A Day in the Journey of Migrants

An emergency relief kitchen on the Odisha-Andhra Pradesh border in Ganjam district was up and running early in the morning. On the menu today was vegetable biryani and chole (chickpea curry). At the same time, volunteers were preparing packets consisting of muri (puffed rice), biscuits, and mixture. By 10 AM, 300 food packets were ready, and another 200 was in line. All these packets were for the migrant workers walking back home hundreds of kilometres on National Highway (NH)-16 from the southern states northwards towards Odisha, West Bengal, Jharkhand, and Bihar. The food packets are being prepared by a group of volunteers from Youth for Social Development in Berhampur, Odisha. The situation is challenging for YSD as they are short-staffed because of the lockdown. With Ganjam district having turned into a hotspot for positive cases of COVID-19 in the last couple of weeks, not many volunteers have been coming forward to assist YSD in this situation.

The people who are inconsolably suffering at this hour are the migrants. Despite the temperatures hovering around the 40 degree Celsius mark, the migrants have been walking for days with hunger and no assistance. We have witnessed hundreds of migrants walking through Berhampur city going to their homes. Even the looming threat of cyclone Amphan has not stopped them in their harrowing ordeal. Volunteers of YSD intercept and request them to rest under a tree for some time while immediately arranging for a mobile van to arrive with food packets.

Today (15 May, 2020) was no different. Our volunteers intercepted a team of migrants at around 1 PM. Having started their journey from Tamil Nadu two days ago, they had been walking for most parts of the trip while managing to get lifts for short distances on trucks. As they crossed the Odisha border, the local police patrol team asked them to wait at the Berhampur Bus Station with the assurance that a bus will be arranged for them. These people had another 300-500 kilometres left to cover before they could reach home in Nuapada, Balangir and Kalahandi districts in the western Odisha. They hadn’t eaten anything in the last few days. Like the millions of migrants walking all across the country, desperation was taking over them having stuck at the bus stand for hours. They were ready to resume
their journey without food, not knowing if the promised buses would arrive at all, lest with the fear of being stopped again if they take a break.

As soon as our volunteers came in touch with the migrants, we made sure to provide food where they were waiting. Meanwhile, one of our friends in Bhubaneswar contacted the Additional Chief Secretary, the State Relief Commissioner, and the district administration to apprise them of this situation in hand. The Additional Chief Secretary took immediate cognizance of the matter and advised the Ganjam SP to provide necessary arrangements for the migrants. Within an hour, the migrants were assured of a vehicle to ferry them to their respective districts by the Commissioner, Berhampur Municipal Corporation. The Commissioner told the migrants that the buses would leave later in the night along with other migrants bound to different locations in Western Odisha, and were told to wait in the bus terminal until then. However, there were no arrangements for any kind of meal to be provided until then. Our volunteers stepped up the occasion again and ensured that all the migrants were provided dinner.

The joy of the buses arriving later in the night turned into instant misery when a police officer confiscated all their mobile phones. They were told to collect their phones after the end of the lockdown period by paying a fine of 21 rupees. The migrants were not informed of reasons behind their phones being confiscated and the necessity to pay the fine. It was later disclosed to us by an official that the phones were confiscated so that migrants could not contact any government officials later to complain about the poor services of the administration and for having made them wait for days.

These migrants were finally able to reach their destinations and register in their village quarantine centres after facing all the worst scenarios possible. Forced to walk for days with no access to food and forcibly made to wait for days for support, even their last bit of dignity was stripped when their mobile phones were seized at a time when they looked for support from the administration. At what cost are we treating our migrants with this suffering?

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