the police. Journalist Ajit Anjum interviewed a schoolgirl who used to live in Gurugram Sector 49, Juggi no 3. She left with her family abandoning her studies, right before completing school. In a desperate attempt to avoid being picked up, Israil and Ashraful, auto-rickshaw driving brothers from Malda, rode 1400kms from Haryana to their homes. With family members and belongings stuffed in their autos, the sole source of their livelihood, they drove for two and a half days.

Residents of multistoreyed apartment blocks in Gurugram report how more than half of the housekeeping staff, self-employed car cleaners, dog walkers, domestic workers, drivers, cooks and other blue collar workers had already left. Other reports record garbage piling up, shanties locked, phones switched off.

This is reminiscent of the exodus of migrant workers hailing from North-East India leaving south Indian cities like Bangalore, Chennai and the Maharashtra city, Pune, in 2012. This was the result of rumours of attacks on people from the North East, in the aftermath of clashes and large scale displacement of people belonging to Bodo and Muslim communities in Assam. However, while both the central and local governments made appeals for calm and ensured the fleeing migrants of their safety (in several Southern cities, Muslim community leaders held meetings with people of the North East to reassure them), in this instance, the governments have been fueling the mass exodus.

Their persecution and harassment is also reminiscent of the violence on Bihari migrant workers in Maharashtra in 2008, organised violence including murder in Assam in 2003 and 2007 and the murder of Bihari migrants in Kashmir in 2024.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✘ One of the repeated recommendations of most researchers is enforcement of the Interstate Migrant Workmen's Act (1979). However The 2011 Standing Committee Report on the Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Amendment Bill exposed the exploitative nature of interstate migrant labor systems. In 2020, the Act was inadequate in either protecting the rights of the migrants, or in eliciting enough information about their lives, numbers and livelihood. In fact, since the pandemic, civil society organisations have carried out the task of offering relief, and of generating data regarding the livelihood and working conditions of India's migrant workers. The 1979 Act did not address the question of their electoral disenfranchisement (since many migrants cannot travel back home during the time of the election), nor did it manage to bring the migrant workers into sharp focus when discussing the rights of Indian citizens. While the 1979 Act remains the only legal framework governing the migrant workers' wellbeing, it does not work. The data-intensive imperatives enshrined in the Act could also have unforeseen negative outcomes, especially its misuse by political actors.
 - ✘ The government should send all party factfinding committees to the states where persecution of migrant workers is rampant.
 - ✘ Central and localised Trade Unions must consider the migrant workers as an integral part of their cohort and address the issues of the migrant workers as their own. Solidarity in this respect has been sorely lacking.
 - ✘ Like the time of the lockdown, the media has belatedly risen to the distress of the migrant workers. We cannot absolve the media from its responsibilities in creating an anti-migrant sentiment and underreporting the issues and concerns related to migrant workers in usual times.
 - ✘ Like during the lockdown, the migrant workers have once again pushed us to think about the nature of solidarity today. While a few political parties have taken out marches in support of Bengali-speaking migrant workers in Kolkata and in other parts of Bengal, only a handful have been present at the sites of violence and persecution, in the aftermath of the events. Once again, community organisations, independent journalists and civil society organisations have been more proactive on the ground. Greater engagement of different political parties is necessary to effectively create solidarity with the persecuted workers.
 - ✘ The central government needs to go beyond the eShram portal to cater to the specific needs and requirements of the migrant workers. It has already become evident that under the guise of hunting for the undocumented, the migrants are routinely subjected to extortion and harassment. Already oppressed by societal prejudice and discriminatory working conditions, the government needs to safeguard their fundamental rights.
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- ✕ Bengali-speaking migrant workers are not alone in their persecution. They have followed in the heels of the death of and violence on Bihari workers across the country and the mass exodus of workers from the North East. The continuing distress of migrant workers therefore is not an isolated event, but needs to be acknowledged and dealt with by all sections of society.
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