

According to the 2011 census 37% of India's population, nearly 453.6 million people are Internal Migrants. Covid-19 induced an intense migrant crisis in India, and nearly 40 million internal migrants' livelihood was affected by the lockdown.<sup>1</sup> The pandemic has potentially pushed generations of marginalised and informal workers into poverty.<sup>2</sup> A World Bank Group report published this year puts the number of Covid-19 induced new poor at around 119 to 124 million.<sup>3</sup>

Migrant Assistance and Information Network (MAIN) is a response to reach out to distress migrant workers. MAIN collaborates with individuals, organisations, religious congregations, and state governments to develop a sustainable model to secure a life of dignity for migrant workers and their families. MAIN has a presence in 25 states. The organisation runs 16 quarantine centres and 22 shelters for the Migrants/Homeless. During the pandemic 21,304 families were given financial aid, 357, 049 dry ration kits were distributed, and 2,721 volunteers were engaged.

OPEN FORUM: ACCOMPANYING DISTRESS MIGRANTS held on the International Migrants Day was an occasion for MAIN to reaffirm its commitment to the cause of migrants in distress. The event was organized by Jesuit Conference of India (JCI) and supported by the Indian Social Institute. MAIN gathered experts, government representatives and migrant workers to convene on one platform to reflect on the workers' everyday struggles. The gathering had speakers renowned for their work and commitment to the cause of the migrant workers and alleviating their struggles. Videos, songs, poetry, and narrations from the migrant worker participants, laid the foundation of the event on their lived experience.

Women and men speaking through the videos shared their reality with the gathering. Shelter, safety, access to livelihood and the well-being of their children were the main concerns expressed by women. Indravati, a housewife, followed her husband who lost his livelihood as a tailor to floods in UP and migrated to Delhi in search of better opportunities. She is constantly worried about the nutrition and well-being of her children. Naseema, Asha and Indravati want a pucca house to live in, as their houses with leaking roofs, are barely standing. Meena, an ASHA worker wants the demolitions of their settlements to stop. And Rupa who wants to be a dancer has instead picked up a beautician's course to support her parents and move them from the road to a house.

Babitha Kumari and Bipin Saha from Delhi shared their lived experiences in person at the event. Babitha works with the migrant community in Delhi for MAIN. She shared her concern for women's safety, sanitation facilities for women at their workplace, and the rise of domestic violence during the pandemic. Bipin Saha, a poet, song writer arrived in Delhi as an eight-year-old and survived in the streets. He proudly shared that through the efforts of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.epw.in/node/158248/pdf>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.actionaidindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/WORKERS-IN-THE-TIME-OF-COVID-19-I-Report-of-Round-2\\_Final-V2.pdf](https://www.actionaidindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/WORKERS-IN-THE-TIME-OF-COVID-19-I-Report-of-Round-2_Final-V2.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.knomad.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/Migration%20and%20Development%20Brief%2034\\_0.pdf](https://www.knomad.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/Migration%20and%20Development%20Brief%2034_0.pdf)

his collective during the pandemic no one in their Basti (settlement) went hungry. He performed a song he wrote on the struggles of the migrant worker.

Awareness about government welfare schemes and access to legal aid will improve the living conditions of migrants<sup>4</sup>. The importance of information networks, outreach and handholding of communities accessing government schemes and services was noted by Dr Rashmi Singh, Special Secretary-cum-Director, Department of Women and Child Development and Department of Social Welfare, Government of NCT of Delhi. She commended MAIN and its initiative to promote collective networks. She encouraged community members to approach and access government programmes directed at pre-school education, nutrition, and financial services so they can benefit from them.

Calling for a re-evaluation of eligibility criteria for various government programmes that address the homeless, Bipin Kumar Ray, Member-Expert, Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board (DUSIB), said that rights of the migrant workers need to be at the centre of government approach to housing. Delhi has implemented effective housing policies and provided housing for 5000 families.

Housing was a prime example for re-evaluating government policy and regulation from the perspective of the marginalised, said Member of the State Level Shelter Monitoring Committee set up on the Orders of the Supreme Court of India and renowned social activist for the homeless Dr. Indu Prakash Singh. He used the term “City Makers” as against homeless, as he believes they are the foundation of labour that make a city.

Many migrants at the Open Forum left their villages due to extreme weather events like floods. Migration due to climate induced disasters will affect over 62 million people in South Asia by 2050<sup>5</sup>. Over 900,000 people in India were displaced due to climate related disasters, said Ms Jyoti Awasthi. She works with women and workers from the unorganised sector through the organisation Laxmi. She is also Founder of Satat Sampada, an organisation engaged in Organic and Natural Farming, to build viable livelihood opportunities for villages and stem migration. She pointed to the information gap on long-term effects of climate induced disasters on marginal farmers and agricultural labour. She called for a country wide mapping of migration in India without limiting the focus to metros.

The Open Forum’s Declaration endorsed this year’s global theme of “Harnessing the Potential of Human Mobility”. It declared a need for better policy to harness the potential of migrant workers in India and ensuring their human rights. It called on the State and policy makers to address decent jobs, decent wages, social security, and protection measures in their policy. It asked for social justice respecting democratic coexistence in diversity and pluralism. It called on the State to improve access to its schemes, programmes, and entitlements for migrant workers, and strengthen data systems to facilitate design of

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.indiaenvironmentportal.org.in/content/470336/rozgaar-survey-report-a-study-on-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-migrant-workers-in-india/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/newsdetail/index/13/19764/millions-forced-to-migrate-because-of-climate-change-numbers-to-treble-by-2050>

targeted interventions for distress migrants. MAIN supported the migrants in their effort to achieve their rights and entitlements for a life with dignity.

The purpose of the Open Forum was to engage and awaken public consciousness on the challenges, rights, and privileges of the migrant workers, according to Dr. Jerome Stanislaus D'Souza, President of the Jesuit Conference of South Asia (JCSA). He said that need was for further collaborative efforts like MAIN, to publicise the narrative of the migrants, and to find pathways to support them in their endeavours towards a dignified life.

Dr. Siji Chacko, Director, shared that MAIN is the outcome of the felt need for a concerted, collective, and innovative response to reach out to the distress migrant workers across India. Dr. Denzil Fernandes, Executive Director, Indian Social Institute, Delhi, shared how MAIN, a collaborative effort is evolving as a national network. He acknowledged the importance of awareness during the pandemic, and the support provided by the network across the states.