

SPECIAL ISSUE

THE MAZDOOR MANDIS OF METROS

CENTRE FOR NEW ECONOMICS STUDIES



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Migrant Dailywage workers wait at Engineering College Chauraha in Lucknow city, India. The group of workers would be employed for a continuous six months without a gap. However now after the lockdown, the workers hardly are in a position to find work even for 5 days in a month.

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The imagery of workers migrating across the country, walking on foot for kilometres on highways, and staying in wretched government shelters is still vivid in our memory. India imposed one of the world's most stringent lockdowns in March 2020 that left millions of migrant workers stranded across the country in cities and industrial areas thousands of kilometres away from home.

This statistically invisible section of our worker population, displaced into highly-centralised industrial centres, suddenly caught the nation's attention. More importantly, these workers were not only stuck in areas away from their families, they were out of a job that paid for their daily subsistence. The next few months witnessed an exodus of migrant workers from cities to their home towns and villages. Many undertook long, desperate journeys on foot, in the absence of any means of transportation.

Now that many of them are returning to cities for work, they encounter a surprising, more disappointing reality. Migrant workers have been forced to return to work to escape their awful financial condition.



Vehicles cross Engineering College Chauraha Labour market at Lucknow-Sitapur road in Lucknow city, India



Workers look for work at Goel Chauraha in Aliganj area, Lucknow city, India. In the absence of work, the income-consumption pattern has been badly disrupted. The workers raised their concern even about how apart from the labour services, the other sources of income in their the household has been affected badly.

However, opposite to what one may expect, finding work is extremely difficult. Industrial activity hasn't picked up to pre-COVID levels. A large number of workers have returned to their employers to find that their old jobs aren't available anymore.

The availability of work has become staggered. Some are able to find work on a particular day but may struggle to get work for the next few days or even weeks.

During the pre-pandemic period, the workers were able to find work for 25-28 days in a month, but in the post-COVID era, they only manage to get work for 10-15 days.



Workers gather around a contractor inquiring for labour work at Engineering College Chauraha in Lucknow city, India



A worker jumps on an Electric Rickshaw at Engineering College Chauraha in Lucknow city, India. During the normal course when finding work wasn't a challenge particularly for the migrant workers they preferred commuting every day from their place of origin.



Mason look for work at Daliganj area, Lucknow city, India. There are two sets of labourers found in the labour market. One is the daily wagers and another comprise of masons. However, the pay of mason is a little higher than the daily wagers even though the working hour of both remain the same.



Apart from struggling to find work, salaries have also taken a hit. There are mainly two types of daily wage workers: masons and labourers. Pre-pandemic, a mason was able to fetch around Rs. 800 a day on average and a labourer was able to earn around Rs. 400 a day.

Now, a mason is offering his services for around Rs.600 a day and a labourer is able to make Rs. 250 a day. Some say that their monthly salaries have dropped more than half from 10-15k to less than five thousand rupees.

These labourers hail from various surrounding and distant states or areas in UP. They manage to find accommodation on empty plots with the permission of owners who allow them to stay on account of goodwill or find a small jhuggi on the outskirts.

They leave their homes early in the morning in search for work and line up at places destined for hiring labourers. They stand right under the sky on the footpaths through the scorching sun or chilly winters waiting for a contractor to hire them.

It is even more challenging for the labourers who commute on a daily basis to find work. Now when the rail movement has been affected, the labourers are spending around five times more on transportation. In the light of them not able to find work, it is only adding to their debts further.

Consequently, they return back to their so-called homes and are left to somehow secure a meal for their family for that night. These labourers live on the edge of hunger, bringing a meal to the table on the basis of what they're able to earn on the very same day.



A family stand next to temporary shelters built on an empty plot at Jankipuram area, Lucknow city, India. Due to the financial constrains workers prefer place for stay is either roadside or under a common shelter provided to the marginalized section in the name of social motive.`



Sheela Bibi, a migrant worker from Malda district, West Bengal stand next to a temporary shelter in Jankipuram area, Lucknowcity, India

On a bad day, some are compelled to borrow money or food from their neighbours. Sadly, the benefits of free rations schemes or direct money transfers that the government had announced as relief measures for the poor haven't trickled down to a lot of their families or are simply inadequate.



Another dimension to their misery is the condition of their children's education. Children have been out of school since the pandemic struck. Unlike the people living in privileged urban cocoons, there are no facilities or possibilities for their children accessing online education.

A worker from Bihar (in the picture below) shares how he had to take a loan to get his daughter treated at a private hospital in Lucknow where they charged him Rs. 300 for every visit.

A health hazard that kept them away from work has left them in a situation where they have to take loans to take their kids to the hospital. Their abysmal financial situation renders them incapable of affording decent care for themselves and their family's health.



Lakhan Sahu (24) with wife Anantkumari Sahu (20) from Chattisgarh state stand next to the temporary shelter in an open plot in Lucknow city, India



Ashim Ray(44) with daughter Manju Ray(10) and Son Amarjeet Ray (14) stand next to a rented house in Aliganj area, Lucknow city,India

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