“We just want to go Home!”

Sunday, 10 May 2020

Dear Everyone:

Sunday morning, we saw a video clip that showed a large group of migrant workers at the Karnataka-AP border, a stone’s throw away from ADATS. While we have all seen their pathetic plight many a time on many media platforms, this was too close to home.

https://www.thequint.com/videos/news-videos/no-money-or-food-but-migrants-from-karnataka-walk-back-home

On 5 May the Government took a decision not to send migrants back to their home states. Two days later, succumbing to public outrage, that decision was reversed. But the damage was done. Desperate migrant workers were already on the move. They had started their long trek home.

We forwarded the video to colleagues at ADATS and Bagepalli staff quickly met. Everyone’s reaction to something terrible happening at our doorsteps was the same. We immediately contacted our regular supermarket to put together 10 packets of dry rations for a group of 8-10 people to cook 4-5 times.

To reconfirm what we had seen in the video, one of us rode to the Highway and border check post. By the time he got back, the dry ration packets were ready. ADATS Field staff loaded 2 packets each on our motorcycles and went to the Andhra Pradesh border. The first group of 12 young migrants we found were resting behind a roadside *Dhaba.* With tears of fatigue and hunger, they told us that they had started from Bangalore and were walking to Kolkata. In the next few hours, we

met 6 more groups. Most of them were walking. Some were on bicycles.

One group of painters and polishers had walked 300 kms from Salem in Tamil Nadu the past 4 days and were going to walk another 1,930 kms to Uttar Pradesh. We were shocked and asked if they couldn't get lifts on trucks and lorries. "Who will stop for us?" they asked, "We have tried and tried…".

Another group wanted to reach Hyderabad, 470 kms away. After taking our ration packet, they asked if we could show them cut roads, village paths and routes to avoid the Highway and check-points. "We only pray that the police won't send us back. We don't want to go back to Bangalore. We will not. We want to go home!"

A teenager broke down and cried, "I haven't eaten, Sir. I don't have ₹ 5 in my pocket."

"When we are stopped and questioned, we are treated like criminals. They search us like we are Highway bandits. All we want is to go back to our Mothers. Is reaching our loved ones a crime?"

Another young person said, "A good Samaritan gave us cooked food packets when we were walking from Bangalore to here. Afterwards, he took out ₹ 1,000 from his wallet and gave me. When I asked, he said that he had also lost his job and wouldn't get this month salary. I thanked him for the food but gave back the money and refused to take it. I couldn't. He will soon be in my state, except that he will be at home".

Another group brought tears of humility and shame to our eyes when they asked, "Our feet are killing us more than hunger. Is it okay if we sell this wheat and oil to a lorry driver so that he may take us a while?" With wet eyes, we replied, "You are the brave ones who have undertaken this long journey. We are nobody and have given you nothing at all. Please do as you see best. Godspeed."

After handing out 7 of the 10 packets we came back late evening to put together another 20 packets Monday morning, we went out again and met with 15 more groups. By 10 am it was blazing hot and there

were no more migrants to be seen. We came back to rest and went again in the afternoon. We found 2 more groups and all of us came back without chappals; we gave them to those whose footwear had worn thin and still had to tread many thousand more steps…

This morning, Tuesday, we went out again at 5 am, but found only 2 groups. One of them didn't want dry rations because they couldn't carry even 1 more kilogram. We managed to buy some bread and biscuits locally and told them to eat.

We will keep this going for as long as we can. A dry ration packet with 5 kg wheat flour, 1 kg sunflower oil, a bottle of pickle and some salt, along with a *tava* (frying pan) and *bandli* (deep pan) for mixing the dough and cook some dhal costs just ₹ 766. Surely, we can pitch in that much to help a group of 8-10 determined youth who have been betrayed by their employers, the State and everyone else.

Best wishes,

Ram

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Tuesday, 12 May 2020

Dear Everyone:

Thank you, each and every one of you who replied to my email expressing concern and solidarity.

Yesterday, we distributed dry rations to 20 groups of 6-8 Migrants. At the end of the day we decided that, starting tomorrow, we would empty our coffers and instead give out cash for them to travel home any which way they could.

Accordingly, we went to the border check-post this evening and convinced the Karnataka police to please let the waiting youth through. We walked with them into Andhra Pradesh with a wad of money and gave 130 migrants ₹ 500 each. The AP police stood by for a few stunned minutes and then decided to join us. They made everyone stand in a line, maintaining physical distance, while Mario, Waheed and Sujaid counted out the money one by one.

The AP police then stopped a few empty eighteen-wheelers going North to pick up cement bags and helped the migrants to climb into them. The lorry drivers have been asked to take them the next 262 kms to Kurnool, half way to Hyderabad. After that, we are sure that another miracle will occur to help them on their onward journey.

Tomorrow morning, ADATS staff will once again go in the morning with dry ration packets as well as 100 loafs of bread that we have specially ordered just now. In the evening, another wad of money…

Thank you also for your spontaneous and generous contributions! You will not be able to send by GooglePay or any other UPI to ADATS since we are a charitable organisation.

Those who would like to pay in Indian Rupees can send to ADATS LC (Local Currency) A/c with the below bank details:

Name of Account:	ADATS LC
A/c No:	0925101113894
A/c Type:	Savings Bank
IFSC:	CNRB0000925
Canara Bank, Bagepalli branch	

From outside India, please ask your bank to send your contribution directly to ADATS FC (Foreign Currency) A/c with the below details:

Name of Account:	Agricultural Development & Training Society
A/c No:	0925101003314
A/c Type:	Savings Bank
IFSC:	CNRB0000925
SWIFT Code:	CNRB IN BBLFD
Canara Bank, Bagepalli branch	
Purpose Code:	"P 1303 Donations to Religious and Charitable Institutions in India"

Best wishes,

Ram

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Wednesday, 13 May 2020

Dear Everyone:

Wednesday evening at 6 pm ADATS staff went out once again to the Karnataka-AP border, in the nick of time. A large crowd of 205 Migrant youth had gathered at the AP check-post, engaged in a one-sided scuffle with a large contingent of police. Being fresh influxes from Bangalore who had no clue as to yesterday's spontaneous "procedures that had been put in place", they had crossed over into Andhra Pradesh. There was also a language problem since they couldn't understand the harsh Telugu commands of the police.

We profusely apologised and brought them all back into Karnataka and the police retreated to their stations. ADATS staff made them sit down besides the Highway, and Waheed distributed ₹ 500 each. Some youth who had run away into the fields had to be cajoled back by braver friends. While munching on 80 loaves of bread and sipping 400 water packets that we gave out, Mario spoke for a while. He told them to use the money in any which way they thought best to reach home. Like yesterday, this group was also stunned. It took a while for them to suspend their disbelief at what was happening, and something like hope or faith slowly crept in. Then they opened up!

They related their suffering and humiliation. They recounted the hard work they had put in at construction sites and factories. They spoke of the sincerity with which they had worked at their employers' businesses. And they swore they would never return.

Mario said he fully understood their anger and frustration. But for now, it would be better to stay calm and concentrate on reaching home. "Tend to your crops for the next 3-4 months. Spend time with your families. And then come back slowly, after testing the waters."

The handful of sympathetic policemen who had helped us yesterday arrived a short while later, after senior officers had left the spot. They once again stopped 4 lorries and helped the Migrants climb into them. 47 youth were sent to Hyderabad (470 kms), 70 to Adilabad (700 kms), 50 to Bellary (215 kms) and 38 to Anantapur (117 kms). Lorry details were noted down and the police warned the drivers not to charge a single Rupee or even think of offloading them halfway. We knew that they would still be harassed *en route* and quietly advised the youth, if pressed, not to give more than ₹ 50-60 each.

A new development is that at the Karnataka side of the border, the Toll Plaza staff had fed hundreds of youth throughout to day. And at the Andhra Pradesh side, the police had quietly packed groups of 15-20 onto various vehicles and sent them on their onward journey. Have we, through the Exodus we organised yesterday, touched the conscience of others? We don't know. It is too soon to say.

We have no idea if the same swell of Migrants will continue tomorrow or if it will drop to a trickle. However, we have ordered another 100 loaves of bread and 400 water packets. We will once again go out on Thursday evening with the hope that there will be less or no more unfortunate youth making the long trek back to their loved ones.

Thank you for your support!

Best wishes,

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Thursday, 14 May 2020

Dear Everyone:

It was no trickle today. We spent nearly two hours with a huge crowd of 188 youth who had already gathered at the proper spot. Karnataka police had told them where to assemble. Unlike yesterday, there was not a single inadvertent crossover into Andhra Pradesh.

When we reached at 6:30 pm, we found a group of young Samaritans from Bagepalli distributing 100 packets of cooked food. Sometime later, two more groups came and distributed relief. Word of mouth has spread in the town that ADATS is arranging the onward journey of Migrant workers.

For some reason, there was less traffic on the Highway. No eighteen wheelers and very few normal trucks and lorries. The police let the Anantapur bound lorries pass through since it wasn't worth loading the youth for a 117 km journey. Instead they looked out for vehicles that would travel 700 kms to the end of Andhra Pradesh.

After giving out ₹ 500 each, we had a lot of time to chat with the youth. Seeing Mario hand over the wad of money to Waheed, an astonished youngster asked, "Sir, how much money are you distributing?"

Many were from Electronic City in south Bangalore. All of them in today's group were not in menial jobs. But every single one of them was levelled to a totally penniless state.

"You have given us another 2 days of life! We didn't have a single Rupee with us."

When going out this evening, Sujaid saw eight youth walking to the border. He stopped his bike and told them to hurry. One of them took Sujaid's number and made 3 panic calls in the space of a few minutes. They ran all the way and made it well in time to receive their ₹ 500 along with the bread and water. Later, one of them said, "2 of us are Flipkart delivery boys. We didn't lose our jobs. But Papa and Mama said to come back. It's not safe any longer in that city. Nobody cares for us."

There were, of course, may painters, tile layers and stone cladders. "We stood on shaky scaffolding, 200 feet high to paint the outsides of their apartment buildings. Now look what they have reduced us to."

Another, the eldest son in his family, "My Father died on 22 March, just before the Lockdown and I couldn't go. Even the *Sharaddha* (40th day remembrance) is over. I have to somehow reach home."

A slightly older Migrant was in a panic when a group of 15 was being loaded onto a lorry. He wanted everyone from his village in Gorakhpur to travel together to UP… but they were hanging around in different groups, perhaps trade-wise.

By 8 pm only 4 lorries were loaded with half the assembled Migrants on their way. Mario, Waheed and Jimmy left while the rest of ADATS Staff stayed back to help the AP police stop lorries and load small batches of youth onto them. After an hour, 2 more lorries were loaded and all the Migrants are now *en route* North on their long journey home.

On their way back, Mario and Waheed saw another batch of 15 exhausted Migrants resting under the lights of a petrol bunk. They hadn't reached the Karnataka border and so did not know about the daily "Exodus" we had arranged. Stopped and gave them ₹ 500 each and coaxed them to somehow trudge another 2-3 kms to reach the bigger group that was waiting for lorries. Unfortunately, there was no more bread and water to give this really fatigued group.

Today, a total of ₹ 1,01,500 was distributed to 203 Migrants along with 80 loaves of bread and 400 packets of drinking water.

Best wishes,

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Friday, 15 May 2020

Dear Everyone:

We met with far less Migrants this evening. Only 117 managed to reach the Karnataka-AP border with great difficulty. Unlike the past few days, there was a palpable fear mixed with sheer exhaustion on everyone's faces. The police have tightened checking on the Bangalore-Bagepalli Highway and forced many groups to turn around.

A group of 13 masons on bicycles said, "A little outside Bangalore, we were chased back at a checkpoint. We managed to escape and get off the Highway. We took village routes that we didn't know existed. After 15 or 20 kms that took a few hours, we accidently re-joined the Highway. This happened twice and it took us 2 days to reach here."

We found a group of 20-25 youngsters were all wearing orange caps that someone had given them *en route* from Bangalore to here. "We are a centring gang from MP. Our contractor is a good fellow. He fed us for 15 days after the Lockdown began. Then he too became a pauper. Ever since we have been in dire straits. We went to the station but couldn't reserve seats for when the railways opened. Then we went to the police station and paid a bribe to register ourselves as Migrants. Nothing worked. 2 days back, we decided to walk 1,400 kms to Bhopal and have reached here."

A group of 7 middle aged men, along with a couple of youngsters, were all from the same village in Gorakhpur, UP. They had been doing Cement Concreting work for a contractor who was white topping roads in Bangalore. After the works abruptly stopped on 22 March with the Lockdown, they hadn't received a single Rupee in wages. They still waited for 15 days, not quite understanding what was happening. "After that, we didn't have a single Rupee. We knew that no one is going to help us. The next 35 days were hell. We were trapped without food or shelter. We just don't know how we survived. Then we heard that people had started walking thousands of kilometres to their native places. Just then, one of our Mothers sent a little money. We don't know how she managed to get it and know were to send it. It was just luck. We started walking and here we are…"

Older Migrants who had already worked in Bangalore for the past 3-4 years knew the ropes. In between jobs, when employers didn't provide accommodation, they had to find safe places to spend the night without the police harassing them more than once or twice a night. They knew which health centres treated them humanely. And who would give them a little money when they begged for assistance.

Newcomers who had come only in January had actually believed the labour contractors who brought them from UP, MP and Bihar. 2 ½ months later, when the Lockdown was declared, the labour contractors disappeared. "We will never leave our villages and come so far ever again, Sir. If not for fellow Migrants who knew Bangalore, we would have died. Never again to this horrible place!"

Another group of about 15 youngsters were all from the same village Bihar. A friend asked them to somehow reach Anantapur and they would all together proceed to their native district. But this group had no idea how big a city was and where in Anantapur they had to meet him. However, they had a mobile number that worked. Waheed told them not to worry. He called the contact and found the exact spot that they had to reach. He explained what we were doing and told the guy that, if lucky, his friends will reach in the next 3-4 hours. If not, it would take 2 more days.

We met with a small group of 4 Palakkad youth who had joined KIA factory a month back, were making the reverse journey. They had crossed over into Karnataka. The local police said that if they got onto lorries to reached Bangalore, they would face horrible conditions in quarantine centres. It

was better they walked to the Karnataka-Kerala border. We gave them ₹ 500 each, bread and water and wished them godspeed.

On our way back, we found 2 totally exhausted stragglers, a youth and an older man, trudged along. When we stopped and gave them bread loaves, water packets and ₹ 500 each, the older man broke down and cried bitterly, "You are the first people who have been kind to us, Sir. Surely you have been sent by the gods who have tested us very badly these past few days. No, no, you must be gods!" We assured them that we weren't. We encouraged them to go just a bit farther where a group was waiting to get them onto lorries to ferry them a few hundred kilometres.

Like yesterday, there was very little traffic on the Highway, perhaps because of strict checking *en route* from Bangalore to here. The local police and we managed to send just 78 Migrants in 2 lorries, just 117 kms to Anantapur. We have no idea how they will proceed from there. Though the police and we tried to convince the 16 cyclists to also get onto the lorries, they refused. When we left at 8 pm 23 youth were still waiting by the roadside for transportation.

Today, we gave out just ₹ 58,500, 48 loaves bread and 240 packets of water. While we were there this evening, three groups of Samaritans cam and distributed a few cooked meals. And like yesterday, the Toll Plaza staff had fed Migrants the whole day long.

We do wish the authorities would either themselves organise the safe return of Migrants or at least let them walk back without harassment.

Best wishes,

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Saturday, 16 May 2020

Dear Everyone:

ADATS staff returned late night with very distressing news and I was too distraught to immediately write my 6th email to all of you. We did reach out to 181 Migrants but it was a very different experience from the previous five days.

Small groups of 15-20 came to the Karnataka border in terrible fright and apprehension. They were a shattered lot with bruises on their bodies. Many had taken 2-3 days, and one group had taken 5 days to make the 100 km trek from Bangalore to here. The police had thrashed them and sent them back at every checkpoint.

Evidently, these checkpoints operate only sporadically. Because the past 5 days many Migrants had reached us without being stopped. Yesterday's lot were cursed with ill luck; they were always at the wrong spot in the wrong time.

When they sighted the waiting ADATS Staff, many ran helter-skelter into the fields. We had to chase them and reassure that we were there to help. Many fell to their knees and begged with folded hands, "कृपया हमें मत मारो" (Please don't beat us!). Some of our Staff threw physical distance to the winds and put their arms around their shoulders to stop their trembling and cajole them back under the Highway lights. When we distributed loaves of bread, bananas and water packet they once again broke down with a rare mixture of relief and disbelief. On Friday, it was a middle-aged man who broke down and cried. Yesterday it was teenagers.

Many fell at Waheed's feet when he distributed the ₹ 500 notes. After he prevented the first 4 or 5, they started falling at the feet of 9 year old Jimmy who was standing next to Waheed. No sight could have been a more pathetic testimony to the physical torture they had undergone on their unnecessarily cruel journey from Bangalore to here.

We called our ex-MLA and made him to speak to a senior district police officer. He claimed that this may have been the work of over enthusiastic Home Guards that the police had recruited to man the checkpoints. He said the police would have simply prevented them from moving forward and transported them back to Bangalore to Migrant shelters. We responded that this may be in theory, but the reality was that most were simply lathi charged and chased back. A few were loaded onto police vans, driven 5-6 kms South, and then let out with more canings. We suggested that the best thing his officials could do was to simply let the devastated youth walk on, unhindered. Daring to undertake a thousand-kilometre trek to reach home was punishment enough for no crime of theirs, without additional beating and abuse *en route*.

(This morning, we posted our Chickballapur Staff at that border, halfway from Bangalore to here. It appears that the Dy SP has kept his word. The police there merely provided masks to those who were wearing none and let the Migrants pass.)

When we were returning at our usual time of 8 pm, we saw three more groups running away into the fields. We stopped and cajoled them back to the Highway, distributed money, food and water, and convinced them to walk ahead and reach the designated spot. They were still scared and asked us to accompany them there. We had to turn around and go with them.

As before, the police stopped lorries to ferry the Migrants North. 56 and 38 youth climbed into two lorries. Another 70 youth negotiated with the third lorry to take them straight to Jhansi in UP. The

driver wanted ₹ 4k each for the 1,600 km trip but it was bargained down to ₹ 3k. They'd pay a portion now and the rest on reaching, where their families would be waiting with the balance.

17 petrified Migrants, who had even lost their baggage when "escaping" from Bangalore, refuses to believe that their luck had changed. They refused to take the money, food or water. Jimmy later told me, "They just started marching Left Right Left, Ram! How far could I run behind them and ask them to come back? I didn't have a torch and the road was dark, Ram! I was scared. They just didn't listen."

Best wishes,

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Sunday, 17 May 2020

Dear Everyone:

As they returned at 7:45 pm with smiles on their faces, ADATS Staff declared, “Today was efficient!”

When they reached the border at 6 pm, about 70 Migrants were sitting in groups by the roadside, patiently waiting. Toll Plaza workers had explained the standard procedure and sent them to the pickup point. While we were distributing money, bread, jam and water packets, a huge line of another about 50 youth walked up. After a short gap there was another line with 62 taking today’s numbers to 182.

After yesterday’s horrible experience, we did not expect such large numbers. Our wad of money got over and an ADATS Staff has to rush to Bagepalli to borrow some more money from shopkeepers. And the Bolero went to scrounge as much bread and jam as they could lay their hands on from local bakeries.

Speaking to the district police yesterday and sending Chickballapur Staff to that halfway checkpoint certainly paid off. Not a single Migrant reported any harassment and that terror was conspicuously absent.

Today’s youth encountered good souls as well as the wicked.

A minitruck gave a group of 12-15 Migrants a lift from Devanahalli till a little before the Toll Plaza. Not knowing our arrangements, he stopped his vehicle and asked them all to get down. He showed them a cart track they should take to avoid the checkpoint since he wasn’t sure what awaited them there.

Another young boy told Sujaid that a biker on the Highway had picked his top pocket and robbed his mobile – the only way he was able to communicate with his family.

23 smartly dressed youngsters were all from a Canteen in a major IT firm. As soon as the Lockdown was relaxed, they decided to walk all the way to Jharkhand.

A young couple with a 4 year old child were making their way back home to UP because her mother had passed away four days back.

A bus with UP registration had broken down in Bangalore and was stuck at the mechanics for 2 months during Lockdown. The driver was now taking the repaired vehicle back to UP. In order to avoid the Toll Plaza, he took an ingenious route through village roads and cart tracks. AP police outsmarted him and confiscated the bus. They made an offer he could not refuse. They agreed to let the bus through on condition that he took close to 70 Migrants all the way to Lucknow; no fine and no bribe.

Close to 70 youth assured the driver that they would pay a reasonable fare once they reached their villages. ADATS Staff refused to involve ourselves in this part of the bargain which we couldn't guarantee would be kept. The hapless driver, sensing that he had no choice, agreed. Migrants quickly secured their bags and baggage on the roof rack and packed themselves like sardines into the bus.

An older woman with two youngsters in tow hobbled along a little late. She "ordered" us to quickly pay her ₹ 500 and give the food and water, "I have my seat reserved on that bus! It cannot leave without me. It must not leave!" We not only "obeyed" but gave her and a monstrous bundle of all her pots and pans and other belongings a quarter kilometre lift on a motorcycle while the youngsters jogged along.

As luck would have it, another UP registered empty lorry came along, this time legally through the Toll Plaza. AP police commandeered it and loaded 35 youth. The driver demurred and said he could take them only till a little North of Kurnool since he had a banana load to take.

This time, Mario intervened, "Come on, *yaar*! These are your people from your state. Surely, they are more valuable than the bananas. Negotiate a fare and take half now. They will pay you the other

half when they reach Uttar Pradesh." The youth all chipped in and the driver finally agreed, scratching his head.

Another lorry, for his bad luck, came speeding along the Highway. This was exactly what the AP police were waiting for. After threatening dire consequences that were more apt for murder and heinous crimes, he too was given a proposition that he could not refuse. 47 youth were loaded to be ferried, without any fare, to Kurnool (halfway to Hyderabad).

Soon after it rolled out, 2 youth who had got separated from their group of 12 came running. They described their friends to Jimmy who told them that those 10 had jumped into the truck that just left. They waved and screamed but to no avail. Jimmy took them to the AP police who asked them to calm down and get onto the next vehicle, if and when one came.

One more lorry going to Bellary was stopped and about 30 youth were loaded, including the 2 persons who were separated from their group.

In total, 1,018 Migrant workers have been assisted in the past 7 days. These are just groups that arrived late afternoon till a little after sunset. We are sure that some more would have reached after the AP police and we sent out the last lorries and trucks – those who preferred to walk in the night and also stragglers. They would have arrived between the wee hours and about 10 am, before the asphalt roads got too hot to walk. It would be fair to say that we have, in some small measure, assisted a third to one-half of those who crossed the Karnataka-AP border this past one week.

Best wishes,

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Monday, 18 May 2020

Dear Everyone:

When ADATS Staff reached the border at 6 pm, close to 70 Migrants had crossed the Karnataka Toll Plaza and were waiting at the designated spot.

Soon after receiving their ₹ 500, a loaf of bread, jam and water packets, Andhra police stopped an empty eighteen-wheeler and loaded all 59 to be ferried 117 kms to Anantapur, free of cost.

A while later, a group of 8 cyclists and a little over 30 walkers reached us. They too were loaded onto a second lorry headed to Anantapur.

After that another large group of over 50 Migrants came. As luck would have it, the next lorry that the police stopped was going to Nagpur, halfway across India. All 50 were quickly loaded. The driver demanded a fare of ₹ 1,500 from each; the Migrants bargained it down to ₹ 1,000. Mario knew it was very unlikely that they would have that much money. There was the risk that they would be offloaded a while later. So he separately gave the driver ₹ 5,000 to pay Toll Plaza fees and got his word that they would all be taken to Nagpur.

The fourth lorry stopped we stopped was also headed to Anantapur. The remaining 31 Migrants were loaded by 7:15 pm.

The vast majority of Migrants we met today were manual labourers. Road layers, *Hamalis* who load trucks in the market, officer helpers, etc. Some were hawkers who sold vehicle and mobile accessories at traffic signals. Some were roadside vendors. Most were middle in their 40's accompanied with a few younger relatives. It looked like the more able bodied had started their walk

earlier and the older ones had taken a while to leave Bangalore. Most were from UP, MP, Odisha and Jharkhand.

After receiving his ₹ 500 and the food, a middle aged man told Sujaid, “आपकी वजह साही मानवता बचती है। मेरा दिल से आपके लिए मेरी दुआएं“ (It is because of you that humanity is saved. My prayers for you are from my heart.)

As a lorry was leaving, a 50 year old man stood up. When the police shouted out for him to sit down he said, “I want to thank you and say bye. I can’t do that, with respect, sitting down!”

Best wishes,

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Tuesday, 19 May 2020

Dear Everyone:

Lockdown 3.0 ended on Sunday, but the Karnataka government took two more days to announce relaxation in Lockdown 4.0 which would be in effect till the month end. Bangalore Migrants hoped for 2 special measures – inter-state movement of buses and special trains to take them to their home States. Unfortunately, the measures were ambiguous and took time to percolate down to police and ground authorities. This resulted in thousands of Migrants temporarily putting off their arduous walk back home.

Today, we felt the effect of this confusion. There were far less people at the border when ADATS Staff reached at 6 pm. Only a small group of 27 were waiting at the designated spot. A while later 17 more arrived, taking the total to 44 Migrants. Most were teenagers from UP, Jharkhand and Odisha who were working in South Bangalore as painters, shop assistants, mason helpers, etc. In today's lot, there was just one middle aged couple with their teenage son, headed to Madigubba in Anantapur district.

About 25 of them had walked for one and a half days. The rest had got lifts part of the way. A group of 6 had caught a taxi that was coming empty towards Bagepalli. After bargaining a fare of Rs 350 each, they ended up paying Rs 4-500 when they got down. About 10 Migrants took a government bus (intra-State movement started today) till Bagepalli, heard of the ADATS arrangement, and quickly trekked to the border.

After giving them bread, jam, water packets and ₹ 500 each, there was enough time to speak to the youngsters. Perhaps because of their age, they were far more forthright in expressing their opinions

than previous groups we interacted with the past 8 days. One young boy was even carrying his pet parrots back to UP. Today, we felt we got a good feeling that we were speaking to our equals.

"We are a group of 17 who all lived together for the past two years. When the Lockdown was declared and there was no work, our employers helped us for 10-15 days. After that, good people in the neighbourhood started giving us a little food, soap and small necessities. This went on and on for so long. After 2 months, we knew that we cannot forever survive on goodwill. That's when we started talking to each other about walking back home."

"We were not scared. We saw in our neighbour's TVs that other people were doing it. We are strong. But how long will our strength last if we continue like this? We pooled all our money and decided to walk as a group. Some of our Mothers had saved up the little we send home every month for the past 2 years. They sent it to us and our kitty got bigger."

When ADATS suggested that they would then have enough to make the journey, there were sheepish grins all around.

"It is all finished, Sir. We didn't calculate properly. Coming from Bangalore to here has taken two days. Now we are bankrupt. The ₹ 500 each that you have now given is heaven sent."

We knew it wasn't a lie; just the brazen bravado of youth. A quality we pray they do not lose since they will need it in large measures if they are to reach home safe and sound.

After that, they shared their understanding of how the post Lockdown scenario would be. Their analysis of the economy was pretty astute!

"After this Lockdown, wages will drop and it may not be worth coming back all the way. Don't you agree?" they asked. When we suggested that wages may actually increase because of a labour shortage, they didn't quite agree.

"No Sir. They have seen us in a helpless state. They know that we cannot bargain. Shortages increase the price only for those things that the rich people buy. We are different. They know we are in the market only because we are helpless."

Today, 2 vehicles headed to Hyderabad and Anantapur were stopped by the AP police. After loading as many Migrants as possible on the Hyderabad bound lorry, the rest got onto the Anantapur minivan.

ADATS Staff returned at 7:30 pm and got news that a group of 42 Migrants had stopped 18 kms south, at Varlakonda village.

Two engineering college students, themselves from UP, saw a fatigued and shattered group early this morning. When coaxed, they said they were a gang of concrete layers for RCC roofs, walking from Bangalore to Chhattisgarh and Odisha. On the way, they were continually harassed by Karnataka police and received severe beatings. They hid in the fields the whole of yesterday and walked the whole night.

The two students arranged a meal at the roadside hotel that college students frequent and took them to a farmhouse on the other side of the road. The farmer accommodated them in an empty silkworm rearing shed and asked them to rest. Apart from giving them drinking water and arranging for them to charge their mobile phones, he could not do more.

Meanwhile, the students were wondering if they could stop a passing lorry for the Migrants to proceed north. This afternoon, a Bangalore bound lorry from Chhattisgarh stopped at that same hotel. The driver agreed to come back empty and ferry all 42 to his home State. The Migrants decided to wait till tomorrow morning.

Not having eaten the whole day, they wolfed down the bread and jam we distributed before giving them ₹ 500 each. ADATS staff left them with fingers crossed that the Chhattisgarh bound driver will keep his word.

We don't know what tomorrow will bring. Will the Lockdown relaxation continue or will there be yet another *volte-face*? Will buses start operating inter-State? Will Migrants have the exorbitant fares they have to pay to get to their home States? We will know only when we once again go to the border at 6 pm on Wednesday; we have long since stopped believing press briefings and official communiqué.

Best wishes,

Ram

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Wednesday, 20 May 2020

Dear Everyone:

ADATS Staff left early to find over 120 Migrants already waiting at the designated spot by 5:30 pm. A little later, small batches of 15-20 started walking in. One of them saw us and ran into the fields. We had to give chase and convince them to come to the Highway. In total, 182 people were assisted today with bread, jam, water packets and ₹ 500 each.

Apart from a family of ten, the remaining were all youth in their 20's working as painters, masons and RCC concrete layers and factory workers. There were 6 women and a small child in today's groups. They were headed to West Bengal, Bihar, UP, MP, Odisha and Chhattisgarh.

Today's groups were not as forthcoming as yesterday's teenagers. They were totally exhausted. If they do not find or cannot afford onward transportation, we doubt if they will be able to trek thousands of kilometres to their home States. One group were already cheated from Bangalore to here. A driver said he would take them to the "Andhra border" and made them believe it was some 500 kms away. He took a fare of ₹ 600 from each and dropped them a little before Bagepalli, under 100 kms.

Some others who walked all the way had begged for some food from hotels along the Highway and were flatly refused. A young boy was quite puzzled, "We have seen with our own eyes that when well-dressed people stop their cars the hotel people come out and invite them in. But when they see

us and the clothes we are wearing, we are chased away. I have come to accept that no one helps the poor. You are here, giving us not just food, water and money. But even respect. Why?”

Helpers and factory floor workers were summarily terminated from their jobs. Even the Manager of a pressure cooker factory, who was working there for the past 6 years and earning ₹ 20k a month, was not spared. He wasn’t paid for two months. All of a sudden, the owner gave him ₹ 15k instead of the ₹ 40k that was owed, and sent him packing. We saw all ten of them completely levelled, trekking together to MP without a penny in their pocket. Workers in a medium sized bread factory had a similar experience.

AP police stopped 4 vehicles to load Migrants. 2 lorries were sent to Anantapur with about 70 and 40 persons. The family of 10 headed and 3 others to Hyderabad in a mini tempo. A fourth lorry crammed 62 Migrants took towards Hyderabad. We made arrangements with a sister NGO at Anantapur for 110 Migrants to be given a hot meal by about 9 pm.

The group of 42 who we met late last night waited for the truck to take them to Chhattisgarh the whole night. After a while, their calls to the driver went unanswered. This morning, they gave up and started walking. Toll Plaza workers told us that they had crossed into Andhra Pradesh early this morning.

To date, we have assisted 1,450 Migrants with food, water and ₹ 7,25,000 in cash. With your generous contributions we will be able to manage for another day or two. We fervently hope against hope that some larger solution will be found to take Migrant workers back to their homes and loved ones.

Best wishes,

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Thursday, 21 May 2020

Dear Everyone:

A group of about 70 Migrants were waiting at the designated spot when we reached the border at 6 pm. Soon after, 20 more arrived. A third group of 10 stragglers came a while later. They had, in their confusion, stopped way before the designated spot and we had to quickly haul them in a small tempo. Immediately after distributing bread, jam, water packets and ₹ 500 each to everyone, a big lorry and a minitruck were stopped by the AP Police and all 101 climbed on.

Once again, we informed our sister NGO at Anantapur that 91 Migrants would reach by 9 pm for dinner. The 10 persons in the minitruck will travel directly to Hyderabad.

Today's groups were a mixed lot from UP, Bihar, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. Except for an elderly senior Mason, all were young, including 3 women and a child. They were masons, assistants, painters and carpenters, had jobs in borewell and steel fabrication firms, etc. Just like yesterday, one among them was the Engineer in charge of the fabrication firm, now in the same plight as his staff. Unlike previous days, we had no time to engage them in any deep conversation.

Quite a few Migrants, whose arduous journey we assisted in a very small way, these past 10 days, have reached their hometowns:

- Last night's group of 110, who got their late night dinner at Anantapur, managed to ride lorries to Hyderabad. It was a great relief when they called and informed us that they had reached safe.
- Sujaid received a call at 2 am from the group of 13 who had gone in the mini tempo saying they too had reached Hyderabad.
- The 2 Flipkart delivery boys who left on Thursday called the next afternoon to say they had reached Hyderabad and had no clue as to what they should do next. Sujaid put them in touch with friends who guided them on their onward journey. After reaching their hometown in Odisha, they once again called on Sunday to say they were safe in a quarantine centre for the next 14 days.
- The group of 13 who we sent on Saturday reached home in Jharkhand on Tuesday. They were very apologetic when we called them, "Sir, we lost your number and cursed ourselves. We have met with our families and they too join us in thanking you profusely."
- Yet another group of 8 who we had sent on Saturday reached another district in Jharkhand yesterday, Wednesday, 20 May. After spending a night in their homes, they were all packed off to the quarantine centre by the Panchayat, along with their family members.

Another heartening outcome is that the "arrangement" we have put in place seems to be working on its own. Toll Plaza workers continue to provide meals to all those who pass through the Karnataka border. AP police told us that they had, on their own, stopped lorries and loaded more than 200 Migrants who trickled in during the day today.

55 of you have generously contributed a total of ₹ 8,84,144. In the past 11 days we have spent ₹ 8,35,486 – 96% on cash handouts to 1,591 Migrants and 4% on food and water. We are determined to continue for as long as need be. But, at the same time, we fervently hope that the authorities will simply allow free inter-State movement and let the Migrants reach home, without harassment, any which way they can.

Best wishes,

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Friday, 22 May 2020

Dear Everyone:

About 60 Migrants already waiting at the designated place when ADATS Staff reached at 6 pm. 10 minutes later another 10 more youth walked up. We distributed bread, jam, water packets and ₹ 500 each and spoke to them for half an hour.

Most of them were from West Bengal. The rest were from Tripura, Jharkhand and Odisha. The Bengalis were working as cooks in hotels while the rest were bar benders, carpenters, masons and daily workers at construction sites. 4 of them were working in a medical lab. A few were working in a TVS spare parts factory.

The 7 youngsters from the North-East got terribly cheated. At Bangalore railway station they were told that there were no trains to Tripura. They negotiated with a taxi to take them 3,400 kms all the way to Tripura at a fare of ₹ 21,000 paying half now and agreeing to give the balance at Agartala. At Bagepalli, he forcefully offloaded them and took off.

The AP police managed to stop a Hyderabad bound lorry and all 70 were loaded.

An hour later, seeing that no one else was coming, ADATS Staff came towards Bagepalli and stopped at a roadside hotel. All of a sudden 4 taxis arrived and 26 Bengali youth alighted, all construction workers. When we saw the taxi drivers taking ₹ 700 from each, we objected. They pleaded, "Sir, that is the fare we have agreed to. We too have not had any income whatsoever for the past 2 months."

Just then, 4 Migrants pedalled in on bicycles, headed for Odisha. When asked them why they were taking such a circuitous route via Kurnool/Hyderabad they explained that the Lockdown in Tamil Nadu was too strict for them to ride through.

We distributed food and ₹ 500 each, walked back with them to the designated spot, and called the AP police. An Anantapur bound lorry was stopped and all 30 and their bicycles were loaded. The driver agreed that if he didn't get a load in Anantapur, he would take them all the way to Hyderabad.

Today we assisted a total of 100 Migrants. They had all tried and failed to get government announced train and bus tickets to their home States, in spite of valid registration and other documents.

ADATS/Coolie Sangha have used the deep rooted socio-political presence that we enjoy in the region to put in place the "arrangement" for Migrants to smoothly cross over the border, and also reduce their harassment *en route* from Bangalore to here.

Police on both sides of the border allow a reasonable override of standard rules

and procedures. They listen when we gently suggest that many SOP's they are asked to follow are ill-conceived and counterproductive. They quickly understand that forcible prevention will pile up huge and soon unmanageable crowds of frustrated youngsters in their precinct. Their biggest nightmare is scared Migrants dispersing into the surrounding countryside. It pays greater dividends to earn the goodwill of the Migrants and facilitate a smooth and orderly passage.

Ironically, the two States have come to precisely the same realisation, 12 days later. The latest relaxations speak about allowing inter-district and inter-State travel.

But we don't think there will be any immediate slowing down of youth opting to walk home, till three governmental measures kick into place.

1. Firstly, travel on government buses and trains should be made free. Every single Migrant, irrespective of what job they held and how much salary they earned 2-3 months back, has been levelled to pauperisation. Only those whose families manage to reverse-remit moneys from their home States will be able to afford bus and train fares.
2. Secondly, eligibility screening of Migrants should immediately be done away with. We have all seen visuals of 2-3 officials sitting behind their desks to "register" fifty thousand Migrants. Renowned economists have proved that it is cheaper to make a benefit universal than to try and determine who is eligible and who is not. It doesn't require any great application of mind to realise that no one in their right senses wants to go to a village in Chhattisgarh unless they came from there and want to return home.
3. Thirdly, physical distancing measures need to become more pragmatic. A huge train can surely carry more than a thousand passengers. While medical screening may certainly be needed, merely checking temperature is a routine and mindless exercise.

ADATS will continue going to the border for as long as needed. When we run out of money in the next few days, we will still go out with water packets to meet with brave youngsters from all over the country and wish them godspeed.

Best wishes,

Ram

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Saturday, 23 May 2020

Dear Everyone:

Today, we met only 27 Migrant youth who had already assembled at the designated spot when ADATS Staff reached at 6 pm. The AP police had also stopped a Hyderabad bound lorry and they were waiting for us to come. After receiving the bread, jam, water packets and ₹ 500 each and they immediately climbed in and left. We told them to pay the driver just ₹ 100 each after reaching.

7 youth from Jharkhand and 3 from MP had hired 2 taxis at a fare of ₹ 800 each from Bangalore and arrived just when we reached. Like yesterday, the drivers pleaded that they had to charge so much because they themselves were out of work for more than two months.

3 youth had "escaped" from a Migrant camp just outside Bangalore after 2 days of forced lockup. They realised that it would take forever for the hundreds in that camp to be processed and eventually sent to railway stations. After a night and day of walking, they had reached the Karnataka-AP border this evening.

We waited for more than an hour but no more Migrants came. Unlike yesterday, no one had passed through even during the day, when we were not there.

At 8 pm, after we returned, a taxi driver called to say he has dropped 5 Kolkata bound Migrants at the border, but they were too scared to cross the heavily lit Toll Plaza. Sujaid told them to walk through towards Andhra Pradesh and the AP police would stop a vehicle and put them on it. He asked them to call him in case they faced any difficulty.

When announcing relaxations to Lockdown 3.0. Karnataka government declared every Sunday a full, State-wide Lockdown. No one knows why this whimsical decision was taken, but Bangalore police have clamped down from this afternoon itself. This cannot be the only reason why so few Migrants reached the border today.

- The 70 Migrants who we loaded on a Hyderabad bound lorry last evening called to say that they had reached safe. Sujaid called a priest from Tripura who used his contacts with the Tripura and Telangana governments to get the 7 youth onto a train bound for Assam. From there, they have to travel another 563 kms to reach home.
- The Anantapur bound lorry took yesterday's 30 Migrants all the way to Hyderabad.

Yesterday, we had suggested that three government measures need to kick into place:

1. Free travel on buses and trains
2. Stop Eligibility Screening of Migrants
3. Pragmatic physical distancing measures

This morning, the AP government issued instructions to all District Collectors and Mandal officials that they should feed and transport roadside Migrants and take them to the nearest railway stations, free of cost. The AP government also declared that they will pay the train fares.

We await central government action on our second and third suggestions.

1,708 Migrants have been assisted to date. Tomorrow, we will once again go to the border even if just a few youngsters trickle in.

Best wishes,

Ram

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Monday, 25 May 2020

Dear Everyone:

Eid Mubarak!

We did not go to the border yesterday since Sunday was a total Lockdown in Karnataka and no North bound lorries would have come. Today, when we reached at 5 pm, 19 young Migrants from Nagpur, Chhattisgarh and Odisha were already waiting at the designated spot. Soon after we finished distributing bread, jam, water packets and ₹ 500 each, 10 more arrived.

AP police were not present today. ADATS Staff stopped an Anantapur bound mini truck and loaded all 29.

Half an hour later, a group of 12 Assamese came. They had left Hosur in Tamil Nadu yesterday morning and walked for 2 days to reach the Karnataka-AP border. This morning, after breakfast, they had eaten nothing at all. We distributed ₹ 500 each after they wolfed down the bread and water. Then we stopped a Hyderabad bound lorry and had a most unique experience.

The driver, the third generation in his profession, told us that earlier this week he had ferried a group of Migrants on top of his lorry. The police stopped him and everyone ran off into the fields. He, naturally, couldn't abandon his lorry and was severely beaten. When he adamantly refused to admit to any wrongdoing, the situation took a weird turn. The police actually apologised, fed him a hot meal and let him off.

"Let all 12 climb in. I will tie a tarpaulin since it is thundery and may rain on the way. If they just wrap it around themselves they may suffocate." We offered some money to pay toll fees *en route*, but he took serious offence.

"If you give me any money, I will offload everyone from my lorry. I am doing this because I have to help as many of these young kids as I can reach their homes. My father and grandfather were also drivers. That must be the reason why their grandson is on the road in these troubled times."

After we were properly censured and humbled, we forcefully put a

few loaves of bread and some jam in the cabin for him and his cleaner to eat on the way. By then our friend from Haryana had cooled down. When we asked him to join us for a cup of tea he replied with a smile, “Of course I will have a chai with you. I was wondering when you would ask!”

A total of 41 youngsters were assisted today, taking the total assisted these past 15 days to 1,749 Migrants. Hundreds of them have been helped in their onward journey from Hyderabad to the northern States, by a selfless and dedicated network of Jesuit priests, lawyers, social workers and activists. Sujaid is in constant 24x7 contact with all of them.

Best wishes,

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