

Laws Against the Labour Force

One of the major initiatives by the Modi government has been to change the existing laws and rules around labour in India. The Modi government wants to convert as many as 44 different labour laws into 4 “simple” labour codes – wages, occupational safety, health and working conditions, social security and industrial relations.

Even the RSS supported union Bhartiya Mazdoor Sangh has notionally opposed these new labour codes. One of the major problems with the labour codes is the removal of specific social security measures such as Employees State Insurance (ESI), Employees Provident Fund (EPF) etc., and make it a centralized fund. The Modi government is

also considering the privatization of all social security measures. This means that money meant for welfare of workers may be gambled away by private institutions who will always take risks for greater return on investment.

It seems that the changes in labour laws are meant to make the owners and employers happy. The employers have been saying that doing business in India is too complicated. For example, many different registrations are needed before a business can be opened. Also, where labour violations by the employers are alleged, the Labour Department is empowered to conduct inspections. The new four labour codes may make it much easier for employers to do business, but it will also make it very easy to hire and fire workers without any job security or social security for employees and workers.

The requirements on providing a safe environment for work will be diluted. There will be restrictions

on the right of employees to organize strikes. Close to 70 percent of the labour force in India are workers, not employees. This means that workers do not get access to ESI, EPF etc. Under the Contract Labour Act 1970, if a worker has worked for more than 240 days as contract labourer, then he or she has to be given the status of a ‘regular’ employee. This will be denied with the introduction of a new category called ‘fixed term employees’, where the concept of regular employment is being done away with so that the employer does not have to ensure job security of his employees. Of course, owners have creative ways of not implementing even this old rule. Under the new labour codes, even this basic protection will be removed.

Currently central government has set a minimum of 336 rupees (plus some consideration of inflation) and state governments can set minimum wages as long as it is above the figure set by central government. The new

code on wages has very little to say on minimum wages. There are very few provisions for setting minimum wages for workers. When the majority of the labour in India are unorganized sector workers without job or social security, there is no doubt that minimum wages will go further down for workers. Finally, the new labour codes leave it to state governments to decide what is a normal working day. Usually a normal working day is considered to consist of 8 hours, but under the new codes, state governments can increase the number of hours as a normal working day.

The government is trying to divide employees and workers and subsequently, all the people doing labour for a living will be negatively affected. All Central Trade Unions have opposed these new codes but so far, the government has not acted upon its whims and fancies. The workers and employees have to come together and make the government listen.

Here, There and Everywhere

Walking into the Basti you are hit with the distinct smell of mustard oil. Young men gather together near carom boards at the local tea stall. The murmurs of Bengali follow you everywhere as you walk around. This must be Bengal. But it isn't. This is the Thubarahalli Basti. Home to more than 10,000 migrant workers who have travelled all the way from Bengal and Bangladesh in search of better lives.

“At home we have only our farms. We can't make any money. At least here we can earn.”

The Thubarahalli Basti is situated in an open field surrounded by gated housing complexes. 100 meters from these well organized and sanitized apartments lies a vast expanse of metal sheet, 1 room homes stacked together as closely as possible, connected by dusty dirt roads. The smell of mustard oil competes with the smell from the garbage dumps which periodically punctuate the area. Waste from the city and nearby apartments is collected, sorted and deposited near their homes. Access to proper sanitation, water and electricity are limited. Water is provided

through large tankers that visit the Basti once a week. Sections of the Basti turn dark at night as only some parts are provided electricity. While migration has provided more opportunities to earn, access to a minimum living standard is does not exist.

“We have no electricity or water. Children die here like lizards.”

While the Basti and the surrounding apartments look very different from each other the people who live in both are closely linked. The residential complexes were built by the hands of those living in the basti. The majority of households around the basti employ the women to take care of their homes as domestic help and

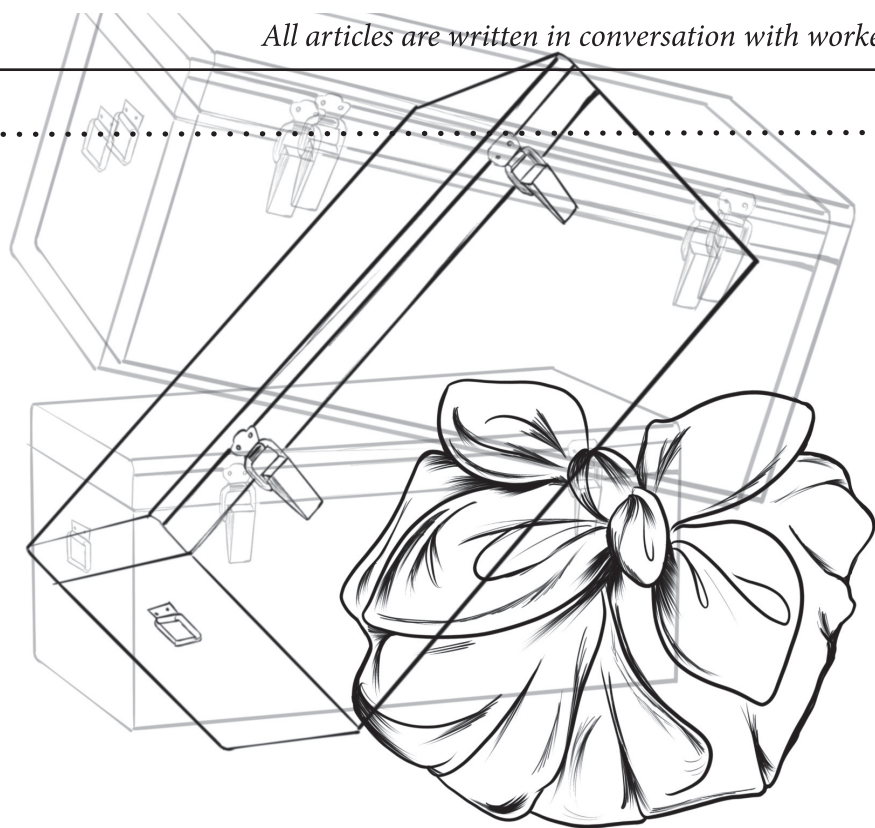
cooks while the men work as bus drivers for nearby schools, waste pickers, and daily wage labour. The migrant worker takes care of the work no one else wants to do. If not for them, who would cook the meals and clean the house? Who would build these massive complexes? Who would pick up the garbage and sort it with their bare hands? In spite of the fact that they are active and important members of the geography they occupy, they are treated as second class citizens.

“We keep their entire house in order, it functions because of us. All they do is sit at the table, eat, and scold us.”

Bevaru is dedicated to the voice, view and experiences of workers in Bangalore. The paper will focus on workers from the unorganized sector. This is the first issue of the paper, give us feedback, suggestions and ideas. Please share your writings, poems, songs, ideas around labour. For any information, write to us on bevarupaseena@gmail.com or call/message us on 6366646052.

All articles are written in conversation with workers by Team Maraa.

Hindi Translations: Anushi Agrawal
 Kannada Translations : Mahima Gowda and Prathibha. R
 Illustrations : Jayasimha C
 Design & Layout: Jayasimha C



The women work throughout the day, starting at 4am, often returning home only at 10pm. They work in several households earning Rs 2,000 to Rs 5,000 per month per household. Days off are a privilege with the women afforded 2 days every month if they have kind clients. They are treated insensitively and expected to report to work even if they are unwell or if someone from their family has died.

“We go for three hours in the morning to cook lunch, then in the evening to cook dinner. If we take any rest, we get scolded for not working hard enough. If we ask for water, they deny us. If we sit on the park bench in the colony, they chase us out.”

The women in the basti are the most at risk. Domestic workers recounted instances of sexual and verbal harassment they face where they work and are threatened with being accused of stealing if they tell anyone. Leaving late they are forced to wait for their partners to accompany them to travel the short distance home, in fear of being harassed. Living in the

Basti itself puts them at risk due to its isolated nature. In August 2017 one woman was grabbed at home in an attempted kidnapping. She was saved only because another woman heard and alerted everyone. Kidnapping, rape and sexual harassment are common occurrences in the area yet there is no reaction or support from the police. The residents cannot speak the language and lack any social or political clout leaving them vulnerable.

The attitude of treating the migrant worker as an outsider is carried forward by police officials, politicians and the local population. Migrants are consistently harassed by local police through verification checks. Whether Indian nationals or foreign they are vulnerable populations who live in constant fear of losing their homes and livelihood. This fear is in turn exploited through police shake downs for money. In December 2018 an eviction notice was given to residents of the Basti with the local MLA Arvind Limbavalli labelling the residents as security threats because they were from Bangladesh. These same ‘security

threats’ who have co-existed with the surrounding locality for the last 15 years doing the essential jobs no one else wanted to do. In 2017 Bashir Ul Shaikh, a resident of Thubbarahalli, was killed by locals living nearby. He was accused of being a migrant thief stealing electric cables. His body was wrapped and electrocuted with the cables he was meant to have stolen.

The majority of the Bengali migrants in Thubbarahalli are Muslims, adding another layer of oppression. Muslims across the country have been targeted through violence, lynching and government policy aimed removing them from their homes. The updating of the NRC (national register of citizens) is a process employed by the Indian state to remove citizens they deem as illegal. In Assam near Bengal, the NRC is being used to target Muslims where they

represent a large proportion of those categorized as illegal. Hindus identified by the NRC are to be saved by the Citizenship Amendment Bill which will save them only because they are Hindu, not Muslim. The NRC now comes to Bangalore. The migrant worker’s home is at risk once again.

The migrant worker in Thubbarahalli is abused, harassed, disrespected, vilified and forced into being an outsider. The migrant worker has lived in Thubbarahalli for 15 years. They pick up the city’s garbage and segregate it by hand, clean the streets we walk by, build people’s homes, clean those homes and take care of their children. They perform the jobs no one else wants to do. The residents are contributing members of our city. Their livelihood, wellbeing, and dignity should not be at risk on the false basis of being an outsider.

*On 27th October 2019, (post the writing of this article), 29 men, 22 women and 9 children were arrested in Bangalore on the basis of being illegal Bangladesh migrants. These individuals are the same people who clean the streets, sort the garbage, clean peoples' homes and take care of their children. We stand against these arrests and in solidarity with those arrested.

This is our Space too

“He lost his mind once, when he was not working. Somehow he got better and returned to work. It is the only thing that keeps him sane. And now again he does not have a job” laments Meena, a powrakarmika speaking about her father Shashikumar who was removed from his job after 20 odd years of working as a powrakarmika.

Shashikumar (60 years) worked as a garbage collector on the lorry and started working for Rs. 50/-

in Bangalore. Over the last 20 odd years, his salary went upto Rs.13,000, after protesting for better wages. Suddenly, they have asked him to stop coming to work and his salary for two months is still pending.

“If our fathers and mothers stop working, their sons and daughters need jobs, how do we survive” asks Meena. Due to the exploitative contract labour system, powrakarmikas have had to fight for every little



thing from wages to dignity. In January 2018, the powrakarmikas with less than a year of work experience were fired. From May 2019, the workers aged more than 60 were fired with no prior notice; neither were they provided with Provident Fund (PF) or any other post retirement facilities. The announcement has also set 45 years as the age limitation for the applicants. This means that the powrakarmikas who have worked

for 20-30 years cannot apply because of their age.

Shashikumar clears all the garbage produced from restaurants and houses, after 8 hours of working with filth, a drink helps forget what one sees, hears and smells. Today, he makes Rs. 100/- picking plastics and tin from garbage piles and selling them in recycled shops. *“He likes being independent and does not like stretching his hands*

So many saris

She straightens her night gown as she gets up from the bed. Mother, Amma, maa. She gets her children ready and sends them off to school. She is a responsible mother. She changes her sari.

Her children love her. They think she works as a vendor, in an anonymous shop. Her children care for her. She hides away the fatigue of the day. Her children never questioned her. She is a great actress.

She hides behind her makeup, no one can see who she really is.

From the street to the lodge. Lodge to the street. She sees all kinds of men. She loosens her hair from its tight braid as she walks into the room. She performs her function. Her livelihood is on her mind. She changes her sari.

The men find her beautiful. Some want to take her home, marry her, and possess her. She is time pass for others. She does not let anyone in. She does not let anyone know her life by night.

At she steps out after her last job for the day, she can see the Obbava squad that is trying to cleanse the city, without recognizing she is so much in demand. They search like vultures and when they find her, bring her down in public. Her family is on her mind.

for food and his drink. He does this just so that he is self-sufficient,” admits Meena.

What is the point of working sincerely for so many years? He does not get his pension, no retirement benefits and no support for his children’s education or employment. Four generations of Meena’s family have been working as powrakarmikas in Bangalore.

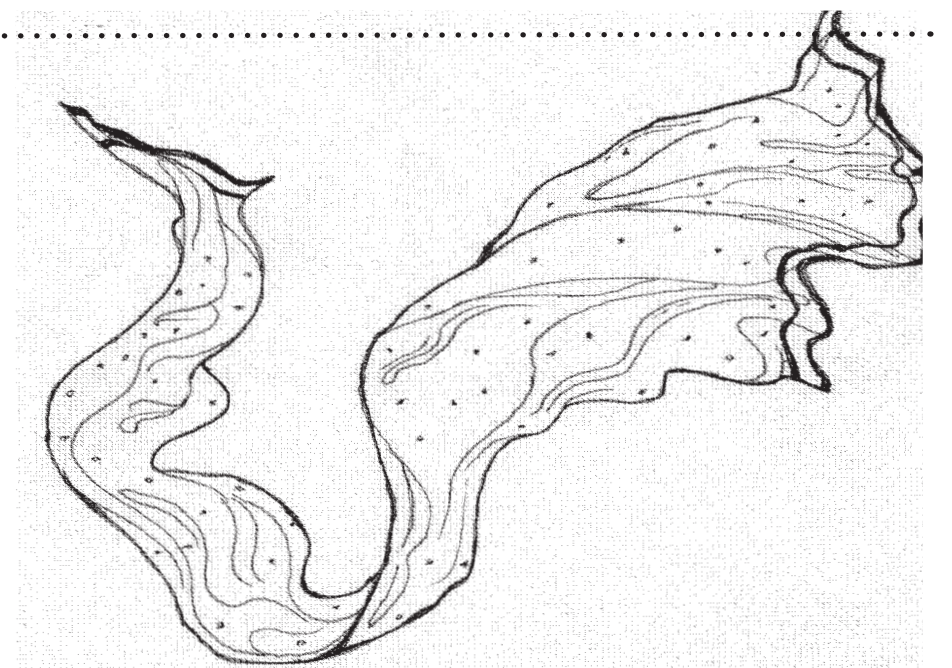
“Are we slaves of the Government? Why did we, generation after generation clean this city, to find our fathers and mothers in this state? This is not a matter of money, this is a matter of dignity? We have worked hard all these years and should we now we working to earn respect? Will this be our future too,” questions Meena.

Powrakarmikas, a strong women work in the city claim the space they clean as theirs. They are not used to staying at home. They are attached to their workspace. Eleven women have been retrenched from work in Jeevan Bhimanagar overnight. *“One of them has lost her mind. Another tried to find work in other people’s houses, but*

because she cleans the filth on the street, no one wants to takes her as domestic help. She too has become a ragpicker now. The others have joined her too. They are unable to imagine a day without work. This is their space too, they have a right over it,” states Meena angrily.

Meena has dengue today. If I take leave, my salary will cut. I need fifteen days to recover. If I get 13000/- I will only get 7500/- what should ill do pay the electricity, water, food, school fees? She is at work. She has not eaten, has not had any medicine. *“My father has come to help me, because I am ill today,”* she smiles, as he pushes a large cart of garbage.

Not a single powrakarmika has applied for a permanent job. *“Does the government think we have caste, income and school certificates? Do we have permanent addresses? Who are these permanent jobs for?”* She is determined to file a case in labour court on behalf of her father and friends, *“They can make workers permanent, after they give us the answers.”*



And they ask her for her services for free.

She wipes off her makeup. She is exhausted. She rushes back home to be in time to make dinner for her children. She puts them to

bed. She looks at her bangles and her marriage chain. In silence, she smiles. Her dreams are on her mind.

She wakes up and changes her sari.

Entry Restricted

"It sounds like a pack of lions roaring. Relentless, it grows louder."

a garment worker describes the sound of the garment factory.

To get to the factory, you have to travel to the outskirts of the city. Metro fare is expensive, so we usually take the bus. It takes some of us close to two hours to reach and return home.

The factories stand in a line, three or four storeys high, with dull windows drawn shut. A compound wall encircles it, atop which sit curls of gleaming barbed wire. At the gate, we have to punch in the time and date. If we don't, we risk not getting paid.

As we enter the large hall, what strikes us first, is the piercing white light of tube-lights. It overpowers the room, leaving no place for the sun. Nor for any breeze, so our nose is filled with the sharp metallic smell of needles, buttons, zippers and scissors. As our eyes adjust, rows and rows of desks come into view. Twenty in one uniform line multiplied into fifty rows. Heads are bowed over sewing machines, measuring, adjusting, cutting, sticking, mending. Hands move briskly, rustling fabric passes down the line, until it reaches the end where it is neatly encased in plastic. This process is overseen by the Supervisor. Even if we don't see him, we always hear him. His voice like a megaphone, as he strides between rows, barking orders, slapping, insulting, leering. Human error has no place here.

The body is the machine. 9 am- 6 pm leaves the neck feeling sore.

Sticky armpits, hands develop blisters and joints begin to ache. Time is money, and a visit to the bathroom costs. We learn to hold our bladders full. The stomach befriends hunger, as production targets eat into lunch time and tea time. Over- time results in no increased pay, just poorly cooked dinner and no time to spend with our children. It would put anyone in a bad mood.

Focus. So that the button is sewed correctly, the zipper doesn't get stuck, and the crease folds perfectly. Focus so intently, that we learn to ignore the hand sliding down our blouse, the gaze traveling across our faces, the accidental brush against our breasts. Some say, this is part of the job. Any form of complaint is muted by the HR department. Dismissed, for why would you want to risk losing this job?

The garments we prepare with utmost care get sold at double, triple, the price of our labour. They find their way into glassy showcases, sitting snug on mannequins, in countries we will never visit. In sickness and in health, we are worth only as much as we produce. Like clockwork, our days pass by in blurs of curses, aches and pains, and silence. Oh, but if we meet a production target, we get a cake!

This city has over 1 million workers like us. Our labour is no cause for celebration, no indication of progress. At the city's peripheries, we must not be seen or heard. Hidden inside beige concrete, steadily, we work.

OBITUARY

Leaving their homes behind, workers travel long distances to find work. They build houses and offices that they never inhabit. The ground beneath our feet is no longer firm. The foundation bears the weight of injustice and inequality. At 2 am on July 11th, there was a loud bang. The earth shook in a quiet neighbourhood in Bangalore when a building under construction collapsed over to the next building which also came crumbling down. Most construction workers in cities live and work on site, amidst construction materials and tools with bare minimum to protect them from any disaster. Their children play with jelly stones, sand, cement and sometimes they help their parents at work. Once the building is constructed, they move to the next site.

In this case, the building collapsed on the workers, while they were asleep inside it, perhaps while they were dreaming. Migrant workers on contract, unregistered and vulnerable die as unknown citizens in an alien city. This obituary is for many workers who died here because of the lapses in our collective vision of a city and our blindness to show basic respect for human life. We mourn for their children did not play enough in their lifetime. We stand by the families who endured this loss, without the knowledge of where and in what circumstance their loved ones died. A city that rests on such cruel and unaccounted deaths will face consequences. The mountain of debris, to date, shows as proof.

The inner voice

*Even as tyranny rules
the inner voice of a woman is held
hostage in the grip of masculine power*

*for the woman who appeases all
restrictive chains
are her ornamentation*

*that the lament of the woman who wilted
quenching the thirst of the semen
is but for a life of unbound freedom and equality*

*it is imperative to be convinced that
abandoning all
and standing on the street
is not for you
but to hold onto her identity
in a distorted world*

*amidst the fragrance of the jasmine flower
to satiate the bodily desire of an unknown man
is but an imposition of an obligation
on her femininity
and not a choice*