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BEVARU

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Bengaluru

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Love, Dignity, Struggle

In collaboration with domestic workers, powrakarmikas, garment workers and sex workers

VOL. 5



Unknown to the city: Migrant workers speak out

“700 workers? Are you sure? The number itself is frightening.”

This was the response of many government officials in the last few weeks, during the Covid 19 lockdown. The sheer number of migrant workers in the city seems to have caught the state, trade unions and general public by surprise. The lockdown has resulted in huge numbers of migrant workers getting stuck without work and wages in the city. In response, the Labour department, BBMP and the Police have been trying their best to ensure food supply and ration distribution, with mixed results.

There are close to 9,000 migrant workers building the Bangalore Metro, one of the largest infrastructural projects of the city. A report released by Maraa, revealed the precarious living and working conditions of the workers. The BMRCL refused to share any data about the workers employed on the Metro. The COVID-19 crisis gives us an opportunity to unearth the exploitation of Metro workers, over the last decade.

“It is not as though the Government is doing us a favour. They won’t spare a single rupee even if we miss work for one day. All we are asking is to be paid

for the work that we have done. We came here to work and nothing else.” Meanwhile, on the city’s numerous construction sites, a similar story unfolds. Since the lockdown began, the workers have been trying to reach their contractors and owners, their only link in the city. Most owners and contractors have switched their phones off and are absconding. Some have made provisions for ration, the cost of which workers know, will be cut from their future salaries.

“Our bodies are accustomed to work.

**We work hard, we work honestly,
and we deserve to be paid for it.**

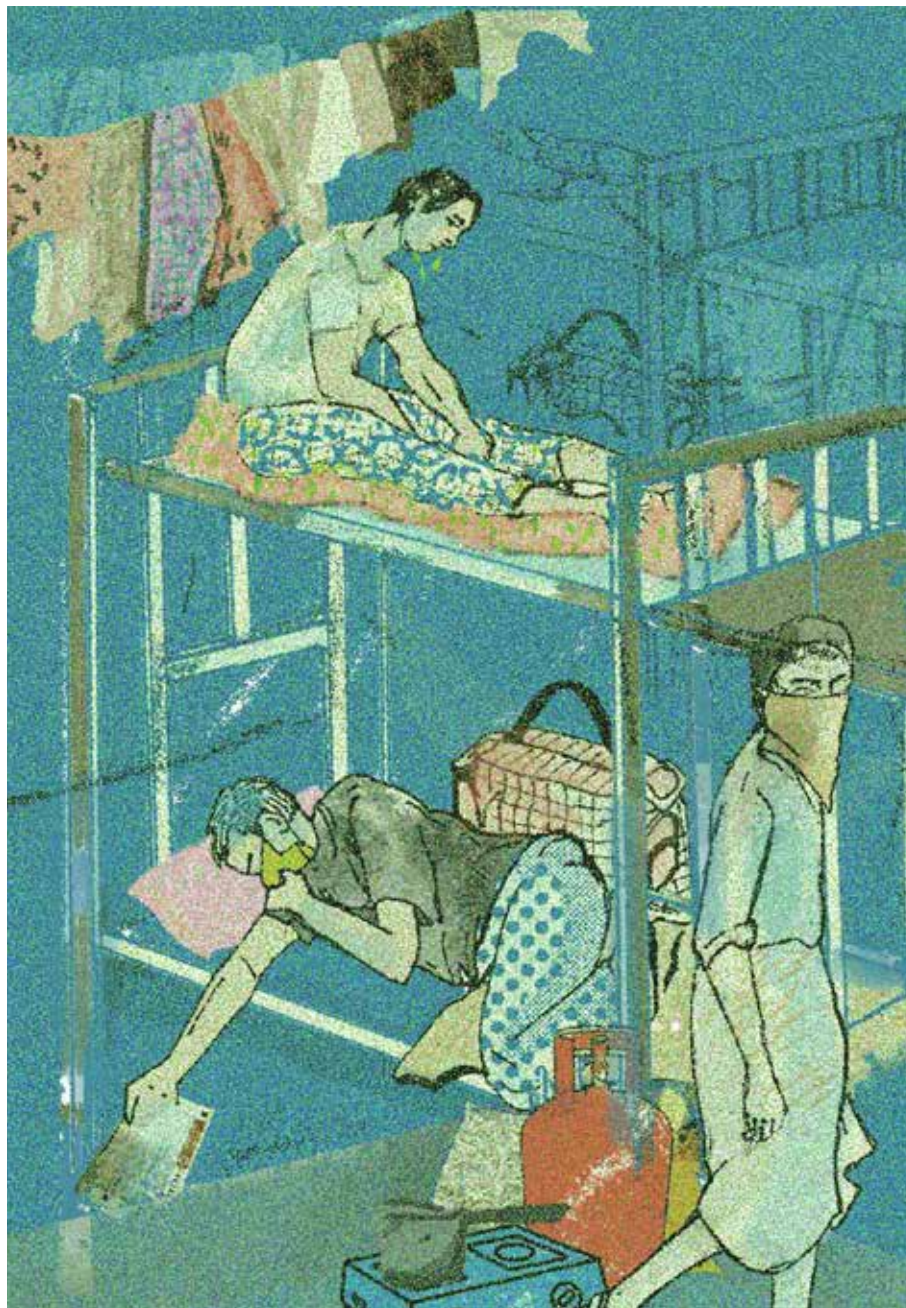
We do not like asking people for two meals a day.”

For daily wage workers, the situation is worse. “I only have Rs.2,000/- left, that I am saving in case of a medical emergency.” shared a waste picker, who lives alongside a drain, in Mahadevapura, a sprawling IT corridor of the city. Confronted by the government’s lack of accountability, the workers have had to rely on the charity of organisations and strangers who have tried to distribute ration, as stop-gap measures.

In principle, it is the responsibility of the Labour Department, in conjunction with the BBMP and trade unions to ensure food and ration distribution. In reality, this system is unable to address the needs of migrant workers. Not all migrant workers have bank accounts, rations cards or other documents to access services and support mechanisms in the city. Most migrant workers are not registered with any union, who have themselves faced their own battles against privatization, disenfranchisement, political co-option, and decades-long vilification by the middle class and the media. Most migrant workers prefer their flexibility, mobility, job security and anonymity, as does a global financial system that prefers informal labour. Demanding for rights in an unknown city while fighting unemployment and agrarian crisis back home, workers prefer to be follow where the work takes them. On their end, while the unions have tried to incorporate migrant workers into their spheres of influence, they have barely been successful in registering migrant workers.

Regional and local tensions, casteism and communalisation continue to deepen, impacting all forms of relief. People who don't speak the local language or speak in a different dialect are neglected and denied food/ration. There have been cases where relief is primarily distributed by MLAs only in voter constituencies-some workers have had to pay for 'free' ration. A large percentage of the workforce in Bangalore is Muslim and the focus of local TV channels and efforts in relief work has clarified that it is less about the epidemic and more about spreading hatred and violence. "The corona virus is not going to affect us. The bigger virus is caste and religion. Why don't you do something to control the spread of that virus. It is more dangerous than anything else," said one of the workers who has been following the situation in Shiv Vihar, following the Delh riots. The virus has further exacerbated practices of untouchability and discrimination, toward migrant workers from SC/ST communities. "They don't come to our side of the area, they distribute food only in the gullies where people of their caste live."

"Our rooms are very small. There are no fans, and these days it is very hot. The sun heats up the tin.



We feel like we will catch fire inside."

In living conditions like these, what scope is there for social distancing? In places where there is no water supply, how can we follow the Prime Minister's appeal? Workers are struggling to eat one square meal a day, where is the relevance of masks, gloves and sanitisers? The health precautions designed by the central government come across as a cruel joke. The Central Government has ignored the workforce of this country yet again. There is no respite, assurance or consolation. Now we see workers, captured by the media, as miserable masses, thronging railway stations, or walking barefoot on roads. This selective representation robs them of their dignity, and fails to address the systemic issues that have created this situation.

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This issue of Bevaru gives you an insight into the experiences of migrant workers during the

I built the Metro

I came to this city in 2010. I was in MG Road for a while, then Majestic, then Mysore Road, RR Nagar and now in Banerghatta. I feel like I have built the whole Metro in Bangalore. I know what goes on inside. Who will complete it, if we leave?

I had a dream that all of us left the city and decided never to return. All the city people quit their jobs and started building the Metro. They had to complete what we had started because all means of transport had collapsed. All of us were watching these videos on WhatsApp; I could hear us laughing loudly.

I have spent half my life in cities. I ran away from home, my father was a nasty man, and I was too arrogant. I have not returned since. I learnt about life on the road. I love my work, I am the best welder anyone can find. Just that not too many people can find me. I have built many metros - Hyderabad, Bangalore, Delhi - I know the taste of all these cities. I am surrounded by everyone wanting to go home, some are afraid, some are sick of not working, everyone is saying, I want to go home, when will the trains open? After 15 years, I had a dream about home. I dreamt of Meena Bazaar, the pond where I used bathe 4-5 times in a day, the dargah, the smell of fresh litthi choka, and Rehana.

I came to Bangalore 6 months ago. I like the weather. It is tolerable, but sometimes makes us lazy. I came when the purple line was getting built. The Byappanahalli station was nearly complete and they assigned me to build the overbridge near Byappanahalli station. Have you seen that bridge? It looks so sturdy and majestic. I am very proud of it. But my contractor didn't pay me for 6 months. I could not send anything back home. My mother would call me every day to find out why I had not sent any money home. I was

ashamed. Only alcohol rescued me. It helped me cry. It helped me wake up the next day to get to work. One night, I started walking away from the construction site. I was furious. It was like I was possessed. It was around 4 pm. There was a tender coconut seller on the road, I pushed him aside, took his knife, and strode right ahead. I knocked on a door I had never seen before. He opened the door, I slashed his throat. It was my contractor. I woke up sweating. I left the city the very next day, and promised never to return.

I am a crane operator. I must be the only worker who has been in Bangalore since they started the Metro construction 2009. I even speak Kannada now. The metro would not be possible without me, and the city cannot find a better crane operator than me. You see, I see things from the top, it is a very different perspective. I don't like to live in the labour colony. I felt I was too old to share a room with so many people. I like my privacy. I like to cook my *phulka sabji*. So I took a room and paid rent for it from my salary. It was hard to make ends meet; even though I was skilled, I got paid the same as other workers, I could hardly save any money. I used to go home once a year. My wife, over the years, became suspicious of me. She felt I was with another woman, because on some months I could not manage to send any money home. One day she called and told me never to come home again. She told me I could not meet my daughter or son anymore. I thought it was a dream. I tried to go back home two years ago, I was beaten by locals in my village and was asked to leave. I returned to Bangalore. I still work here as a crane operator. I live alone. In Bangalore city. Come home, visit me.

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This article is based on conversations with four workers building Namma Metro, over the last decade. Maraa's report on the living and working conditions of metro workers during the lockdown was submitted to the Labour Department on 6th April and subsequently made public on 11th April to push the Government to take action.



How can we stay indoors? The street is our working place

Gloves, sanitizers, masks, social distancing, contamination. What impact do these precautions and restrictions have on work that rests on touch, proximity, and intimacy?

“When we watch the news, we feel scared. All the health precautions are talking about social distance, to avoid physical contact. How will we continue our work?”

Members of Sadhana Mahila Sangha, a collective of street based sex workers, are more worried about what will happen once the lockdown lifts. They remember what they went through during the HIV outbreak in the 80's. More than the illness, it is the stigma caused by the illness that persists. During the time of HIV, the figure of the sex worker itself was considered to be contaminated. It took years to recover from the stigma, and the sex

workers fear that Covid 19 will put them in a similar situation.

The lockdown has been cruel to sex-workers, who forced to leave streets and public spaces, find themselves indoors, with no way of earning money. Worse, their partners have become cold and are not willing to help them. “If I call my partner and ask him to help me, he pretends like he doesn't know how to transfer money online. This is very hurtful. In the past, even on my day off, I used to go to him if he asked. He used to tell me I am like his wife. I slept with him even when he had viral fever. And now, he tells me the virus is dangerous and I could infect him. He no longer wants to see me, nor am I his wife. It is very convenient isn't it?” shares a member of the collective.

With hospitals over burdened by COVID 19, people going through other kinds of treatment have faced difficulty in accessing healthcare and medicine. This includes a number of sex workers who are undergoing ART treatment. The sudden lockdown means that they could not visit the hospital for their weekly check-ups

and treatment. It took close to three weeks of putting pressure on the Women and Child Welfare department to get permission and passes to access medicine for the women.

Like other workers, sex workers are struggling to make ends meet. There is no income, and the price of ration has doubled. If they step outside to try and buy ration, the police harass them and drive them indoors.

“I feel most happy when I can wander outside. My work is on the streets. With the money I earn, I run my house. I can pay for my children's education.”

“Ever since the virus hit, I am cooped up indoors. I have no way of earning money. I am dependent on others. I have lost my freedom.”

Members of Sadhana are trying to mentally prepare themselves for what lies ahead. Some women, forced to supplement their income, have taken to doing small jobs, such as preparing pickles and papad at home, and selling it in their neighbourhoods.

They are not sure if they will be able to occupy public space in the city as they once did. This uncertainty, is taking a psychological toll on many sex workers, who are also the sole earners in their families.

“Who do I speak to about what I am going through? My daughter in law can't understand my struggles. I can't tell my children about the work I do. How can I tell them why I need a physical relationship, when they keep advising the opposite on the news?”

How will our relationships of intimacy and desire change? Will new forms of stigma and discrimination surface based on work that requires physical proximity? Who will account for the economic, mental and emotional loss workers have undergone during this crisis? The sex workers raise very pertinent questions, that need to be carefully considered for the future we build, in the aftermath of Covid19.

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**This article is based on the experiences of Sadhana Mahila Sangha, a collective working to ensure the rights of street based sex workers, in Bangalore.*



What is more deadly than hunger?

The day the city retreats into its cocoon, he is asked not to come to work. A sudden quiet falls over the streets. There is not a sound to be heard, except the chatter of birds and barking of dogs. His friends and him find their daily routines and rhythm disrupted. Time that would pass by in the careful sifting of plastic, metal and tin, listening to Bhojpuri songs, an occasional laugh, lies still.

A suffocating heat descends. A combination of rumor and news floats through the godowns where they live, about a virus. There is need for human confinement, to avoid contamination. There is talk of masks, gloves, sanitizers and 'social distancing'. Living in close quarters, with scraps of metal, sheets of plastic, aluminum, paper, not to mention sixty men from his village, he only knows proximity. Nevertheless, he buys a mask.

He lives amidst gated complexes and offices made of glass, in a prominent IT corridor of the city better known as ITPL with close to five hundred people. They occupy space minimally. They work, quietly. Their days pass in 12-14 hour shifts. Time is money. Calculations have to be precise. They are crucial to daily life in the city; tiles, plastic, garbage, concrete, bricks; sifting, cleaning, cooking, building, constructing. His contractor owes him two months' salary. That is against the law, he is told.

The metal that surrounds him glows with heat. Time passes in snatches of sleep, card games and daydreaming. On the phone, his wife tells him they have been told to harvest the crop as soon as possible and clear the fields. But trucks are not allowed to enter the city with produce. The soyabean is rotting, she says. Around him, men grow restless with hunger. A few fights break out. He tries calling the contractor. His phone is always switched off. With each passing meal, his savings begin to deplete. Some money has to be set aside in case of a medical emergency. The price of wheat has doubled. He reads the news. The death toll had reached 200. He remembers the hospital close to the village where he grew up.

Each day he would witness close to 70 deaths, because of some disease or the other. But that never made the news, it was never reason enough for a lockdown. He lies down but cannot sleep.

It is time for another survey for food supplies. He makes a list with names, Aadhar ID, job profile, employer names and incomes of all worker. He wonders what the Government will do with this data? What if they use it against them? He feels like tearing up the survey. But he maintains his composure.

The tall apartments that encircle his godown, lie stern and silent. His neighbor, who cooks and cleans for one of the apartments was denied entry at the gate when she had gone to ask for her salary. A resident looked at her suspiciously. He is not surprised that workers like him have to face this prejudice. 'Social distance' has always existed.

They are forced to rely on the charity of strangers. Cars and trucks full of supplies begin to arrive. His life is quantified in packets of rice, dal and oil. With each round of supply, the men around grow desperate. There is an uncertainty as to when the next round of supplies will be delivered. There is suspicion and resentment, "Why is he taking three bags more than he needs?" A man next to him faints because of dehydration. He is quickly removed so that others can continue filling their bags with rice. He will have to wait another day. That night, he shares a meal with some of his neighbors. They eat in silence.

New schemes for workers are announced on the news. He suspects the virus is part of a larger game plan, to make his people suffer. An auto full of cooked food has arrived at 5 pm with lunch. One packet per day. He opens the bag, and the food is stale. Is there anything more deadly than hunger? He throws the packet away.

He and his friends go to the road outside for a smoke. It is a new feeling, to stand idle and survey the city. They pass the beedi between them, looking out at the empty street and barred shutters. A man appears on the balcony above, and shouts at them through his mask, to maintain distance. He stubs the beedi. That night he dreams that the government has replaced bombs with the virus as their weapon of choice.

Bevaru (Sweat) is dedicated to the voice, view and experiences of workers in Bangalore. The paper will focus on workers from the unorganized sector. Please share your writings, poems, songs and ideas around labor. Give us your feedback, suggestions and ideas.

This is a special edition of Bevaru highlighting the experiences of migrant workers during the Covid 19 lockdown. All articles written by Team Maraa.

Maraa is a media and arts collective, based in Bangalore since 2008. The collective workers toward freedom of speech and expression by highlighting voices from the margins. We challenge notions of the developing city by representing narratives of exclusion, struggle and resilience in different forms.

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Point of no return

“I keep walking from one end to the other.” Some of us gather and sit by the road for an hour or two, then we walk on the terrace. We can only pray for the lockdown to get over soon so that we can go home. What is left for us here?”

Littered across the city are concrete skeletons. The foundations for the homes of Bangalore’s ever-expanding population. However, these are not just homes in the making. They live here. In open structures of cement and brick. There are no walls, no windows, no toilets. Water is sourced from the borewell. Scattered within and outside of these structures are loose building materials – bricks, cement powder, plaster. While adding to the décor of the site they also contribute to significant amounts of dust. They are not yet the state-of-the-art homes they are advertised to be. This is their home. For now.

Each site is isolated with a different owner and contractor. They come from far away: Bihar, Jharkhand, Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Orissa. Lured by contractors, they travel long distances with the promise of finding work, money and a better life. They do not speak the local language. They are not registered. They are not part of any union in the city. Workers do not recognize the city, the city does not recognize workers.

“10 of us left our room for work at 8 am like any other day but there was no means of transport. All the streets were empty. The police started chasing us away saying go back to your houses or we will lock you in. We called our contractor, he told us all work has to be stopped for 21 days.”

Without work, the city does not feel like home. They live alongside rich people. They see them jogging in the morning or walking around the neighborhood. So many cars.

Nobody has ever asked them where they are from. Contractors change with each building. Workers are paid daily and sometimes weekly. They send as much as they can back home, the rest is used for weekly expenses. Their families back home are solely dependent on their income.

“We walk outside but not far. Rich people living here look at us suspiciously. We just walk inside the construction site. Anyway, we are just here to work.”

After a hard day’s work, food is the only memory of home. They take great care to cook and they all eat together. The people from other states have different tastes and eat separately. Now they survive on one meal a day. “You have to adjust,” the contractor said. They have no other choice, but to wait.

“My body pains from sitting idle the whole day. We try and play Ludo or watch videos on the mobile phone but there is a constant worry about the future. How will I pay rent for this month? How will I go home, how will I get money?”

The police threatened them that they will put them in jail if they see them getting out. They have not heard of any schemes that they can benefit from or take care of their welfare and security. As contract labourers, they can be cut off from any direct contact with the employer. The worker has to be content with what he gets from the contractor. Nothing more. Nothing less. No one is accountable to them.

“After this lock down suddenly, we feel alone here. Nobody in the city knows we live here. Who can we reach out to? I have stopped calling my family back home, they start crying on the phone. I just tell them I am well here. What else should I tell them?”

They spend more time listening to music and playing games on their phones; balance will soon run out. For now, they can speak to their family. Soon they will be giving missed calls to them. They are bored. They would rather work or go back home. Their families back home have stopped answering calls. All the trains are shut. Hunger returns.

They are tired of waiting. A group of them decide to go to the owner’s house. The owner gives them Rs. 200/- and tells them that the rest will be paid after the lockdown ends. Some of them are angry, others just quiet.

“If I go home at least I amidst my people. I don’t have to think about hunger. I don’t have to beg. All I want is the money I have worked for. Once this ends I’ll go home and never return.”

The workers have little to do with what they build in a city. They live on the edge. Today, there are many under constructed buildings and houses stand abandoned waiting for the hands that can complete them. They stand as witness, to the false promises of the city.

M I S S I N G

My name is Surender Yadav. I am about 45 years old. I was wearing a white shirt and there is a blue taveez around my neck. I am 5 feet 6 inches tall, and wheatish brown in colour. I came to Bangalore in February to work with my brother on the Metro. I worked on the Banerghatta line. I went missing on 20th of March at 8 pm. When I was returning from work, I lost my way back to the labour colony. My brother too has been trying to reach me. I do not have a cell phone. The company has registered a complaint at the Police Station, and there is still no news of me. My family back home is very worried. Suddenly, there is no one on the street, no sound of vehicles. Only stray dogs, so many of them. Everyone also seems to be missing.

If you find me anywhere, please call 9880755875.

This is a real complaint, registered with the Hulimavu Police Station. It is also a marker to acknowledge that several workers in the city have gone missing. Some complaints were registered, other disappearances have not been recorded. They are still waiting to be found. Their families await them.





Sleeping peacefully

She has had a headache since morning. She couldn't sleep last night. She woke up late and made small cups of tea with less milk. She saw her husband sitting outside the house, staring at the road. There is nothing to do, no plan for the day. She waits for packets of food for her children.

She came to Bangalore five years ago with her children. Her husband works here as a construction worker. It was the first time she took a train. It was her first time to the city. It was all new for her: living in a rented house, no supervision from her in-laws, cooking for only four people, surrounded by people who spoke different languages and ate different kinds of food.

It is 11am and the children are still sleeping. She wakes up her elder son and asks him to check if they are distributing food packets. She goes to the kitchen to check how much ration is left. Barely enough for the next three days. They manage with one or two meals a day, usually Dal and Roti.

After she arrived, she had to start working to make ends meet. Her first job was in a garment factory in Bangalore. When that closed down, she started working as a domestic worker.

She likes to work. She can sleep peacefully after a day's work. Moreover, if you don't work, what will you eat?

Her husband and children are fast asleep. She sits staring at the walls without blinking. The room feels even smaller when she looks at her family sleeping in the afternoon heat. She feels suffocated. She nervously hums bhajans of Lord Shiva. She doesn't know how to use a mobile phone, so there is no other distraction.

At 6pm, she can see her neighbors returning with packets of food. She runs to get her share, but today they ask her to get a plate and stand in line. She feels uncomfortable and humiliated. What has her life come to? She returns home and asks her children stand in queue. She doesn't eat anything at night.

She wakes up to see the powrakarmikas at work. She is not sure if she will receive her payment for April. "How can I ask Madam to pay me? I have not even worked this month." But then she thought of her children standing in line for food. She decides to call her Madam tomorrow.

It is 10pm. Her husband is still sitting and staring out at the streets. Her children are playing games on the phone. On her neighbors' phone, she sees pictures of workers walking back to their villages. Her brother-in-law also walked from Agra to the village. The knot in her stomach tightens.

By midnight she lies down, wide awake. She looks at her husband, she has never seen him this quiet. As she closes her eyes, she remembers when she would be so tired after a day's work that she would start snoring the moment she lay down. There was peace of mind, there was assurance of food. There was work and she could sleep peacefully.

As per the law

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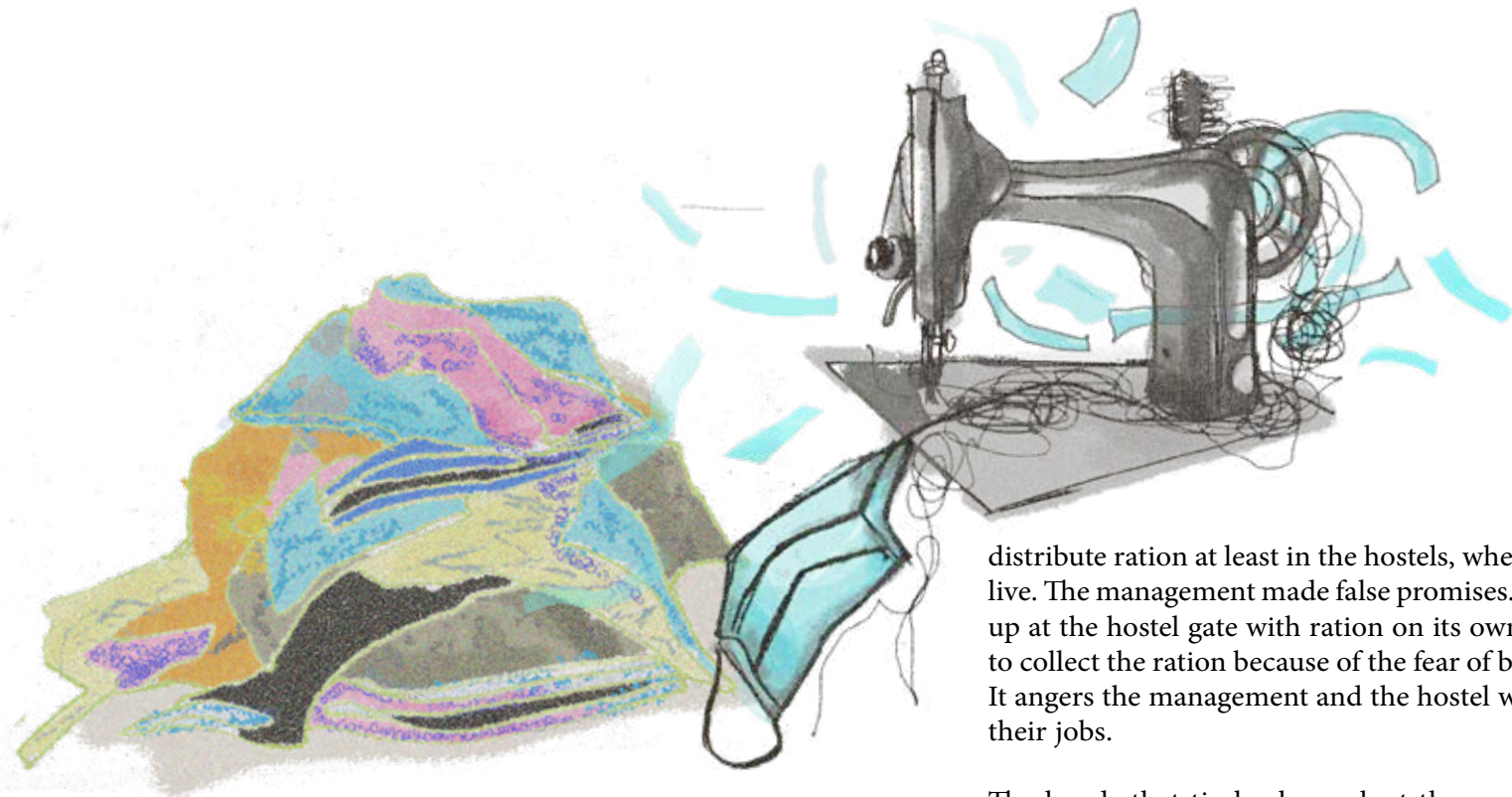
* The state has to ensure temporary shelter, food and other provisions for workers, stranded because of the lockdown. This is applicable for migrant workers stuck in cities, away from their homes.

* All employers, industries, factories and contractors are required to make payment to workers, on the due date, without any deduction in wage, for the period during which their workplace is closed.

* In case of lack of shelter, the state is required to provide shelter for workers, after ensuring necessary health protocols.

* If workers, including migrants, are living on rent, the landlords are required not to demand payment of rent for the period of one month. If the landlord is forcing evictions, they will be liable for prosecution under the Epidemic Diseases Act.

* Workers should have access to necessary health precautions, including gloves, masks and running water to ensure health and hygiene.



I don't know

"Where are you from?"

"Tripura."

"Why are you here?"

"Have come to collect cloth to make masks."

"Corona virus is spreading because of people like you".

He spat on her.

"You better run away from here before we start beating you up."

"But I had only come to take the cloth."

The gang of local boys started running after her. They reached the market, and she managed to escape behind the empty vendor carts.

Since that day she has not stepped out of her house. She works in a garment factory which is shut due to the lockdown. In these times making these masks with the union helps her out. She was angry after the incident but she never went back to that area, "I don't have anyone here with me. If things get worse then who will speak on my behalf? We have come here to work and earn, we cannot afford to get involved in such fights."

All the garment factories, in Bangalore, have been closed due to the lockdown. There is only a paper stuck on the gate of the factory, on which the date of re-opening, keeps getting postponed. That is the only source of information for the workers. They only have the landline number of the factory. That is why, the workers respond to all questions these days with, "I don't know."

Will you get paid for April? Will you get ration from the company? When will the factory open again? Do you want to go home? How will you survive? "I don't know." This lack of information has led to spread of rumours. 50% of workers will be laid off after the lockdown, they will have to leave their job if they choose to go to their houses after the lockdown. Back in their villages, the Panchayat is registering all the workers living in cities, and if they don't return home, they will not be allowed inside their villages again.

Amidst these rumours, there is a fear amongst workers of losing of their job. A few workers have decided to go back to the village after the lockdown gets over, "So many people work together in a factory, a cloth passes through so many hands. There are more chances of virus spreading there. If we get the virus, who will pay for our treatment. It is better to leave for home." The workers have received no help in terms of ration or food from the management of the company. They have been paid for March. The garment workers union did approach the management of a company demanding to

distribute ration at least in the hostels, where most of the migrant workers live. The management made false promises. In fact, when the union turned up at the hostel gate with ration on its own, workers refused to come out to collect the ration because of the fear of being associated with the union. It angers the management and the hostel warden, and workers fear losing their jobs.

The hands that tirelessly work at the machine all day, sewing zips and tucking buttons, are now idle. The workers for whom each minute is accounted for, who couldn't leave work to go to the toilet, or take a tea break, now have a lot of time at hand. At such a time, stuck in hostels, watching only Youtube and WhatsApp, their only response to all the questions asked is "I don't know".

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This article has been written in conversation with migrant workers associated with the Karnataka Garment Workers Union, KOOGU.

O B I T U A R Y

An endless walk

Home lies in the distance, a mirage in the hot sun. *She was used to walking long distances. To catch a bus, for a health-check-up, for work. Sometimes a walk was needed to clear the mind.* It was a family who discovered her lying by the roadside in the summer heat. *She was still walking, she heard her mother's voice ringing in her head.* They tried to wake her up. They called out to passerby's and the police. The police refused to touch her for fear of contamination. A crowd formed around her body. *She reached her village, she was greeting her neighbour.* The family covered her body with the only cloth they had. They waited with her till the ambulance arrived. *She was inside her house. How tall her children had grown!* Her mother got a call. She was declared dead. Her family has no money to come for the funeral. *She is drinking a sweet cup of milky tea. Her*

mother is preparing her favourite dish. She dies in the company of strangers. Like many others, forced to leave the city, trying to get home. It is evening and she is gossiping with her neighbour, she has many stories from her life in the city. Damn that contractor! The news carries a small mention of her. They don't know her name. The government promises compensation. Others like her, continue to walk. Home lies in the distance, a mirage in the hot sun.

*Home lies at a distance for migrant workers stranded in cities, because of the lockdown. This is not the first time they have walked a long road. It is perhaps the first time it has been publicly acknowledged. This obituary is dedicated to all the workers who lost their lives, on the road, trying to get home.

When will we get our gift?

“Do you know we are the only people working on the streets? Not one day of leave since the lockdown. We work every day from 6.30-10.30am. Aren't we brave to be getting out, sweeping the streets, cleaning everybody's garbage during the time of the virus? Would you do it?” asks Meena rightfully. She switches off her phone in the evening because all her friends call her and ask about this 'promised gift' from the Government. “Did Modi or Yeddy announce a gift for powrakarmikas or is it a rumour? Whatever it is, it is spreading like the virus,” she laughs, as she chews on her beeda.

She wakes up at 4:30am, gets ready by 5:30am and waits for her friends to gather near the auto stand, and together they head to work. “The performance of the punching our attendance in the biometric has stopped. Now we just take a photo of all us with masks and gloves, keeping 1 metre distance. That's what it takes to make the state believe we are at work.”

“Is there a problem with educated people? When will people learn to segregate?” Even during this time, powrakarmikas are having to sift through tissue papers filled with mucus and saliva, sanitary pads, medical waste, and “yenjal” (leftover saliva). Piles of garbage still collect in corners. With the lockdown it is easier to throw a bag of garbage without being noticed. “Do you know where we live? If the virus infects one of us, it will spread to the whole slum. It is most likely us who will get it, from people who use tissue paper. How can educated people be so self-centred? It's our turn to make people realise what untouchability feels like. We tell them openly, if you don't segregate, we will not touch it. Please follow the rules,” she states sternly.

Buses don't stop for powrakarmikas, auto rates have doubled, 5-6 of them have to cram together in an auto to report to work. After the lockdown, from an 8 hour day, their work is reduced to 4 hours, for the same amount of work.

“If there is no means of transport, we just walk. We avoid drinking water, else we have to use the toilet. It's a long walk from our area. We are exhausted

by the end of 4 hours. All chai kadais are also closed. We have to get home to relieve ourselves and eat our first meal of the day at 2 or 3pm.”

Many areas in Bangalore have been marked as hotspots. Where no residents can get out, no outsiders can come, but powrakarmikas continue to work in these 'hotspots'.

Wages are still the same, while prices of everything else is rising. “Milk, gas, vegetables, dal and rice. We can barely feed our children well. With the lockdown, children get bored and cranky; they keep asking for biscuit, chips, chocolates. We used to sell recyclable waste and get some small change, which was useful for unplanned, petty expenses. After the lockdown, even that income is cut.

Then there is rent and schools will soon open. We have to pay fees, buy shoes, socks, uniforms. The future looks impossible but we are taking it one day at a time.

Powrakarmikas who have worked for over 30 years have been retrenched early this year with no pension nor

benefits. “People from other castes are slowly trying to take our jobs. Jobs should first be given to our sons and daughters, otherwise how will our families survive?” asks Muniappa, who has served as a garbage collector for the last 30 years.

With bars being shut, alcohol which is habitual for those who have to work with the stench of sewage and garbage; work is more challenging. However, the women are thrilled. “This is the best thing about the virus. How are they working now? It's just an excuse. Bars need to be shut till they get used to not drinking. It saves us from their aggression. “At least we are sleeping well.”

One request from the powrakarmikas, to the residents, is to stay indoors. “Don't come out and infect the air. Just let us work in peace.” And dear Government, “Pay our wages on time, otherwise we won't sweep the streets. And don't forget our gifts.”

chuckles Meena as she smears the sunna into her beeda.

