



LOCKDOWN CHRONICLE

THE STORY OF A MIGRANT WORKERS' PLATFORM ACROSS INDIA'S LOCKDOWN

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1. MAKING SENSE OF IT

When, on 24th March, India's internal migrants learned that they were henceforth prevented from both earning and travelling home, Saajha Manch Mobile Vaani – a phone-based platform for migrant workers which uses Interactive Voice Response (IVR) technology¹ - was inundated with distress reports and calls, forcing us to repurpose, from our regular focus on rights-at-work, to respond to the looming crisis. Unlike the construction and largely unorganised sector-based workers closely reported on by [SWAN](#) and [Jan Sahas](#), Saajha Manch's base of 4000+ regular monthly listeners are mostly toiling in registered factories spread across industrial regions of Delhi-NCR (National Capital Region), Ahmedabad, Tirupur and elsewhere. Earlier surveys had shown us that at least half of our listeners held Provident Fund (PF) accounts and proof of employment, even though they were casually hired on a daily basis or on a seasonal basis through contractors. Therefore, we hoped that at least these workers would benefit from the [central](#) and [state](#) government orders which instructed employers to pay wages during lockdown and to not lay off workers. But our first lockdown survey – undertaken in the first two weeks of April – showed that these relatively formalised workers were magnificently let down by their employers. The government had rendered the majority of its industrial workforce stranded and destitute in one fair sweep.

From March to April, daily callers doubled and contributors tripled, and much of this sustained through May into early June. New volunteer 'reporters' – champions who agree to contribute to and increase the reach of Saajha Manch – joined in the crisis. How do we explain the government's remarkable lack of attention towards these internal migrants, among the worst hit by the lockdown? Some [commentators](#) place the roots of this in fiscal concerns, that India's economy cannot and should not bear the costs of shoring up the needy since this would require a departure from [macroeconomic prudence](#). Others have explained it by a lack of [empathy](#) and consideration which runs deep in India's hierarchical society, an engrained disregard and – perhaps – a belief that the poor are habituated to suffering and would soon forget the pain and settle for a leadership focused on [image and illusion](#) rather than detailed delivery, as it had after demonetisation. Another view is that the government – and its class allies – sought to make the poor the [outer layer of the herd](#) from which the inner and richer layers would be immune and protected.

¹ Saajha Manch Mobile Vaani (Saajha Manch) is accessed by making a missed call to **92111 53555** and receiving the call-back, during which listeners hear and navigate a variety of content running on a playlist, including news, local updates, information bulletins and entertainment. By pressing 3 at any time, they can record their own voice and these contributions are moderated before being published. While more than half of all content played is from the listener community, no formal registration nor membership of users is required.

Through news reports, interviews, listener opinions, queries and reflective pieces, Saajha Manch chronicled lockdown with a steady stream of migrant workers' voices, providing a window into how some members of this 100 million-strong population were making sense of it. Accessible by phone buttons from anywhere in India, the platform builds awareness, promotes debate and facilitates solidarity. Partners² ranging from central trade unions to local youth clubs, use the platform to reach their support base and agree to assist in off-line follow-up of grievances.

The dust – for the time being – has settled. Many of our listeners have finally managed to reach home. But the combination of disregard and inconsideration which constituted their experience of lockdown is not forgotten. “Employers are crying, ‘if we let the workers leave, our work will suffer’”, reports [Rajesh from Bihar](#) on 2nd June. “But these are the same people who refused to help in workers’ time of need, saying that their pockets were empty”. “The companies cheated the workers; the workers cried loudly in the hope that someone should help, but they were disappointed in every way and have gone to their homes”, says Saajha Manch reporter [Nand Kishor](#). “They will prefer to work in their villages now... The torture that the workers faced cannot be forgotten in a lifetime! These were the workers who grew the companies, and the workers thought that they would consider them, but they did not... To bring back the workers, justice will have to be repaired!”. Workers, with regular employment relationships, are equally aware of how easy it could have been to push relief through employers. On 29th March, a few days before a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) with the same request was filed by activists in the Supreme Court, a garment worker, [Imran](#), implores the government to work with employers to identify and trace their workforce and provide the requisite relief. But, like the PIL, this plea fell on deaf ears.

Reflecting the pulse of Saajha Manch over the previous month, the May issue of [Rafi ki Diary](#)³ reflected on the absurdity of industrialists’ panic at a crisis that has resulted from ever-expanding capitalist extraction and expansion and the irony of expecting social distancing amongst those living in a matchbox:

Those who claim to make this world better through capital are looking for opportunities to bring back the workers for their factories. The industrialists cannot operate machines nor robots without them... They who earlier operated humans through machines, now look to humans to operate machines.

...People living in posh houses play songs of social distancing for the workers living 5-6 in matchbox rooms...The coronavirus has forced capitalists to reduce production and pollution in a system which has been infected for years. The earth - made for all beings – was encroached by a handful of capitalists and now appears free of them. Increase working hours to restore the economy, say some capitalists, while the earth is restored by the virus.

² Saajha Manch’s partners include Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU), Safe in India, Ideal Youth for Revolutionary Changes (IYRC) and Mazdoor Ekta Manch (MEM) in Delhi-NCR, Aajeevika Bureau in Gujarat and Rights Education and Development Centre (READ) and Tamil Nadu Rural Labourers’ Movement (TRLM) union in Tamil Nadu.

³ ‘Rafi ki Diary’ is a popular monthly programme published on Saajha Manch which reflects the mood among worker-contributors and seeks to incorporate their contributions into a narrative commentary.

...Listeners! Do you think the world of owners will ever be able to provide you the food, clothes, shelter, health and happiness you need? If not, are you thinking of creating a different world for yourselves, in which there is no owner/ oppressor nor labourer/ oppressed?

The rest of this report chronicles the activity on the Saajha Manch platform over the lockdown period. The next section provides a timeline of key events with hyperlinks to Saajha Manch's daily news bulletins. Section 3 documents the relief efforts of Gram Vaani's Saajha Manch team in partnership with various organisations funding and delivering relief on the ground. Section 4, the main part of the report, discusses some of the key themes of the lockdown as they appeared chronologically through the voices of Saajha Manch contributors, with published audio files provided as hyperlinks⁴.

2. TIMELINE OF LOCKDOWN EVENTS

- 24th March: First lockdown declared.
- 29th March: Home Ministry orders employers to pay full wages and not to lay off workers during lockdown, but offers no help to employers in managing the wage bill.
- 30th March: [Govt announces express withdrawal](#)⁵ facility of 75% of PF or three months' wage (whichever is less) but many argue that, due to procedures, it will not be usable for the vast majority of the Employees' Provident Fund subscribers.
- 1st April: Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY) package announced, has very little for migrants while women Jan Dhan account holders get Rs.500, all poor households get free rations of 5kg per month for three months, and the Building and Other Construction Workers' Welfare cess funds to be used for welfare of construction workers. Solicitor General declares that this – along with 15 lakh migrants covered in transit relief shelters – is enough for stranded migrants.
- 2nd April: [SC hears and accepts a PIL](#) by activists Harsh Mander and Anjali Bhardwaj requesting government to foot the wage bill for employers during lockdown.
- 7th April: [SC refuses to pass the order](#) requested by 2nd April petition and says it is for the executive to decide whether and what they can pay on behalf of employers. "We don't want to supplant the wisdom of the Government with our wisdom," said the CJI. He also remarked, "if they are being provided food then why do they need money for meals?"
- 14th April: [Second lockdown](#) declared, till 3rd May. Haryana Government announces ration distribution to non-ration card holders.
- 15th April: [Thousands of workers](#) gather at Bandra Station in Mumbai after hearing the false news that government was offering trains home.

⁴ Hyperlinks are to Gram Vaani's public interface. Click 'download' to hear the Hindi audio or view the text transcription, most in Hindi while some are in English.

⁵ All hyperlinks to Saajha Manch's daily audio news bulletin, *Rozana Samachar*.

- 21st April: Gujarat follows Rajasthan to extend daily working hours from eight to twelve while announcing no overtime pay. [It also declares](#) that most workers will be unable to travel back home stating the need to stay put.
- 29th April: [Work starts](#) to take selected migrants home from Gujarat in buses.
- 1st May: On the eve of the end of the second lockdown, announcement of [Shramik Special trains](#) for inter-state migrants and students.
- 4rd May: Lockdown extended until 17th May. [Large numbers of workers](#) gather at Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh (MP) and Uttar Pradesh (UP) borders as states struggle to manage the passage of workers travelling home by any means possible.
- 5th May: [The horrors faced by migrant workers](#) trying to get home emerge, between lathi charge and multiple quarantines at state borders.
- 6th May: Government of Karnataka cancels the Shramik Special trains after construction lobby expressed concerns over exodus, then re-instated the trains two days later causing huge disruption.
- 7th May: Uttar Pradesh follows Gujarat and Rajasthan in suspending the majority of labour laws through ordinance, including permission for 12 hour shifts with no overtime and greatly reduced safety protections, for a period of three years.
- 8th May: [Death of 16 migrants](#) crushed by a freight train in Aurangabad district.
- 9th May: Desperate workers seeking to head home gather at government officers, clash with police at [Kapas Hera border](#).
- 14th May: Announcement of [Atmanirbhar Scheme](#) for lockdown relief, acknowledges migrants for the first time and the figure of Rs 80 crore for relief is mentioned. Centre announces it will pay for rations distributed to inter-state migrants by state governments but remains focused on 'shelter homes' where very few migrants reside.
- 15th May: [SC stays the Home Ministry's 29th March order](#) to pay lockdown wages, saying that no employer will be prosecuted for not paying. Uttar Pradesh withdraws its directive to extend working hours to 12, but the other points of the ordinance remain.
- 15th May: [SC dismisses plea](#) by lawyer Alakh Alok Srivastava seeking a directive from the Centre to all district magistrates to identify and provide food and shelter to stranded workers, during which Solicitor General Tushar Mehta said, "states are providing inter-state transport. But if people get angry and start on foot instead of waiting for the transport to be provided nothing can be done. We can only request that people should not walk".
- 16th May: [Union Minister for Railways](#) Piyush Goyal declares, "We have gone through the entire three months without a single person starving. That's not just the effort of the Centre or

state governments. It is the effort of 130 crore Indians”. Meanwhile, news of accidents and deaths of migrants en route home come in.

- 17th May: [Lockdown](#) extended until 31st May.
- 22nd May: [All India strike](#) by Central Trade Unions against hasty suspension of labour laws by several states, including Gujarat, Haryana, UP and MP, and planned representation to the International Labour Organisation (ILO).
- 28th May: [The SC takes suo moto cognizance](#) of the situation of inter-state migrants, in response to a scathing letter written by 20 senior SC advocates to the CJI and other senior judges, seeking cognizance of the SC in the biggest humanitarian crisis in independent India. The letter referred to “institutional deference to statements made on behalf of the government and the court’s apparent indifference to this enormous humanitarian crisis”.
- 31st May: End of fourth lockdown and phased reopening.

3. SAAJHA MANCH’S EMERGENCY RESPONSE

As lockdown was enforced, Saajha Manch was swamped with cries for help from workers from across Delhi-NCR, Tirupur, Ahmedabad and elsewhere. In the early days, workers registered their need by calling up **92111 53555** and pressing 3 to [record their voice](#). By the third week in April, it had become common to receive more than 100 SOS calls in a day. To improve efficiency to cope with numbers, Gram Vaani created an SOS channel. By pressing 0, workers transferred to a question which asked them to select their location from a list of eight, across the three states of Haryana, Tamil Nadu and Gujarat. The graphic below plots the number of SOS calls received daily for each of these two types, (i) audio messages (pink line) and (ii) button press on the SOS channel (brown line), and maps these against key lockdown events.

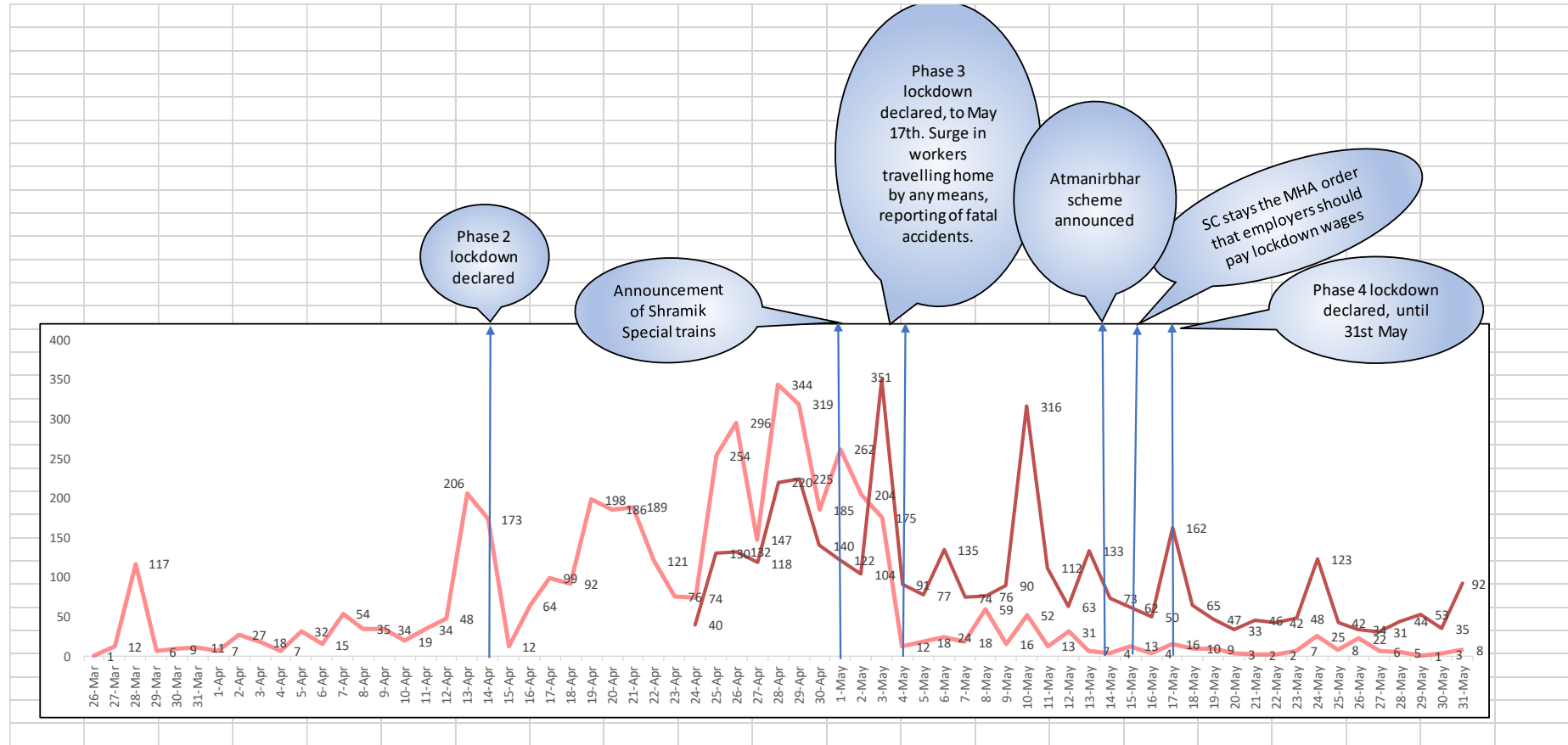
Of the over 8,000 calls of both types fielded by Saajha Manch between 26th March and 31st May, a little over 3,000 were unique callers while the rest of the calls were repeats, as workers called a second or third time in desperation, after receiving no help, or to receive follow-up help. Of these 3,000+ unique requests, Saajha Manch and its partners were able to respond to 1,590 requests. Other than on-the-ground assistance to relief partners, Gram Vaani’s role was to leverage the IVR platform as a way by which SOS calls were registered and allocated, and through which beneficiaries could be verified by phone and in person on receipt of the benefit.

Three kinds of benefits were distributed. Where we had reporters and partners and where citizen funding & logistics for ration distribution was available – as for Gurugram and Tirupur – we responded by providing **ration kits, valued at around Rs. 1000** and designed to provide food for households for a period of one to two weeks. Where we had no such network and/ or funding and logistics for ration distribution, we leveraged partner crowd funds to provide **cash support at Rs. 800 and then Rs. 500** per household, averaging Rs. 600. In Tirupur (Tamil Nadu), towards the end of the lockdown, we also provided end-to-end assistance to **access special trains** to help migrants get home. The table summarises the tally of the relief efforts:

Inter-state households covered by Saajha Manch-mediated relief at destination, Lockdown 6th April to 28th May 2020			
By location		By type of benefit	
Manesar, Gurgaon	607	Ration kit (average Rs.1000)	1195
Kapas Hera, Delhi-Gurgaon border	480	Cash (average Rs.600)	95
Tirupur, Tamil Nadu	445	Travel assist (time & internet)	300
Elsewhere Delhi-NCR	33		
Other work destinations, (Guj, Maha)	25		
TOTAL	1590		1590

To get this emergency help to listeners, Gram Vaani depended on partnerships with collectives and NGOs who leapt into action to respond to the crisis. They are Gurugram Nagrik Ekta Manch ([GNEM](#)), [Feeding India](#) and Ideal Youth for Revolutionary Changes ([IYRC](#)) in Delhi-NCR, and [READ](#), Vizhuthugal and Jeevan Trust in Tamil Nadu. In each case, these organisations provided the benefit – sourced from crowd funding, donors and local philanthropy – and our role was to indicate demand, help with last mile logistics and verify receipt. Once benefit had been received, the IVR also provided a means through which receipt could be registered with a [simple acknowledgement](#) from the same registered phone number.

SOS TIMELINE: DAILY SOS CALLS ACROSS LOCKDOWN WITH KEY EVENTS, 26TH MARCH TO 31ST MAY 2020



Legend:

—: SOS calls registered per day (including repeats) through pressing 3 and recording message

—: SOS calls registered per day (including repeats) on the dedicated SOS channel set up on 24th April.

4. THEMES OF THE LOCKDOWN CHRONICLE

The remainder of this report draws on contributions by migrant workers on their experience of lockdown by pressing 3 while on the phonenumber or by giving an interview with Saajha Manch reporters. We work through seven themes which are broadly chronological. First, the migrant crisis was **a crisis foretold** and all too obvious to workers in the first days of lockdown. Second, **employers swiftly ducked out** of responsibility towards their workforce. Third, before the government got anywhere close to relief for inter-state migrants, **some citizens stepped up** to provide relief. Fourth, as lockdown extended into Phase 2, the **government proved itself short on words and shorter on action**, as even modest commitments to migrants failed to reach. Fifth, by late April, **landlords got the jitters** and demanded rent from their stranded tenants. Sixth, from early May, migrants had permission to **travel and return** but how? Seventh, from mid-May, **unlocking revealed the sorry state of what remained**: few jobs, sealed neighbourhoods and a proportion of workers exhausted by their ordeal. Eighth, **what possibility of protest** presented itself in these new normal times?

4.1 A CRISIS FORETOLD

As early as 27th March, Saajha Manch was abuzz with reports of migrant workers setting off for home on foot because they knew too well they could manage no more than a few days without work at the destination of migration. At first it seemed that this would apply to those with homes within 200-300 km, but it became clear that many were ready to make [longer journeys with no transport](#). Gram Vaani's Rishikant interviewed a woman *en route* to her home from Ahmedabad as she explained how working conditions in the factory – [targets and verbal abuse](#) – had become intolerable from mid-March as her employer rushed to complete orders. “Keep your phone charged, drink lots of water and take rest on the way”, Rishikant advised.

By early April, the number of SOS calls had picked up, as workers from [Tamil Nadu](#) to [Kapas Hera](#) simply shared their terrible situation: *how do we eat with no wages?* When the lockdown was extended on 14th April, the degree of the government's disregard became clear: after nearly a month of going hungry, workers were asked to simply bear it for longer. Not once, remarked [Vikas](#) from Dundahera, had a government representative visited the people being locked down. The appeals kept rolling in: is Saajha Manch able to help, when neither employer nor government have made any provision and our cash is finished? Yet, there was no shortage of will to stay back: if they could just get by, workers showed forbearance to [sit it out](#) in the hope of finding work when factories reopened.

The *impossibility of not circulating* was obvious to inter-states from the first day. While they might have hoped for more from employer, the government's empty promises were to be expected. “Government makes promises, that they will send relief funds directly to workers' accounts, arrange 1000 buses for migrant workers... The government needs to promise less and work more”, said Delhi's [Prem Kumar](#). He requested the central and state government to partner to provide Rs. 5,000 to each laid-off worker until the situation returns to normal.

4.2 EMPLOYERS DUCK OUT

In the first two weeks of April, Saajha Manch undertook an IVR survey of 750 workers across Delhi-NCR, Ahmedabad and Tirupur, and found that:

- Despite the [Government Order](#) of 29th March that employers should not lay off workers and continue to pay them, 53% respondents said they had been laid-off at lockdown.
- 57% respondents reported not having been paid their full dues even upto 21st March.
- More than 60% reported an urgent need for assistance, mostly food. Among the most in need were Oriya and Bihari migrants stranded in Tirupur.
- While the [government announced](#) express withdrawal of PF funds for workers, more than 50% of the respondents did not have PF accounts, and of these, 60% had not been paid their pre-lockdown dues either.

When Saajha Manch tried to verify with listeners the release of March dues later in April, the results were no better. Of the nearly 400 respondents, less than half of those based in Gujarat had received any March wage at all, while another 23% had been paid only until the start of lockdown. The situation was better for those in Haryana, where a third each of respondents had received full March wages, received wages only to lockdown, and received no March wage at all.

Well aware of the promise of the 29th March government order to pay wages, several workers filed queries about this on Saajha Manch. If the government had promised and their employer had not delivered, what steps could they take? Saajha Manch attempted to respond as best possible⁶, given the prevailing back-and-forth and confusion on the issue. [One of the replies](#) encouraged workers to collectivise in an effort to demand wage payment at least between 24th March and 17th May, i.e. prior to the government's retraction of its initial order.

In the early days of April, the platform was flooded with workers' testimonies of being left suddenly in the lurch by employers. [One voice](#) reported on behalf of a group of 30 workers from Jharkhand stranded in Tirupur and an employer who had provided nothing since the second week of March. [Another](#), from Haryana who was unable to get anything more from his employer other than dues for the days worked. [Another](#), reporting from Tirupur, described the scale of ducking of responsibilities by garment sector employers in the city.

It was in mid-April – past the due date for payment of March wages – that the depth of employer shirking became clear. While some employers coughed up dues till 21st March, many avoided even this, hedging their uncertain future. [Here](#), a group of workers from Delhi's Narela Industrial Area sought to register their case with a lawyer. And it was then clear that March wages would be the last transfer. "If

⁶ Saajha Manch's Pucho aur Jaano service provides workers curated response to the questions they record on the platform, within a few days. We curate the response by reviewing our stock of existing replies and researching a suitable reply for fresh questions through our own resources and external experts (advocates, trade union leaders and NGO partners). Through the >two month lockdown period, Saajha Manch received and responded to 120 such questions and – since its establishment in 2017 – has built a stock of over 1000 Q&A pairs which, in the coming months, will become available to workers instantaneously through key word search and automated retrieval.

they didn't even give for full month in March, why will they give for April?", remarked [Saajha Manch reporter Manohar](#).

Many employers appeared to be 'spring-cleaning' their workforce, using the occasion to shed the old guard and bring in new flexibility. [Prem](#) from Delhi's Kapas Hera was three years into his job at the time and three decades in the capital. In spite of his credentials (a company ID card and several types of universally recognised ID) he was laid off with wages upto 21st March and. As on 13th May, he was still managing on the Rs. 9,000 he received that day. Ten days later came a report from Manesar's IMT: a group of permanent workers learned they had lost their jobs when they approached their company for re-hiring. The company, having paid them no wage since 21st March, asked them to report only "[as and when we call you](#)". As companies huddled in their own uncertain futures, workers struggled even to get paid dues for work done. [Sudhir Yadav](#), a welder in Ahmedabad, explained how he and his co-workers fought to extract wages for work completed prior to lockdown. Taking the help of a union they listed their names, the name of the contractor and employer and, by thus creating pressure on the employer, were able to recover half their March dues while the balance remained pending.

Several queries coming onto Saajha Manch and responded to in its *Pucho aur Jaano* slot pertained to grievances which had become impossible to resolve in the lockdown context of closed factories, HR managers avoiding calls and government officials working from home. Examples include resolving pre-lockdown [payment of wages](#) disputes, disputes about [illegal withholding of ID documents](#), and [getting PF claims cleared](#).

Those workers in debt to their employers found themselves in even worse circumstances. Surat, whose power loom and diamond industries are well known for their bonded labour arrangements, brought contributions from workers paid paltry dues at lockdown – [in one case, Rs.2,200](#) – as employers sought to recover their advances, and yet these workers suffered as others with no support across lockdown. As it became clear at re-opening, lockdown effectively created [bonded workers of all workers](#). When one cannot leave and when the choice of employment is so poor, one has no option but to accept conditions meted out.

4.3 SOME CITIZENS STEP UP

The speed and coordination with which civil society organisations responded to the migrant crisis was striking. Other than the six organisations with whom Gram Vaani partnered to assist our listeners, we heard about several other incidences where citizens had come together to meet the needs of those in most difficult circumstances. One such was the '[roti bank](#)' in Bahadurgarh, Haryana, which sought to help workers sit out the lockdown rather than taking to the roads. Another was Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU)'s Haryana office which distributed rations to all manner of workers. [Here](#), CITU's Sakvir Singh comments on the destructive efforts of government to exclude civil society organisations in the relief efforts when its own efforts were found wanting. Following the flood of workers making their way from Mumbai to UP and Bihar from early May, Aurangabad became a major transit region as well as the site of the terrible accident of 8th May. A Saajha Manch reporter [interviewed residents](#) of Sanaora Panchayat near Aurangabad who describes the locals' provision of food for travelling migrants. While this was frowned upon by the district administration, the panchayat let it pass.

4.4 A GOVERNMENT SHORT ON WORDS AND SHORTER ON ACTION

In the last ten days of April, Saajha Manch undertook a survey in three states which are major destinations for migrant workers in order to verify access to relief packages by state governments. Nearly 500 people in total responded to it. Of the respondents from **Gujarat** (mostly Narol, Ahmedabad), 82% of respondents had not received government rations because ration distribution had not reached their area. For the **Tamil Nadu**-based respondents (mostly Tirupur district), 61% had not received the rations offered to inter-state migrants on showing their Aadhaar card, in spite of a relatively inclusive and proactive administration. While 85% of them had approached district officials through helplines or in person, the response had been weak, with 45% getting no response and another 39% being told simply to wait. In **Haryana** (mostly Gurugram district), 79% respondents reported they had received neither ration nor cash transfer of Rs. 1000 promised by the host state of Haryana and by central administration, while 18% had received some help from their home state.

What additional evidence do workers' accounts offer on state governments' commitment and competence in terms of delivery relief? Gujarat comes out badly. Not only was the lockdown most severe here but the administration greatly curbed the activities of citizens to deliver relief so that it could not reach the workers at all (in contrast, the Haryana government more often commandeered citizen relief and claimed it as its own). Narol-based [Sudhir](#) from Bihar reflected on the contrast between his own home state (from which he successfully received Rs. 1000 transferred to his account) and the failure of the Gujarat state government to support its guest and transit workers. The state government's much hailed *Anna Brahma* scheme had not appeared once in his neighbourhood. By some accounts, the Delhi government fared better and our [reporter Nand Kishore](#) described the quick work being done by the Kapas Hera flour mill as government aid recipients rush to the mill to grind the crude flour handouts.

But the overwhelming picture is one of [too little too late](#), on the paltry size of a package which arrived – for the lucky few – after weeks of scrimping stress. Even worse, there are several examples of workers who – with all due diligence and determination and KYC (Know Your Customer) in place – were still unable to benefit from official relief. Saajha Manch reporter [Hasmat Ali](#) interviewed a Delhi auto driver in early April on the difficulties of accessing the cash payout promised by the state government. With only two days' ration left when interviewed on 13th May, [Prem](#) from Kapas Hera had done what he could to avail the e-ration card from the Delhi Government. He was checking daily but it just showed that the status was pending. A few days before that, he had stood in a queue of 30 or so people waiting in the sun for a plate of chowmein, the only sign of food relief in the neighbourhood he was confined to. Making do with money from home, a [cycle repairist](#) from the Gurugram border had sought to get the promised support from his home state via the Bihar Government app. But nothing had come to his account through this app or from his host state, Haryana.

By 2nd June, Saajha Manch reporter [Sonu Sahraul](#) had adopted a sceptical stance and cautioned listeners to consider, for example, in whose benefit the PF policy of 75% quick withdrawal is? In issuing the scheme, the government passed the buck to workers to run around employers and the PF office for several days to secure release of their own money. But this lets the government off the hook to bear workers' costs during lockdown.

Given the magnitude of state government failure to deliver relief, it is shocking how these governments went straight from this to suspension of labour laws, particularly in the case of Gujarat, a key destination state which – by the accounts of its own business community – depends enormously on guest migrant workers. As several states declared a waiver on the length of the working day, permitting up to 12 hour shifts six days per week and throwing into doubt overtime pay, Saajha Manch reporter Manohar interviewed [a worker](#) from Bahadurgarh’s industrial area who outlined how employers will interpret this as a carte blanche to get longer hours from workers while paying them the standard (eight hour) shift rate.

4.5 LANDLORDS GET THE JITTERS

The clear instruction from the [Haryana government](#) at the end of March was that a month’s waiver should be given on rent payment to workers and students. This would suggest that no rent should be charged for the month of April. Yet, Saajha Manch’s small survey of Haryana respondents during the second phase of the lockdown in late April, showed that 46% of respondents faced pressure from landlords to pay rent, whether or not they had paid up.

By the time the second lockdown was declared in mid-April, house owners appeared to be closing in on their tenants to salvage what they could, in some cases threatening them with expulsion with the knowledge that they could go nowhere. [Yogendra was](#) locked down in Delhi shortly after returning from his village and by late April, the landlord was knocking. [Deepak](#) in Manesar described his interaction with his landlord which compelled him to borrow from home to pay the rent. By late May, [reports](#) came in that this [pressure](#) and their inability to pay rent had become the most immediate reason for heading home, even by foot, as workers who had survived for weeks threw in the towel shortly before re-opening. At the same time, in Ahmedabad and Manesar, there were notable reports of relief offered by landlords beyond that required by government order. In the third week of May, [Ahmedabad worker](#) Anil Choudhury reported that landlords were asking for electricity and water bill payment but waiving house rent. A few days’ later, [Manesar-based landlords](#) reportedly stepped in to cover rent and even helped out with rations.

4.6 TRAVEL & RETURN

The third [SWAN](#) report describes the government orders which opened migrant travel from end April onwards, as “a maze of obfuscating orders that have created more chaos, destruction, and deaths. Since the Central government permitted inter-state travel for migrants, the abysmal travel arrangements meant that many migrants decided to escape the distress on cycles or in cramped lorries”.

Between May 19th and 21st, the Saajha Manch team spoke to 71 workers by phone who had earlier reported Ahmedabad as their location. Those who had got home had done so by virtually every means of transport available (foot, car, truck, bus, train) and paid anything between Rs. 600 and Rs. 6,000 to do so. The larger numbers of respondents were still waiting to go and cited the failure or slow speed of the online booking process as a key constraint.

Through the month of May, Saajha Manch's query service *Pucho aur Jaano* sought to respond as best as possible to the confusing and rapidly changing information regarding travel home. Several queries, particularly from [Tirupur](#), simply asked how to register for the Shramik Special trains and - teaming up with the sarpanch of the city's SIDCO industrial estate - Saajha Manch was able to facilitate off-line bookings for those registered on the platform (section 3 above). Other queries came from [Karnataka](#) where a group of 30 workers were stranded after their train was cancelled on 8th May, and from Gurugram, where workers trying desperately to get on a train to [Bihar](#). As and when information came in, often at the last moment, Gram Vaani staff and reporters shared it on the platform, such as [here](#) about free inter-state buses leaving from Manesar to the borders of UP, Bihar, West Bengal on 22nd May.

As with other special purpose systems set up by government in crisis, the evidence from listeners is that the special train travel system did not work nearly well enough. There were problems in the clarity of information, registration process, cancellations, and overcrowding on arrival at the station. Several complaints were around online registration which gave no result after being duly completed, from travellers in [Tamil Nadu](#) seeking to reach Bihar or from [Ahmedabad](#) wanting to travel to UP. One group complaint from [Manesar](#) heading to Bihar reported that it was not the registration process but the police at the Haryana-Delhi border who scuppered them and they were sent back to their vacated rooms in frustration and despair. Other negative accounts focused on the crowds and long waits on arrival at the train station at the allotted time, with reports of waiting for up to [six hours](#) common. Finally, workers also grieved that, out of pocket after the long lockdown, they were unable to pay the bribe being charged for registration on these official trains, Rs. 500 in this case from [Tamil Nadu](#).

Such is the widespread failure of the online registration for Shramik Special trains that contributor [Rajesh](#), recently returned to Bihar, was convinced it was a deliberate act on the part of government to keep workers bonded at destination for industries to use.

Particularly from Tirupur, where Saajha Manch supported offline registration efforts, reports came in of the journey experience: what were the Shramik Special trains like and were the migrants properly looked after? Late in the afternoon on 31st May, [travellers from Tirupur](#) who were headed to Bihar called up Saajha Manch reporter Reshma to complain they had not been fed since early morning and had been missed out of lunchtime distribution. Meanwhile, there were no shops or walk-through salesmen for those with the cash to purchase. [Sudhir Yadav](#) reported from back home in UP after successfully completing a complicated journey, in a group of eight co-workers, from Ahmedabad by train crowded with 1200 people. While he paid Rs. 695 on a ticket officially priced at Rs. 650, this depended on a network of connections involving brokers from his home district, the local district magistrate and local politicians. Most of his co-workers paid Rs. 1500 and several paid this without even getting the ticket. "Only those who had money and local connections were able to get train tickets back home". There are also positive experiences, such as [this listener](#) who travelled from Delhi back to UP.

Towards the end of May, [reports](#) from [Manesar](#) made it clear that, while some workers had failed to access trains, others steered clear of the trains because they feared they (or one of their family members) could be 'turned in' and forced to stay in quarantine if they showed any signs of cold or fever. Determined to get home where they could re-gain their resilience after being battered by the lockdown, being corralled into some form of government detention was to be avoided at all costs. This is what

explains the willingness of workers to scrimp together funds for alternative – and more expensive – forms of transport, or even depart by foot.

As listeners reached their homes, they recorded what they found on arrival and the prospects they saw in the coming months. Returning migrants from Maharashtra enjoyed a warm reception by the quarantine centre in [Amethi, UP](#). By contrast, a week later in early June, a returnee from Tamil Nadu – having reached [Purnia District](#) quarantine centre in Bihar – described the poor state of facilities and the failure of instituting basic measures against the virus. Why can't Bihar do as well as other state governments such as Chhattisgarh, he asked.

As Saajha Manch's listeners drifted home towards the end of May, their priorities shifted towards information about home state schemes and entitlements available for returnees. The query service *Pucho aur Jaano* increasingly provides actionable information on such topics as updating an [Aadhar card](#), accessing central government [housing schemes](#) for rural areas, and information bulletins covering [source state government schemes](#). On 31st May, veteran contributor [Shankar Pal](#), normally residing in Manesar, reported from his home in Palamu, Jharkhand expressing concern at prospects for returnee migrants with farms being battered by cyclone and untimely rains. In a small phone survey of Gujarat returnees, Saajha Manch learned that nearly a fifth of the 71 workers interviewed were adamant that they would not return to work destinations after the lockdown trauma. But nearly a third say they would return and most are just going to wait and see.

4.7 UNLOCKING WHAT REMAINS

What does re-opening mean for industrial workers, in Manesar, Tirupur and elsewhere? Manesar's auto and garment export factories unlocked to a workforce which is both surplus and highly uncertain. The proportion of workers still residing in surrounding villages was more than could be hired. While [workers spent their days in the sun](#) going from one factory to another in search of work, employers negotiated to secure a small workforce with a spare 'bench' so they can pick up quickly if orders come. In late May, Saajha Manch reporter Deepak interviewed [Mohammed Minaria](#) who stayed back through lockdown on the expectation of getting work but found that he got only one day's work after sitting idle for five; it's just not enough.

As workers learned that only a few of them will be offered work and that too on a zero-hours basis, they concluded that the long wait to re-opening may not provide what they need. [Two permanent workers](#) updated Saajha Manch that their company is re-hiring most of its earlier regular workforce on contract. When the workers objected, they were told to "go fight with the government". [Deepak Kumar Yadav](#) from Manesar's Khoh Gaon believed that automotive companies are deliberately holding back full wage payment in fear that workers will leave if paid their full dues. Once again, the conversation became about getting back home by any means possible regardless of the expense. Even those who manage to clinch back a full-time job are [forced to walk to and around](#) the enormous IMT campus – up to 14 km – because there is no transport. These issues are not confined to Manesar. Saajha Manch reporter Hasmat interviewed a CITU representative working in Delhi's [Narela Industrial Area](#) who describes how workers, lured to wait out lockdown by the promise of interim wages, find themselves offered half the wage they earned before and nothing for the interim.

All of this – of course – goes on with the background of the spreading virus. It is at re-opening – not lockdown – that fear of the virus is manifest on the Saajha Manch platform. Are workers being sacrificed for the needs of industry? Now that factories are open, where is the police? They appear to have left the scene when workers need their protection, said Saajha Manch reporter [Deepak from IMT](#) Manesar. If they work and thereby get sick, [asked workers](#), will they precipitate the closure of the plants they depend on? Workers are uneasy as they re-join the plant with no sight of order forecasts: [will there be enough workflow](#) to make it worth the risk? And yet how could they avoid work and falling sick when social distancing – even if maintained in the factory – [is not maintained outside the gates](#)?

It is clear to [commentators](#) that the impact of lockdown on re-opening is to have squeezed the workers into a situation of greater compulsion than they were before because their fall-backs are so much weaker. On 26th May, the radical workers' newspaper **Faridabad Mazdoor Samachar (FMS)**⁷ issued an online diary from two workers who resumed work in the re-opened factories, rendered into audio form by [Saajha Manch](#). Highlighting the absurd in its stoical reporting of detail, the account holds out promise of workers' resistance and alternative futures:-

“At the factory gate the guards took workers' temperature from a distance Company officials were fearful. For twenty-five minutes, they kept saying stay away! maintain social distance! do not spit! do not come to the factory if you have cold-fever!

...[The next morning there was a poor show] The factory is operational, why are you not coming for duty? No autos are running. Then come on foot!... What are you doing sitting at home? If you don't come, the company will take any action... The workers started asking about their April wages. Half of it will be paid between May 11 and 15 and the remaining half between May 20 and 30. April money will be given only in exchange for work now. No leave nor overtime money and every Sunday duty

... Employee card has replaced finger punch and is never touched by management... No canteen kitchen, food must be brought from home. Creche has been closed and 150 pregnant women told not to come. Continuous announcements: do this! do that! like sitting in a railway station...Nobody checks when leaving the factory, the guard even inspects the bag from a distance”.

And what of the workers' residential neighbourhoods? On 27th May, Saajha Manch reporter [Nand Kishor](#) wandered the deserted tenements of Kapas Hera, Dundahera and Biswasen villages which housed workers of Gurugram's Udyog Vihar, and described the ghost town after the bulk of workers had finally found a route home. “In colonies where lakhs of workers used to live, now there are only locks hanging on the doors and deserted streets. Those who invested in rooms to rent have sharp lines of worry on their foreheads. But it is they who had refused to waive the rent at lockdown. Between virus and starvation, the workers decided to lock their rooms and go home... Now the owners will cry for the workers as their lakhs of money are exhausted. Things will be different in future”. Nand's note of hope

⁷ With more than 20,000 copies distributed monthly across Delhi-NCR, FMS has been running since 1980s and continues to document workers' accounts of factory life as they reflect the shape of capitalism and social dialogue.

that workers' withdrawal will engineer a shift in the balance of power is dampened by his turn to the [shopkeepers](#) who – facing the desolate streets of the working class areas - remain without customers. People have reduced but [dogs have increased](#), reported Hasmat from NE Delhi. Children emerging after lockdown found themselves more at risk of stray dogs who have had the run of the streets for the last two months, and a hospital system far less able to attend to them for first aid and injections.

4.8 THE POSSIBILITY OF PROTEST

Lockdown dampens protest not only because workers are forced out of the factory and into their rooms, but because employers and government are harder to access. Does it also dampen protest by increasing the desperation and compulsion of workers, or could it have the opposite effect?

In these workers' accounts, employers are shown to be busily seeking advantage from the situation, to tie workers in but only as many as they can use while shedding all other obligations. Workers also highlight the heavy-handed response of the police. When the central trade unions struck on May 22nd, for example, the police arrested several leaders who were legitimately and according to law “going to present a memorandum to the concerned authority on behalf of their union. How is this possible?”, asked the rights advocate [Gauri Sharma](#) in an interview with Saajha Manch reporter Hasmat Ali. The heavy-handedness is also seen in the manner of quarantining suspected cases, in policing of working-class neighbourhoods, in the halting of migrants at borders and preventing their access to trains which were scheduled especially for them. “Why would workers wish to be caught in the police abuse with their families?” asked advocate Padam Kumar in Saajha Manch's bi-weekly series [Legal Charcha](#). “If they are to die of hunger or corona then let them die near their families, that is why they go home by any means”. The heavy handedness is also seen in the enforcement of new state government ordinances which suspended most labour laws including rights to organise.

It is the combination of employers' disregard, government negligence and police heavy-handedness which brings some of the platform's commentators to hope that a new phase of uprising is near. Towards the end of May, Saajha Manch reporter Hasmat interviewed [Naushad Siddiqi](#), Secretary General of the All India Labour Welfare Association. He remarks that such is the spread of discontent and awareness that “labourers are now self-motivated, they don't need unions”. [Kalicharan](#), a long-standing contributor to Saajha Manch from MP, commented that the repression levels implied by the new labour laws would incite workers to protest on a mass scale. “In the light of such oppressive laws and policies, the labour movement will gain strength. We are all with it”, he said. Advocate Padam Kumar agreed. “Workers are the kings in chains and it is in their hands to rise up through creating solidarity”.

Jawaharlal Nehru University's Sunil Tamminaina, part of the Migrant Workers' Solidarity Network ([MWSN](#)), said in an article in [First Post](#) on June 14th that, while there had been hundreds of protests of migrants workers resisting and opposing the injustice meted to them during lockdown, this had been unreported by the mainstream media. To correct this, MWSN is undertaking a [mapping project](#) and has so far mapped 158 protests involving over a lakh workers, most of them focused on demanding the means to get home. This ground-based activity complements the campaigns and litigations which made their way to central ministries, the Prime Minister's Office and to the upper courts, such as that by

[Aajeevika Bureau](#) on getting home and an earlier PIL filed by [Harsh Mander and Anjali Bhardwaj](#) on government payment of migrant worker wages, and even the 'national strike' called by [central trade unions](#) demanding that employers should pay up themselves as originally instructed by the centre.

In spite of these efforts by civil society, the central government and the apex court both proved extremely hard to influence. As the SWAN report noted, "It took a bouquet of grim statistics, large scale deaths, deplorable images on the television, among others for the SC to finally wake up", just as lockdown was being lifted. Can a common platform for migrant workers like Saajha Manch, help to build the engagement and solidarity to underwrite protest, when and where it is most required?