

## Accompanying Distressed Migrant Workers

*Martin Puthussery, SJ*

My first experience with migrant workers was when I was a 23-year-old scholastic. In an emergency, I was travelling by train from Calcutta to Kerala, my home state, in an unreserved coach. The coach was overcrowded with young Bengali men travelling over 2500 kilometres south searching for work. During the 45-hour train journey, some young men, who were also my age, shared with me about their families, their work in their villages, reasons for migration, types of work they were going to do, their aspirations, etc. One of them even offered me a cup of tea.

That first encounter had an impact later in 2011 on my volunteer work among migrant workers in Kerala. I visited migrant workers in the labour camps in the evenings and built rapport with them. Gradually I began to get involved in their issues such as wage theft or non-payment of wages, police cases, imprisonments, accidents, sickness, deaths, physical assaults, harassment, cheating, exploitations, discrimination by the locals, etc. Thus, with over 500 workers, the Jeevika - Migrant Workers Movement was formed.

One of the most risky yet most fulfilling involvements among the



migrants in my life was the case of Dipen Konra, a tribal migrant worker in Kerala from West Bengal. I found Dipen lying in a general hospital,



with plaster from neck to feet with both the legs tied together and guarded by two police officers. Later I learned that he had been travelling to work in a suffocated general compartment at a construction site in Kerala. At the Aluva railway station, Dipen got down to fetch water and could not get back into the over-crowded general bogey to reach Kollam, his destination. Not knowing what to do and unable to speak Malayalam, the poorly dressed Dipen began to walk. In the late evening, he was found by the Police, tired and dirty, and questioned in Malayalam. Since he could not answer and appeared to be a stranger, he was taken to the Police Station. In the early hours, with a mere desire to escape, he ran away and mistakenly entered the adjacent airport compound. Suspecting Dipen to be a Maoist or a terrorist, he was beaten so severely that his legs and hands were broken, and he became unconscious. Since he was in police custody, he was soon transferred to jail. I visited him in prison and took up his case in the courts. I also functioned as a translator for him in the courts.

Meanwhile, I approached the State Human Rights Commission, and with the Commission's intervention, he was transferred to the hospital for

further treatment. Nine months after the assault, Dipen was released from jail, and on an Easter Sunday, he boarded a train to reach back home. Later I visited him in his home in West Bengal.

Involvement in the case of Dipen made me realise that several migrant workers are languishing in jails for crimes not committed by them. After that, I visited several other prisons in Kerala, and with people's support, I helped some get out of prison. In some cases, it was to free the migrants from implication in false police cases.

I also encountered a shocking number of accidental deaths of migrants. With the help of others, including the government and employers, we sent over 100 dead bodies to their home States for the last rights. In about twenty cases, we had to provide proper burial or cremation in the presence of friends near the work sites.

During the Ignatian month in Tertianship, I was deeply affected by the meditation on the Flight of the Holy Family to Egypt. That further compelled me to continue working among the migrants. After Tertianship,

I volunteered to start the Labour Migration Unit at Indian Social Institute (ISI), Bangalore.



In Bangalore, with the Archbishop, I took the initiative to start the Commission for Migrants to look after the pastoral care and other needs of migrants, including African nationals. I prepared a

presentation on "Jesus the Migrant and Our Response", narrating five mysteries of Jesus the Migrant, the Sojourner and the Outcast for Catholic Religious of India (CRI).

My involvement in releasing Dipen from jail was also a cannonball moment in my desire to continue accompanying distressed migrant

workers. This incident inspired me to visit migrants languishing in different jails in Kerala, Chennai and Bangalore and to take up some of their cases. This incident also became the base for choosing and doing my doctoral research on the areas of exclusion and vulnerabilities of distressed migrant workers.

Pope Francis has been a great inspiration to my accompanying distressed migrant workers in India. The annual messages of Pope Francis on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees are a great source and inspiration for my work with migrants. "Building the Future with Migrants and Refugees" is the title of Pope Francis' message for the year 2022. In his message, Pope Francis says, "God's plan is essentially inclusive and gives priority to those living on the existential peripheries. Among them are many migrants and refugees, displaced persons, and victims of trafficking. The Kingdom of God is to be built with them, for without them it would not be the Kingdom that God wants."

In India, migration has been a survival mechanism and a refuge from turmoil for millions of people. Landless farmers, agricultural labourers and marginal farmers who lost their livelihood due to globalised farming practices form the bulk of these distressed migrants. The Covid-19 national lockdown in India displayed not just a migration but an exodus of over 10 million distressed internal migrants. The Coronavirus brought several new forms of discrimination, affecting primarily the lives and livelihoods of migrants, increasing xenophobic prejudices among the local population and the local employers towards the migrants. The pandemic has increased the levels of alienation, loneliness, social exclusion, fear, emotional deprivation, stress, anxiety and depression of the migrants.

The commemoration of the Ignatian Year and the call to conversion harmonise well with my personal encounters with migrants in distress situations and the rich experiences of accompanying distressed migrant workers since 2011. Thus, I am delighted to share what I wrote some years ago with a little more sharpening of my reflections.

Ignatian Year invites us Jesuits and collaborators 'to see all things new in Christ' in order to recommit ourselves to be contemplatives in action, to pay attention to how God is moving in our lives, and to respond to the

needs of the world. Launching the Migrant Assistance and Information Network (MAIN) in JCSA is a concrete manifestation of this Jesuit recommitment. It is a collaborative venture initiated by the Jesuits of India based on the perceived need for a coordinated, collective, and innovative response to reach out to the distressed migrant workers, internal and interstate. A national helpline will be set up to accompany, serve and advocate for distressed migrants. It will bring multifold positive outcomes in improving the quality of life of the distressed migrants. I am happy to be part of this new venture in the Ignatian year for better accompanying distressed migrant workers.

(Original: English)

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