



Reaching out to distressed migrants



Courtesy: Martin Puthussery, SJ

India's nationwide lockdown exposed the vulnerabilities of over 4 crore distressed internal migrants. The lockdown left hundreds of thousands of migrant workers stranded far from home without employment, shelter, food and social security. The disturbing images of the plight of the migrants on foot, over six lakhs as reported by the central government in the Supreme Court, was almost reminiscent of the exodus experiences of the people of Israel and the migration after the partition of India in 1947. The media showed images of thousands of migrants, including women and children, carrying their meagre belongings thronging to take buses back home from Delhi. All these images indicated how as a nation we failed our citizens and how we failed to protect the dignity of the migrants. It also exposed the insensitivity of our policy makers who failed to anticipate such a crisis.

Reach us home

Migrants want to go home and do not want to be in camps. It may apparently appear to be an emotional response, but from their perspective it is a genuine reason. Their demand to go home is no different from the students, tourists and workers stuck overseas. In fact, they too want to get back to their native places and stay at home with their kith and kin. The recent migration studies conducted by the Labour & Migration Unit of ISI, Bangalore, in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and among the cycle rickshaw pullers of Delhi, show that more than 90% of migrant workers wanted to return to their natives place after a few months or years of work.

The findings of these studies indicated the following reasons: Firstly, a majority of these migrants do not bring their families

to the place of work. They work and live alone at the workplace. In an uncertain future, it is natural that they want to be home where they can feel safe with their family and relatives.

Secondly, most of them do not own any immovable asset. They reside in congested rented rooms, small temporary shelters, in public places and on footpaths. On the one hand, they fear the spread of the pandemic as it is almost impossible for them to maintain social distancing and, on the other, they face hostile treatment from the local population, civil authorities and the police.

Thirdly, most of them are not registered workers and do not have access to social security schemes at their workplace. They are deprived of access to food materials provided through the Public Distribution System (PDS) and Direct Transfer of Cash to Bank Accounts. Dignity, life, survival, and security of the migrants are paramount whether they are forced to stay where they are or return home. It is high time that the State duly recognises the contribution of the migrant workers in nation building and reaches out to them generously at this moment of crisis.

Relief works

The migrant crisis prompted Jesuits, particularly those in the educational institutions, social centres and parishes, to get out from their comfort zones, even during the online retreat, and to reach out to the migrants and the needy. In many Provinces task forces were formed and in most Jesuits in collaboration with alumni, students, parishioners and collaborators plunged into action at different levels. They are running community kitchen, provide dry ration, cooked food, sanitizers and masks, financial and medical aid, generate awareness through IEC materials, offer helpdesk / helpline assistance and counselling, and provide quarantine space.

Some institutions converted their facilities to provide shelter to the stranded migrants. The crisis interventions are commendable. Despite the lockdown and demands of social distancing, there are reports of Jesuits and our collaborators accompanying migrants and the poor in their struggle to survive with dignity. Affirming all these relief works, the President of JCSA issued a circular dated April 13 on 'Reporting on Corona Relief works undertaken in the Conference' to know and learn from one another the variety of responses emerging.

Helpline services

On March 30, the GIAN-Migration network of JCSA set up Emergency Helpline for migrants in need in Goa, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka. It is in constant touch with migration desks in Bagaicha, Ranchi, and with Jesuit Provinces wherein major distress migration is taking place. The activities of the

Helpline include:

- Connecting the distressed migrants over the phone and offering correct information and providing counselling. It is in constant touch with organisations at the source points of migration. Till April 22, the Helpline has managed to reach out to over 6000 distressed migrants all over India.
- Assuring safety, stay and food of the migrants by speaking to room owners, employers, contractors and government agencies. Till April 22, more than a hundred migrants have been helped.
- Connecting the distressed migrants to the nearby government agencies and service providers to access night shelter facility, providing kits and cooked food. Till April 22, over 2000 migrant families have been supported through networking.

Jesuit Resource & Response Hub (JRH)

As a strategy to face the COVID-19 induced crisis and also looking ahead for a long term response to any disaster, JCSA as a collective body initiated to set up Jesuit Resource &

Response Hub (JRH) to 'reach the unreached'. The initiative, through the Conference Development Office and the President of JCSA, has constituted a core team and an advisory committee for JRH with the President as the Chairperson. It is consolidating the reports from different Provinces and also disseminating useful information to the Provinces and partners.

It is envisaged to work in close collaboration with the existing Jesuit networks in South Asia including Lok Manch and GIAN Migration

network. Having initiated certain resource mobilisation efforts, it is initiating online campaign #V4Migrants in order to highlight the issues of migrants. This will be done through email and social media campaigns. At the Conference level JRH will network with various secular and religious organisations, alumni, collaborators, staff of Jesuit institutions, benefactors, well-wishers, etc. JRH through its planned campaigns hopes to express our recognition and appreciation of the services provided by migrants in our lives by providing them the necessary support they need during these difficult times. The campaign will also generate resources to support the lives and livelihoods of migrants and other daily wage labourers affected by COVID-19 and promote their access to development and entitlements. The team is also in the process of developing appropriate and long-term strategies. We wish and hope that this initiative will enable South Asian Jesuits to better accompany the poor by affirming our commitment to the care of migrants.



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