

PREMONITIONS FROM THE WORKERS OF BANGALORE

Hunger will kill us before the virus

A report prepared by Maraa, a media and arts collective in conversation with Garment Workers Textile Union, Karnataka Garment Workers Union, Sadhana Mahila Sanga (a network of women in street based sex work), Stree Jagrathi Samiti (Domestic Workers Union), Powrakarmikas, Construction workers, Metro Construction Workers

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What corona virus means for unorganized sector workers in Bangalore

India is now in the midst of a 21 day lockdown, due to the spread of Covid 19, a novel coronavirus that has spread across the world swiftly, since December 2019. Immediate calls for quarantine, social distancing and isolation have resulted in businesses, public transport, education and other services closing down. While some can afford to 'work from home', a large section of our population is caught in the crossfire between the threat of the virus, exploitative contractors, inadequate support from the government and public apathy and indifference. Even amidst a pandemic, social divides and inequalities of class and caste continue to deepen. This story has not received adequate media coverage, nor public attention and outrage.

As an arts and media collective, Maraa that has been regularly running a newspaper for workers in the city, called *Bevaru* which means sweat in Kannada, we reached out through our networks to collect experiences from a spectrum of workers, migrant and local, who are struggling to survive, in the wake of the lockdown.

**All interviews were conducted telephonically between 22-26th March, 2020*

01. Construction Workers

"Should we sit and eat these jelly stones and sand? How will children survive? At least we would have access to some food back home, but now we see no hope. The contractor has simply said, if there is no work, there is no money. His phone is switched off." This is the plight of several construction workers who are building houses, apartments and offices in Bangalore, who are from Gulbarga, Raichur, Yadgir and Bellary districts in Karnataka and Tiruvannamalai in Tamil Nadu. *"We have not eaten since morning, since we are worried how we will manage for these 21 days. Work is life for us, we don't know any other way. There is no access to drinking water, we are drinking the water that is used for construction in our site. Even if we are hungry it is okay, but we want to return home,"* expressed one of the workers sitting idle at the construction site.

Contractors have not paid workers for the coming week, and most of the workers will run out of ration at the end of this week. *"This is a state of emergency. We have no idea when he will come."*

All the shops are closed and we cannot afford ration from the shops that are open. Besides, all shops have run out of flour, everything has been bought out by the rich."

When so many efforts to bring people back to the country was made, what about us getting back to our homes. Was it not possible to arrange for trains for us to go back to our homes before announcing the lockdown, what are we to do in a foreign land?" a worker remarked angrily from Jharkhand. A group of workers sitting on a pile of jelly stones looking very tense (as observed in a photograph shared with us), *"What sense does social distancing make? We all live in this small room. The precautions apply to us. So many people do not have access to water, how will they keep washing their hands? How can we go to the hospital if our children fall ill, all the hospitals are closed. Is this a plan to kill the poor?"*

There are also several workers at the construction site from Bihar, Jharkhand and UP, who were eating chappatis without any vegetables or pulses. *"All the shops are closed and we are running out of the weekly amount that the contractor has given us. The state has to look into the matter, they cannot cut all public transport, and shut all shops and expect us to survive. We are stuck here now."*

02. Metro construction workers

On speaking to some of the workers from the labour colonies in Bangalore who are building the Yellow Line of the Bangalore Metro, the picture looks grim and uncertain. The construction is running across RV Road, Hosur Road, Electronic City, Whitefield and Kengeri. The BMRCL sub contracts several construction companies to undertake the metro construction work. These contractors find labor through an untraceable network of contractors, who have connections in the most remote parts of the country. Most of the workers are not local and mostly from different parts of North and Central India. All workers live in temporary tin sheet colonies with poor supply of water and basic facilities.

Workers, subject to poor working and living conditions in Bangalore are often exploited. Security guards, skilled and unskilled workers brought in by contractors are still on site. Skilled workers should officially get Rs. 18000-20000/- but workers in all categories get paid between Rs. 13000/- 15,000/- Payments are made almost after 45-50 days after work is completed. In this current situation, one can only imagine how they will survive. Several tried to leave back home, but were unsuccessful as the trains were stopped or they were too full. Picture this. An overview of a labour colony in Bangalore. Some labour colonies are situated in houses, while others are long stretches of tin sheets sheds. A labour colony is located in a rented house, there are about 10 rooms in the house. There are about 150 workers living there at the moment. All workers are male between the age group of 25-60 years. In the hall, 50-60 people stay, small partitions have been made to accommodate everyone. In a room, there are 6- 11 people. There are 8 latrines and 4 bathrooms for 150 people. Water Tankers come in the morning and evening. A separate tanker for drinking water also comes once a day. They are still waiting for the tanker as of now.

Workers present there are from UP, Bihar, Bengal, MP, Jharkhand. The contractor pays about 40 of the workers who work under him. There are about 6-10 contractors managing the workers

based on different skills required on the metro. Contractors are also not local, they are from Bihar, Bengal and Jharkhand. They live on rent close to the worker quarters. The contractor has mentioned that there is a holiday for a week and that the company has ordered the site to be closed. He has paid the workers Rs. 500/- to buy ration. He has promised to give Rs. 500/- in the coming week. There is no assurance that he will pay this amount to them. All the shops are closed in the market. They have ration for the coming week - dal, rice, roti, salt and gas. Vegetable shops open in the evening but there is no assurance that the shops will open from today (24th March, when 21 days of lockdown was announced.)

This is only one of the labour colonies, there are probably around 100 if not more labour colonies spread across the city of Bangalore, with close to a minimum of 200 workers per colony. The crisis is probably going to hit them much worse than we can imagine. These labour colonies are located in the peripheries of the city, hidden from public view. Workers are brought in the trucks to the construction site and are dropped back after work. So they are never seen, nor accounted for in the face of the city. Most of the labour colonies do not have electricity and access to water. There are very few shops that sell basic necessities and even those shops remain closed in these times. The city wanted the Metro, it built the Metro, but now is the time to focus on the people who are building it. The State and the general public will have to take serious responsibility for workers in the city by ensuring the workers have access to free medical care, food and clean drinking water.

Sex workers

On speaking to the sex workers, the most immediate need is the access to ART tablets for HIV +ve patients. Access to the tablets are only available in Government hospitals, so ensuring that the medicine reaches on time is a huge concern. Volunteers or relief workers need to be employed to fetch medicines and deliver it to the required patients. The sex workers are also severely affected since there is no income, and those who are single mothers are affected the worst. Paying monthly rent will become a challenge. Landlords will need to consider waiving off the rents till the lockdown is called off. Ration is also a big challenge. Access to basic ration needs to be provided. Ragi, wheat, jowar, bajra and pulses will be more conducive, since it more nutritious and also can last longer. Several of the workers have to walk 2-3 kms to fetch water, isolation and social distancing is making access to water a huge challenge.

Domestic Workers

Most of the domestic workers were working until last week. They were really not prepared for the crisis. Salaries for the month of March have not been paid. Most of the workers used to collect the salaries in hand. Online payment is a crucial, all employers need to consider that it is not enough to ask domestic help not to come to work. Paid leave for the entire duration of the lockdown is necessary. Houses that they stay in are very small and they are not able to stay indoors the whole time. Police on rounds often drive people to be inside the house. It can be suffocating and is going against all the precautions advised for the corona virus to spread. The prices of supplies have also increased due to the demand. Milk was sold for Rs. 40/- on the day of the shutdown. Water shortage is also a crisis as described by most of the domestic workers. Many of the workers with BPL card would access rations for the family, they would get small

loans to make ends meet. Most of the workers would buy vegetables from street vendors, who are now no longer allowed to sell on the streets. The uncertainty of the future is causing immense mental and emotional stress for many of the domestic workers. After working at 2-8 houses, many workers also have additional jobs like selling bondas, bajjis, stitching etc, that source of income has also stopped. The panic around the virus is an additional fear. People are fearing any form of common cough or cold, they have no idea where they can access medical assistance. The Indira Canteen has also closed, and has no ration available.

Garment Workers

Even though the Garment workers technically fall within the ambit of the organized sector, the conditions under which they work and live, are very precarious. Most companies have told the workers that the factories will be closed for a week. There has been no intimation regarding payments for April. They have also said that workers will have to work overtime to cover up the hours lost due to the lockdown. Some apartment complexes have waived of rent for migrant workers living in the premises, but other workers continue to face challenges of rent and daily ration. They cannot return home. The piece rated workers are struggling the most, as they are completely out of jobs.

Senior Citizens

Fedina, a civil society organization who works with senior citizens who have retired from the work force (including construction workers, vendors etc) shared that they are facing challenges because there is no access to care takers, and they are most susceptible to the disease. They are also dependent on Indira canteens for the mid-day meal, and since the canteen has been closed, they are without food, a situation that will aggravate in the coming weeks.

Powrakarmikas

The only people who are compulsorily asked to report to work are the powrakarmikas. BBMP has ordered all workers to be present for work fearing the spread of the virus because of lack of hygiene. While the workers have some relief of not dealing with traffic and insensitive pedestrians, they find it difficult to find transport back home. Autos are charging a lot more than usual, powrakarmikas are demanding transport to and fro to the location of work or are demanding a hike in salaries to Rs. 15000/- Some of the people in the public continue to practice untouchability and are caught making insensitive comments about not being in public space for 21 days, mostly heard by children from middle class neighborhoods. Today the powrakarmikas are on great demand, *"Did it take a virus to realise our value?", asks Meena, a powrakarmika who also confidently said "Our bodies are immune." Nothing will happen to us, we have fought the worst kind of filth throughout our lives, and we are the only people who can be out on the streets today."* She concluded by sharing a secret recipe of a concoction made from Parijaatha flowers and leaves, with salt, cumin seeds and chilli powder. She says if you drink this, no virus can permeate through your body.

Recommendations and Immediate Steps

Given that the lockdown will be in force at least till 15.04.2020, it is clear that the most vulnerable sections of society are going to be most badly affected for whom the following immediate relief should be provided by the State:

1. BMRCL and Labour Department to identify all labour colonies and immediately ensure that free ration, clean drinking water and medical facilities and assistance is provided to all workers who in labour colonies in Bangalore. Unpaid wages must be compensated by related authorities.
2. Construction Workers Board and Labour Department to identify all construction sites in Bangalore and ensure that free ration, food supplies, free medical assistance and clean drinking water be provided to workers. Unpaid wages to workers must be compensated by the department. Information about their travel must be made more clear to all workers to relieve them of the mental stress.
3. Health department needs to immediately look into delivering ART tablets to HIV +ve patients.
4. Door to door delivery and/or access to ration or cooked food supplied at Indra canteens, Mid day meal kitchens, Anganwadis etc.
6. Free cooking gas and drinking water supply need to be provided to all those who need immediate help
7. Government of Karnataka State to set up a toll free helpline so that people can be directed to the necessary places for ration and acquire required information
8. Toll Free Medical helpline for workers to get the correct information about Corona virus
9. Police to report any emergencies and necessities of workers to concerned departments.
10. Information to all migrant workers about the return travel back home and daily updates on what the Government departments is providing to workers in languages understood by the workers.

As employers, please consider the following:

1. Do not collect rents as income is nil for many of the workers
2. Mobilise food and other basic necessities for workers in your neighbourhood
3. Be sensitive in your attitude and behaviour when you see people on the street.
4. Don't stock up more than you need and consume less, so that we can spare resources for all.
5. If you are in an apartment or a housing complex take the initiative to understand the plight of workers and seek solutions and support them in whatever capacity you can, reach out to your MLA or WARD officer.
6. Mobilise funds to provide for ration and other supplies in the coming days.

To report violence of any sort on workers or any other information please contact us on 9880755875/9880159484

**On 26th March, the Finance Minister announced a package of 170 crore for daily wage and migrant workers. The amounts listed for women, widows and senior citizens is as abysmally low*

as 500-1000 Rs. Further, the transfers will be made via existing government schemes, such as Ujjwala scheme and for those registered under MNREGA. Transfers will be made via Jan Dhan accounts. This does not take into account the number of unregistered workers in the informal economy, whose lives are at risk, from a lot more than the corona virus.

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