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## India's essential but exploited migrant workers



Migration is a survival strategy for millions escaping rural poverty in India. Photo: Migrant Assistance & Information Network

**By Fr. Martin Puthussery, SJ**

The COVID-19 pandemic, whose devastating impacts linger on, exposed the gravity of the migrant situation in India. In 2020, at the height of the pandemic, millions of migrant workers in India's cities were left unemployed and homeless due to the government-imposed lockdown. Migrant workers and their families were forced to walk thousands of

kilometres to return to their villages, and some died along the way from exhaustion, hunger, and accidents. Many of these impoverished migrants have since returned to the cities where they face low wages due to a tight labour market and lack of jobs after the pandemic.

India's 2011 census, the most recent available, puts the number of internal migrants at 450 million. Today, India is estimated to have more than 500 million internal migrants and more than 60 million interstate migrants. Seasonal migrants are estimated at 20 to 30 million adults each year and "circular migrants" or those without contracts or registration to access social services, are more than 100 million.

Migration is a survival and livelihood strategy for millions of Indians escaping rural poverty. The collapse of livelihoods in agriculture and related sectors has accelerated distress migration, especially among Dalits, tribals and other marginalized communities in India. Crop failures, indebtedness and farmer suicides have led to farmers abandoning agriculture and this has resulted in landless laborers becoming unemployed and therefore migrating to urban areas in search of employment.

In India, migration from one state to another is like crossing international borders. Despite their contributions to the economy, migrants are often considered non-citizens by the host states. They have no legal protection, face language barriers, and are often subjected to xenophobia, rights violations, non-payment of wages, debt bondage, illegal detention, human trafficking, physical abuse, and other forms of exploitation. Coming from socially marginalized groups, they often end up in low-paying, dangerous jobs in the informal sector, such as construction, domestic work and services. Due to the precarious nature of their work and the lack of a social safety net, some of them end up with psycho-social problems that can lead to suicide.

In response to this situation, the Jesuit Conference of South Asia (JCSA) has established the Migrant Assistance & Information Network (MAIN) to accompany, serve and advocate for migrants in need throughout India. The MAIN works with individuals, civil society and non-governmental organizations, religious congregations, dioceses and state governments.

MAIN operates through a national helpline system through which migrants in need or their family members can call us for critical support, information and guidance. The team at the central hub in Delhi evaluates each call received and forwards the information to the respective zones and hubs for action, support and follow-up. The network has 21 hubs in 15 Jesuit provinces and covers 15 Indian states; there are two zonal coordinating hubs at the Indian Social Institute in Bangalore and at Bagaicha, Ranchi.

In the past two years, MAIN has received 855 calls, including the accidental deaths of 83 migrants, 37 cases of bonded labor, child labor and human trafficking, 35 cases of psychosocial or medical problems 33 cases of wage theft, and 31 cases of missing migrants, At least 75% of the calls were successfully resolved; the network has also facilitated the recovery of \$260,000 in stolen wages owed to migrant workers and their families.

With experts saying that poverty-driven rural-urban migration is now an irreversible phenomenon in India, advocacy and support for migrant workers is critical.

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