



# International Migrants Day and Distressed Migrants

**M**adhesh Manjhi hailed from Masaurhi which is just 30 km from Patna - the state capital of Bihar. Finding no gainful employment, he left with some of the villagers in the first week of November 2022, to Katpadi in Tamil Nadu, to work as a wage labourer. But on 7<sup>th</sup> November, his family got the information that his body was found by railway police in Bapatla, Guntur District, Andhra Pradesh. Shocked by this news, the family approached a NGO working in Patna district to see what has happened and what can be done. The NGO working on distress migrants issue in Bihar, got in touch with NGOs in Andhra Pradesh, to ascertain the truth of the matter. Also, how the dead body can be brought to his home at Masaurhi.

With all the efforts of many individuals and civil society, as well as MAIN (Migrant Assistance and Information Network) - a Jesuit venture of South Asia, some progress was made. The relatives of Madhesh Manjhi were identified, and efforts were made to get them to travel to Bapatla where the body of the dead person was kept in the mortuary, to claim the body and compensation from the railways, to the tune of Rs. 7 lakhs. Irrespective of repeated attempts, the family failed to travel to Bapatla. The following reasons were identified for this depressing scenario: 1) no money to travel; 2) not educated; 3) do not know the place; 4) do not know the language; 5) not sure if they would get the money; 6) not sure if anyone will help them, etc. But the underlying fact is that the most marginalised and vulnerable population of this country



Photo Courtesy: The Third Pole

story. Some of them do not even reach their destination. They meet with accidents - losing their life even before they reach their destination. If by chance, they manage to reach their destination, they struggle hard to eke out a living. Moving to south India without knowing the language, adds to their woes.

Madhesh Manjhi's death is not an isolated case. Every day, cases of this type are reported by those agencies who are working for safe migration. Sanat Tudu of Dumka

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cremated, and his ash was carried by the son of Sonot, while the last rites were conducted at home. Sonot left behind a widow and 5 children with no economic means to feed them, educate them and bring them up. Thus distress is the integral part of these marginalised both in life and death.

The global family commemorates 18<sup>th</sup> December every year as International Migrants Day. On 4<sup>th</sup> December 2000, the UN General Assembly taking into account the large and increasing number of migrants in the world, proclaimed 18<sup>th</sup> December as International Migrants Day. The day was selected to mark the anniversary of the 1990 adoption by UNGA of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families.

UN agencies had demanded for safe, regular and orderly migration as an important contribution to building a world of peace, prosperity, dignity and opportunity for all. But in reality, this is not happening in most parts of the world, as well as in India. Various field-based studies regarding the migrants, unearth the phenomenon of forced migration, involuntary migration and distress migration. The factors behind these are as follows: 1) Landlessness, 2) Poor returns from land of those who own nominal land, 3) Caste oppression, 4) Feudal exploitation, 5) Lack of employment, 6) Lack of alternative livelihood, 7) Lack of life-oriented education, 8) Lack of skill development, etc.

The Patna Jesuit Migrant Service undertook a study of the state of the returnee migrants during lockdown in 2020. The following were some of the critical issues that were highlighted: 1) They lost livelihood, wages, security, etc., and some of them even lost their lives; 2) In many of the formal sector, one can work from home but this is not possible in the unorganized sector, and thus the migrant labourers are forced to return home; 3) Vast numbers of the migrant labour force comes from Dalit, Tribal, MBC and minority communities who are mostly landless, less educated, poor, rural based and hence are not able to handle the complications of the urban life, and so had to walk back home; 4) Migrant labourers are mostly unskilled, and by not earning enough, faced greater hardships without food, water and transport; 5) Migrant labourers who are the backbone, felt betrayed,

ill-treated, starved, dislocated, destroyed and ended up in depression; 6) The returnee migrants were clueless about their livelihood back at home and about their future; 7) Some returnee migrants within few days left home to go back to those places where they were earning something to save themselves and their families from starvation. This also meant that they were subjected to risks.

The blatant biased treatment of the internal and external migrants by the rulers of this country has come under criticism. Those who got cheap and best education from the best of the educational institutions of the country decided to go abroad for green pastures, instead of paying back to the country which built them and their career for gainful employment and a better life. When COVID-19 affected the world, these non-resident Indians were flown back home by special flight, while the migrants were forced to walk thousands of miles. This is not just of our times. This is social and historical. Indian society and history suffer by the fact of mental and menial labour. Since the migrants are considered to be of the second category, they were subjected to disgrace, disrespect and deplorable conditions.

It is even more depressing to see that the rulers have not learnt lessons from this dehumanising condition and have not put in place a National Policy of Internal Migration. There should be a policy in place which addresses the issues of factors behind distress migration, pre-departure decision and pre-departure training for safe migration, connectivity between place of origin and destination, and state level offices especially from the state of origin, so that the migrants' issues are addressed. The present government for the sake of publicity and popularity keeps talking about "One Nation and One Ration Card". But this is not implemented. If this is implemented, then the migrants can benefit. In the absence of any migrant-friendly policy framework, the distress migrants, irrespective of contributing by their labour, skill and life, are discriminated and dislocated. Let us resolve on this International Migrants Day, to work towards a safe, orderly and proper migration.

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