The extension of the lockdown for over two months since March has further deepened the need for lakhs of migrants to leave the cities where they were working. A missing source of a regular income for weeks, uncertain train services, and steeply-priced bus tickets leave them with no other option than to commence their journey on foot back to their homes often thousands of kilometers away. While a select few manage to procure a bicycle to cycle the trip back home, Rabindra Srivastav cannot rely on either of those options.

Rabindra is a 31-year-old differently-abled individual from Bihar. The disability in his leg prevents him to even walk for 500 metres at a stretch. His disability had significantly limited his livelihood options over time. He had been working in a rice mill in Udurnagar, Telangana State as a cook earning an income of 250 rupees per day. With the commencement of the lockdown, he could not send any further money to
his family back in Bihar as he regularly did. With no work to pay him, he depleted all his limited savings. He, along his friends had barely been able to survive the first few weeks of the lockdown. While some of them borrowed to make ends meet for some time, all the existing resources started diminishing. With growing desperation to go back home, they decided the inevitable – to start the thousand kilometre journey from Telangana to Bihar.

Volunteers of Youth for Social Development came across Rabindra with his 20 friends walking along National Highway 16 near Girisola check post of the Andhra Pradesh-Odisha border in Ganjam District of Odisha. Volunteers intercepted them to provide necessary food and essentials. During the period, we found out how his friends had been generous enough to support Rabindra in their tryst to go back home. His friends would lend their shoulders for Rabindra to lean on alternately for every 2-3 kilometers. The group had already covered a distance of 450 kilometers walking, and still had miles to go before they could reach their homes.

People with disabilities have significant healthcare needs than others. They are much more vulnerable than everyone else, where they also have to take care of their needs linked to their impairments in addition to the standard requirements. It is also a point to ponder about how concepts such as social distancing go for a toss for people like Rabindra when they have no other option than to physically depend on others because of their constraints.

We respect the benevolence of Rabindra’s friends for their warm gesture to assist him in reaching their homes safely. The spirit of these people makes them the true warriors of COVID-19.

By Bibhu Prasad Sahu and Namesh Killemsetty
Youth for Social Development