

NALSAR for Migrant Workers: Press Release (5 June 2020)

[Copyright for all images belong to Devjyoti Banerjee, circulated here with permission; images attached separately]

In response to the global COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the rights of workers to life, livelihood, shelter and health, **the alumni and students of the NALSAR University of Law, Hyderabad have come together to contribute to ongoing relief efforts in India.**

As this health crisis rapidly transforms into a humanitarian crisis, we feel that it is crucial to re-examine the relationship between law and social justice – a topic we have had many animated conversations about in the University. We see the COVID-19 emergency as augmenting an already unconscionable disregard for the fundamental rights of migrant workers to equality, due wages, social security, bodily autonomy, health and livelihood. As concerned lawyers, we want to acknowledge our shared responsibility towards ensuring that migrant workers can access their basic rights. We understand that our intervention is limited, but we hope to start a conversation on the urgent need to acknowledge and correct a status quo that subordinates the lives of the people who are the backbone of our cities, homes and businesses. We have partnered with multiple civil society organisations and individuals to support stranded migrant workers with nutritious food, water, sanitation kits and travel arrangements for those who wish to travel to their homes.

It is heart-warming for us to witness the overwhelming support we have received from our alumni and well-wishers. We have collected a total of INR 25 lakhs through our fundraiser and aim to raise this collection further, to help us expand our relief efforts. After extensive consultation with civil society networks, labour unions and officers operating on the ground to understand the most urgent needs, and deliberation, the collected funds have been directed towards the following projects:

Bus travel from Bhilwara, Rajasthan to Chitrakoot, Uttar Pradesh

In collaboration with **Jai Bhim Vikas Seva Sanstha** and **Akhil Bharatiya Samaj Sewa Sansthan**, we facilitated the travel of 9 migrant worker families of 20 adults and 25 children, employed in a brick kiln, from Bhilwara district, Rajasthan, to Chitrakoot, Uttar Pradesh. Due

to the lockdown, the brick kiln had been closed and the workers had lost their job. They were left stranded on the road, with little money, no shelter, water or access to basic amenities. Some of them had commenced their journey back home on foot. When we received a distress call for support from the collaborating NGOs, we facilitated the arrangement of a bus to take them home. The total allocation for this project was INR 1.2 lakhs, which covered travel, food, and cash transfer for immediate needs (INR 1000 per adult) to sustain the migrant workers when they get home. After a 24-hour long journey, and halting in two places for meals, the migrant workers safely reached Chitrakoot. There they were all screened for COVID-19 in the quarantine centre; given meals on the day of arrival and ration from the State Government; and were sent home. Five of the migrant workers with slight fever have been quarantined for further treatment.

Flight travel from Bengaluru to Raipur

Migrant workers have faced starvation, risk of spread of disease and in many deeply distressing situations have died from trying to undertake long journeys from far-off states back to their home states. Many vulnerable workers such as elderly people, injured people, people with disabilities, pregnant women and their young children are put in life threatening situations when trying to undertake long travel by foot or in buses and trains. We were alerted to the need to avoid long periods of exposure to large crowds of people in the face of rising COVID-19 cases, uncertain access to food and exhaustion from travel over 3-4 days. These risks are even more precarious given that many migrant workers had already been living without adequate food, water and accommodation support for many days by the time this initiative took off.

Consultation with civil society organisations and independent verification with transport companies also showed that the cost per person for bus travel and air travel was very similar, due to the hike in costs of hiring buses over several days for road transport in the present situation, particularly for long journeys. We were also alerted to the fact that for long journeys, particularly between South, North or East India, the requirement of various permissions across the various state borders causes further delays to stranded migrant workers. In light of these considerations, we took the decision to aid the transport of migrants stranded in various parts of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu to Raipur in Chattisgarh through air travel.

In collaboration with **Loving Migrant Workers Network** and **Samerth Charitable Trust**, we organised and funded a chartered flight for the travel of 174 migrant workers including

four infants from Bengaluru to Raipur through Indigo Airlines. We arranged for these passengers to reach the airport from various places in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, including Karwar, Bylakuppe, Kolar, Hosur, to name a few. We financed their journey home and provided a cash transfer of Rs.1000 to each passenger for immediate relief. About 12 buses were arranged by us from all over Tamil Nadu and Karnataka to bring the workers to the Bangalore airport, where they were given food and water before boarding. Together with our partner organisations, we also provided other logistical support, including protective gear and ration kits for future use. An approximate total of INR 16 lakhs has been spent on this project.

Many workers had been facing severe challenges - from employers, landlords, denial of wages - before and during the lockdown. One of the migrant workers, after having landed safely, told our volunteer, “*wahaan Bangalore mein humko bahut takleef ho rahi thi, hum bata nahi sakte hain, yahaan aake achha lag raha hai bahut.*” One of our student volunteers remarked upon the amazing resilience of the travellers noting that, “*I want to highlight the patience they showed. I contacted one guy some 15 times yesterday (including at off hours) because some 10-12 people were using his phone. Not once he seemed irritated and was very willing to help people around him getting in contact with me.*” On a joyful note, another of our passengers summed up his flight experience as “*ek numberrrr!*”.

This initiative would not have been possible without the support from our transport partner, Indigo Airlines. The sensitivity and professionalism of the entire Indigo staff greatly aided our efforts in ensuring a dignified and safe travel for the migrant workers. We owe the successful completion of the flight arrangements to the tremendous teamwork of about 50 alumni and student volunteers, who spent days and nights ensuring that our passengers were flight-ready, infection risk-free, and able to cross any hurdles in reaching the airport on time. We especially thank Shyel Trehan, C. Nandakumar, and Suhaan Mukherjee for providing crucial guidance to our efforts in making the flight arrangements.

Facilitating the journey of 21 migrant workers from Kerala to Jharkhand

In partnership with **Goonj**, we have also facilitated the home-bound return of 21 migrant workers from Jharkhand who were stranded in Aloor, Kerala. We facilitated their journey from Aloor, Kerala, to Jasidih, Jharkhand by a Shramik train, from where local administration is facilitating their journey to their homes in Jamtara, Jharkhand. Ground-level volunteers ensured that they reached the screening centre; provided them with meals, besides bread, biscuits and

water bottles (provided by Goonj); and further ensured that they received regular meals along their journey.

Food aid in West Bengal

We are in the process of disbursing a sum of INR 1 lakh (half of which has already been disbursed) to the National Hawker Federation (NHF) in Kolkata for their community food kitchens. We are also collaborating with the Bangla Sanskriti Mancha (BSM) for supply of ration kits to 200 affected families. The Amphan Cyclone has compounded the vulnerabilities that the pandemic had already exposed the weaker sections of the society to, and we are funding food provisions to alleviate them. NHF's community kitchens are located at Bowbazar, Avishikta and Sector V, Kolkata. Food is distributed there and transported to other locations in Kolkata that are seeing the need for cooked food. BSM is a collective of academics, physicists and other volunteers, focussing on relief work for migrant workers, especially in cyclone affected areas of West Bengal.

Food Support at the Secunderabad Railway Station

When it was discovered that migrant workers and their children on a train from Bengaluru to Nagpur were travelling without food, our volunteers at Secunderabad liaised with the **Centre for Social Justice**, to provide food to the passengers at the Secunderabad station.

Bus Travel from Karimnagar, Telangana to Balangir, Odisha

We have funded the bus travel of 29 employees of a brick kiln in Telangana and seven infants from Karimnagar to Balangir in Odisha. We have allocated a total sum of INR1,05,600. This sum includes an individual contribution of INR 60,000 from a NALSAR alumnus and the remaining is being covered from the funds raised by us.

We are still in the process of raising funds and the above initiatives are only some of the projects we have completed until now. Our fundraiser is supported by [Milaap](#)'s crowdfunding services, and we are grateful to them for having provided us that platform.

Logistical support for bus travel from Shillong, Meghalaya to Chandel, Manipur

We provided logistical support in facilitating the bus travel of 90 passengers by putting the concerned NGO in touch with third-party funders; and monitored and vouched for them to ensure they are able to cross the border between Meghalaya and Manipur without any hassles.

We would like to specifically thank **Foodshaala Foundation** for partnering with us for these initiatives. Given that there is going to be greater need for relief and rehabilitation in the coming weeks and months, we hope that people will continue to donate generously and disseminate our message widely. Any enquiries from the press or otherwise can be directed to our volunteers: **Pranav (9810932960), and Rakshanda (91774 79968)**.