



**CORONA TIMES**

**Untold Stories from Ayodhya**

**(The proletariat got physically close  
so that the elites could socially distance)**



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**Juheb Jhony  
Mahipal Mohan**

**ŠRUTI**

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CORONA TIMES: Untold Stories from Ayodhya  
*by Juheb Jhony & Mahipal Mohan*

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## Director's Message

The COVID-19 pandemic caught the world unprepared in all respects, from governance to health care to socio-economic issues. This severest of crises brought some lessons, the foremost being that the existing system is not able to deal with the fall-out of a calamity of this nature and, we need to put our own crisis strategies together. It also underscored that along with its influences on finances, socio-political and geo-political exchanges; globalisation also emerged as an essential mechanism of disease transmission – resulting into global pandemic.

The unprecedented crisis of pandemic witnessed strict lockdowns for longer periods. Multiple lockdowns affected the unorganised sector severely, especially migrant labourers and workers with disturbing visuals of hunger, poverty, unattended health-care and discrimination, proving the pandemic as a disease of inequality. India witnessed the exodus of lakhs of migrant labours, with daily wage earners undertaking reverse migration from the metro cities to their homes in small towns and rural areas.

Attempting to address the immediate fall-out, the extraordinary crisis of pandemic also brought together extraordinary efforts of collectives, from peoples' organisations to civil society. Multiple numbers of help-calls were attended by these warriors of pandemic whose

courage could nurture faith in spirit of collectives.

This book, a compilation of thirty-six testimonies made possible by SRUTI team members Juheb Jhony and Mahipal Mohan, unfolds the untold suffering of lives of working-class before and during the lock-down. The compendium of these stories also brings stories of collectives and resilience during the pandemic, building together stories of hope.

Salute to Awadh Peoples' Forum for their tireless work of relief during pandemic in the city of Faizabad, Uttar Pradesh! This book is a collection of testimonies from their work area. As Martin Luther King famously said, "We must accept finite disappointment, but never loose infinite hope" - thanks to the comrades of Awadh Peoples' Forum whose infinite faith in change and justice inspired us bringing these stories of unheard voices from the working class living in ignorant ramshackle neighborhood of the city of Ayodhya.

We believe that this book would be able to bring an understanding over the concerns and issues of the working class living in the favelas in the city of Faizabad, further deprived of basic amenities during the chaos of pandemic, yet relentlessly struggling for survival with infinite endurance and resilience, and continue contributing to the town of Faizabad as city-builders.

**Shweta**

## FOREWORD

The Coronavirus pandemic has triggered a serious global crisis, with rasping impacts of it being felt by the poor and working classes alike, across the world. The unplanned lockdown in India has claimed a lot from the lives of the working class. The Indian media and news channels, particularly the Hindi media in Uttar Pradesh never bothered to document the testimonies of the oppressed class. The COVID-19 has had a global impact, where the health and socio-economic crises were seen vividly, at the local level, thereby further amplifying the existing socio-economic conditions of the working class in Faizabad.

The lockdown imposition and further crisis felt similar to the turmoil brought on November 2016 following the demonetisation of 1000 and 500 rupee currency notes. Then, the working class suffered the most and it was repeated again in 2020. People of Faizabad (Ayodhya) are little accustomed to this sort of crisis for they faced such curfews when lockdowns were imposed due to communal tensions.

During the lockdown period, disturbing visuals of discrimination, hunger and poverty became common as the larger society was engulfed by apathy. The daily lives of families were severely impacted – people losing their jobs, shortage of rations, lack of proper healthcare; people couldn't even attend the funeral of their loved ones. On

the other hand, we also saw the benevolent side of many institutions, organisations and individuals who came forward for those needing help. COVID-19 has taught a lesson to all of us that our existence depends upon our collective efforts. Individuality will keep us apart and weaken our resolve to grow as a society.

In the month of October 2020 during brainstorming sessions we came up with an idea to try and document the testimonies of the working-class people in Faizabad – who continued to struggle against the odds during the corona virus induced lockdown. From the month of November 2020 to March 2021 we visited Faizabad twice and interacted with more than sixty people. Of those we have compiled stories of lives of the people before and during lockdown.

Awadh Peoples Forum, Faizabad, Uttar Pradesh collaborated with SRUTI, (Society for Rural Urban and Tribal Initiative) and helped in collecting the testimonies from their field area. We thank them all for their dedicated guidance and camaraderie –which made this possible.

15 March 2022  
Hauz Khas, New Delhi

**Juheb Jhony**  
**Mahipal Mohan**

## INTRODUCTION

The city of Faizabad (now officially called Ayodhya) has affected every Indian even if they haven't visited it ever in their life. Since the early 1980s, barring a few South Indian and North-eastern states, everyone has heard the name of this city during the elections. The developments of Babri Masjid and Ram Mandir have always set the tone and discourse of elections in the country. Even during the pandemic when the whole world was trying to fight the coronavirus, Ayodhya was preparing itself for the inauguration of Ram Mandir crushing all hopes for justice in the Babri Masjid demolition case. Karl Marx very correctly said, "Religion is the opium of the masses".

If one comes to wonder and really enquire about, 'Who are the people of Ayodhya, especially the working class, with whose sweat the city is built and continues to run?' Then it is not difficult to conclude that the blood of these working-class men and women have always been used just for political benefits. The corona crisis has mostly affected the lives of the working class. It has acutely affected the livelihood and access to resources. The daily work transactions involve busy markets and hand to hand transactions which have been completely decimated due to the lockdown.

When Government of India imposed one of the strictest lockdowns in the world to prevent the further

spread of coronavirus, the livelihood of the working-class people was destroyed. In Faizabad it affected the rag pickers, weavers, domestic workers, daily wage labourers, street vendors, homemakers and everyone involved directly or indirectly with the unorganized sector. The lives of migrant workers were shattered when they were left alone to walk back to their native places.

Domestic workers could not collect their salaries for March because of sudden restrictions on mobility. Their children were deprived of the new system of online education which started just after the imposition of lockdown as families were not able to afford smartphones. Women during the lockdown went through unprecedented amounts of domestic abuse. Many families broke during that period and women in those families had to deal with mental trauma.

Subsidies for weavers in power loom sector were rolled back by Uttar Pradesh government before the lockdown which strained the weavers. With the imposition of nationwide lockdown, the hopes of small weavers to progress were shattered. The sector which used to generate a huge amount of employment suddenly became stagnant. Weavers were burdened with loans and electricity bills and many were forced to sell their looms and resort to street vending.

Life of street vendors and other informal sector workers was no different. Informal activities such as street vending are often associated with rural to urban migration. Most of them don't own land or houses in the city they work in. The carts or small vehicles on which they sell their goods are mostly rented. During the lockdown when

there was no income, the landlords continued pressuring their tenants to pay the monthly rents, despite an appeal by the Prime Minister to property owners to not force their tenants to pay rent for two to three months.

Workers in the informal sector have little social security and their socio-economic marginalisation makes them further vulnerable to the effects of the government's nationwide lockdown to address the COVID-19 pandemic. Workers doing low-income work were the most affected. The fear of contracting the disease to go with socio-economic perils assured that they were the worst sufferers during the lockdown. During the lockdown they lost their primary income sources as there were no jobs or functional business. At that time, the prices for essential commodities also increased and it created havoc in the life of workers.

In this document it has been tried to bring up the stories of struggle, sorrows, challenges and betrayal by the state towards the working class in Faizabad, Uttar Pradesh. We also tried to compile the demands of the working class for intervening in the crisis created by ill-planned lockdown. The demands compiled are not just about the issues of lockdown but also tries to usher light on the issues of pre-existing concern of social security and labour rights.





## RAG PICKERS

Rag-picking, as a profession, comes with its own set of inhuman challenges. The daily life of a rag picker revolves around the toxic trash of urban households. Waste Management in India is grossly under-recognized. According to a study conducted by IGSSS, there are an estimated 1.5 million to 4 million waste pickers in India, who pick up, clean, sort and segregate recyclable waste and sell it further up the value chain. They deal with 62 million tons of waste generated annually and recover 56% of India's recyclable waste.

Most of the rag pickers belong to marginalised communities which already are highly vulnerable to social, political and economic exploitation. Their entire family gets involved in the process of collection of waste, its segregation and then extensive bargaining to sell their segregated materials at a good rate. Most often their colonies are settled on the fringes of urban settlements. These areas are not suitable for any human to lead a healthy life. Moreover, the challenge increases manifold times since they are being displaced from their settlements at the whims of government authorities, without giving a single thought about their social and community requirements.

36 families of rag pickers have been living in the

Hasnu Katra area of Faizabad district, in Uttar Pradesh for the past 9 years. Abdul Bashir, the contractor first came to this place in 2011 and over a period of time others joined him. Most of the families have migrated from Barpeta district of Assam belonging to the Miya Muslim community. They migrated to Uttar Pradesh in search of better livelihood opportunities but ended up in trash. Having migrated and settled in Uttar Pradesh for some time now, they have rarely been able to visit their native places since their absence from work even for one-day results in the family not being able to afford food for the day. Afzal, a new rag picker said- in Assam, they are not able to get work at better wages. It also gets difficult for women to get jobs. According to him, in Faizabad all the family members get involved in the work and earn thereby being able to save some money.

For the longest time rag pickers have remained out of any formal systems of employment and its benefits. Their conditions only worsened after the lockdown was announced by the Union Government of India. The devastation inflicted by the imposition of lockdown was unforeseen and unprecedented for the most vulnerable community of rag pickers. During the first few phases of the lockdown, they were deprived of food and other necessities. Since rag pickers are daily wage earners, the Coronavirus pandemic has acutely affected their livelihood and access to resources. Their daily work transactions involve busy markets and physical transactions which have been completely decimated due to the lockdown.

## **ABDUL BASHEER**

Abdul Basheer came to Nawabganj, near Ayodhya in the year 2011 in search of a job. With the help of a friend, he started with importing fish from other places for the local markets. But the business couldn't thrive for long and hence failed massively. Consequently, he then moved into the business of



rag-picking along with his friend. At present, there are 1000 people mostly hailing from Assam working as rag pickers in Faizabad. All of them are involved in collecting, segregating and then selling the wastes.

The lockdown imposed by the Central Government was a nightmare, Abdul remarks. They never imagined that such a strict curfew would be imposed on the common people without giving anyone time to plan or move to their native places. Abdul shared that the announcement of the nationwide lockdown was news of terror, and it got very difficult for the whole community to be able to arrange meals for even one time.

He says that all of them in his neighbourhood would have starved to death, if the local NGOs wouldn't have come forward to support them. Recalling his experiences, he shared how Awadh Peoples' Forum (APF) reached out to them and provided dry rations, soaps, oil, salt, and all possible basic needs.

## **SOHOR ALI**

Sohor Ali works as a sweeper in a showroom and his wife works as a rag picker. Not having many employment opportunities back in his native State, Sohori was compelled to move out from Assam for better livelihood opportunities. During the lockdown period, he



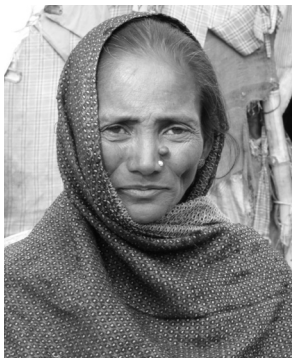
shares how their survival was put at stake. Because of the help and support extended by APF, his family could survive through the tough days of lockdown. The family's situation was so tense that he also had to borrow a lot of money from friends and relatives.

After the first 14 days of lockdown, when Sohori tried to go out for waste collection, the State police didn't allow him to carry out work. He feels that this act of the police was brutal and inhuman because the Police continued to obstruct them from going out and earning their livelihood. He further adds how it was shocking to realise that the authorities were okay with the fact that people were starving but they had problems if people went out for work. If the authorities would have provided rag pickers with basic ration, they wouldn't have ever opted to move out of their homes during the times of Corona.

## **ANWARI BEGUM**

60 years old, Anwari Begum has spent a large part of her life, living in a small kuccha house in Faizabad. The rent of the house she lives in is 2000 rupees and has

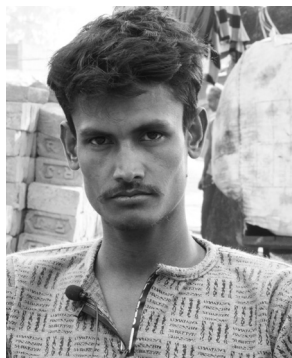
only electricity available in terms of facilities available. Anwari got married here and has also brought up her children here. She has never had any permanent job, her family has always been dependent on daily wage work and rag-picking work, which fetches them earnings of Rs. 500. She shares; it is very difficult for them to run the family by these earnings.



After the announcement of the nationwide lockdown, she recalls how they could not go out for work, leading to them losing their means of earning and making it very difficult for them to arrange for even food daily. Their children were left hungry. She said that the local NGO (APF) helped them by providing ration in these difficult times. Few others also helped them by supporting the education of our children. She goes on to remark how she has never seen a curfew-like this in her lifetime.

## **NAZRUL**

Nazrul who hails from a small village in Assam in search of a good job ended up dipping his hands in the trash to earn a living! He shares how fulfilling his dream of getting a good job motivated him to migrate to Faizabad.



During the lockdown, he was caught back in Faizabad only, while he also wanted to return back to his village. Nazrul

desperately wanted to return to his native village in Assam but there were no trains available. Even when the transport services have resumed, and there are trains available, the tickets are so expensive that Nazrul can't afford them. He says that he had never imagined a lockdown of this kind ever in his dreams and also had no idea of how people were going to manage the whole crisis like situation. This lockdown was nothing less than a death threat according to him. He recalls how in the most critical of times during the lockdown, the concerned authorities ignored them, hated them and made the community feel like untouchables.

### **ROHITUN NESA**

Rohitun Nesa has spent her life living in a small jhuggi-jhopdi and has been working as a rag picker. She says that this lockdown made a joke out of the miseries of poor people. The government had two different lenses for dealing with the poor and rich. The poor were harassed and beaten while the



rich were given all the facilities to overcome the tough times during the pandemic. Teary-eyed, she shares that being daily-wage workers, they were dependent on daily earnings but during the different phases of lockdown, whenever she or her family stepped out to work, they were beaten up.

She shares that the Government representatives had come only once with some khichdi for distribution in

their area, but that too was very little, even for a family of two people! She remarks on how the ruling class is largely ignorant of the working class and never takes the sorrows of the working class seriously. Further, the government also says that it supported people with cash transfers but most of the people in the community do not even have bank accounts of their own thereby making it very difficult for them to receive the government's monetary aid and support.

### **ARMAN ALI**

Arman Ali's family lives in the slum of Hasnu Kutra, Arman Ali is a resident of Rongia, Assam, his father was a resident of a small village ten kilometres away from



Rongia, who sold his house land and came to his in-laws' house. Went. Arman Ali's mother was given equal share in her land by her grandmother because in the Muslim community of Assam, both men and women are given equal rights in the land of the house. But Arman Ali's maternal uncle cleverly registered all the land in his wife's name due to which Arman Ali along with his entire family had to move out of Assam in search of livelihood.

18 years ago, he came to Lucknow with his wife and children. And eight years ago, settled in this colony named Hasanu Kutra of Faizabad. The important time of these 18 years was spent only in collecting garbage and it was not

known when the children grew up. Even today, they are living in garbage heaps, far away from basic facilities like education and health. Arman Ali tells us that the case of his land is going on in the court of Guwahati, for which he has to pay lawyer's fees from time to time. He further says that the lawyer has promised that the case will be in his favour. But that case could not progress further after the lockdown.

At the time of the bandh, when they neither had work nor ration at home, at the time of this crisis, when the government had to help people like them, no one came, at the time of this emergency, organizations and people around them came forward. His family and helped him. Today, on whose land he was living, and many people like him, they also had to pay rent for the house. At such a time, his contractor also helped in paying the house rent.

## MANOJ

Manoj goes door to door collecting scrap and selling it due to which he earns around 200 to 300 rupees in a day. His entire family lives in a small rented house. They have four children who study in a nearby private school. After the schools were closed during the lockdown, all the education modes



went online. They did not have enough money to buy a smartphone due to which their children's education has stopped. Manoj further explains that due to this nationwide lockdown, he did not have work, due to which



he and his family were forced to survive by eating only one meal instead of two meals.

## **CONCLUSION**

The rag pickers played an important role in managing the waste generated from the households during the coronavirus pandemic lockdown. They were at the frontline defending the spread of coronavirus. But the way society as a whole behaved with them is unacceptable.

Even before the lockdown rag pickers in Faizabad were subjected to discrimination by the locals. They have had to face racial taunts every now and then. The police used to harass them by asking them about their identity proof. They had travelled thousands of kilometres to escape this xenophobic harassment but could not get rid of it.

It is a high time state and concerned authorities recognise their work and contribution. This sector must be brought under the formal arena of employment. They should be provided with health insurance, PDS, free education for their children and assurance of housing. The social organisations must work on sensitising the locals and prevent the events leading to racial discrimination.

## DOMESTIC WORKERS

The incomes earned by women through domestic help in the pre-lockdown times formed the bulk share in running their households, for carrying out their day-to-day expenses of groceries and staples. But when the coronavirus started to spread and restrictions on travel were imposed in India, people resisted and heavily avoided the entry of domestic workers into their houses. The lockdown resulted in domestic workers losing their jobs and getting entangled in cobwebs of miseries. Most of them had no source of income in April and May 2020.

The immediate imposition of the nationwide lockdown within a few hours of its announcement had given people no time to make arrangements for themselves and stock up basic provisions, ration and other necessities needed to run a household. During the first two phases of lockdown, families of domestic workers were mostly dependent on relief activities of trade unions and NGOs. Most of the domestic workers migrated to Faizabad from other cities and were unable to obtain the benefits of the state-run Public Distribution System (PDS).

The Union government during this time of crisis had urged the house owners to give relaxations on rents for the period of lockdown. But only in very few instances,

the rents were foregone; this had caused severe mental pressure on domestic workers who mostly lived in rented houses. The main concern of domestic workers was that even though they were afraid of contracting the infection they had to go out in search of work because without work they couldn't fulfil the daily needs of their family. The wages of these workers are so meagre that it is not enough to meet their ends, let alone to save for their future.

Most of the domestic workers could not collect their salaries for March because of sudden restrictions on mobility. Very few managed to collect their wages facing many difficulties which include atrocities of police barricading people to go out.

Neelam Kumari, an activist working with the Gharelu Kamgar Union said that during the lockdown more than two thousand domestic workers in Faizabad had faced difficulties in getting due wages for the month of March. Most of the employers denied paying the due amount citing that domestic workers didn't come for duty during the last ten days of March.

## ANJALI

Anjali lives in a joint family. Her husband and brother-in-law were working as daily wage labourers. Before the lockdown, Anjali was earning Rs 1,500- 2000 by working as a domestic help in the houses of government employees. The family was not that well off, but they were making their ends

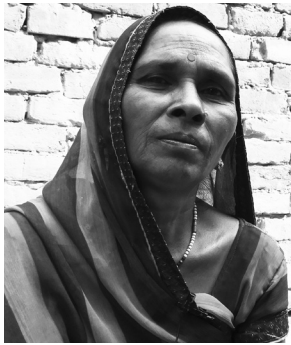


meet and could manage to afford and spend on their basic requirements.

Once the lockdown was announced, her family had to face a lot of problems as the entire family had to sit at home without any job for almost two months. The biggest setback faced by the family during lockdown was when Anjali's sister-in-law broke her marriage stating that Anjali's brother was not able to run the family properly. Reflecting back, Anjali says that her sister-in-law was not wrong, and the entire family has faced a lot of problems to fulfil their basic necessities and requirements.

### **DURGABATI**

Durgabati has been working as domestic help for the last 18 years. She used to earn 2000 Rupees per month



before the lockdown. During the lockdown period, she had to leave her job as people were not willing to continue availing services of domestic help in their homes due to the fear of corona. Her husband who was a daily wage worker was also failing in trying to get a job.

They had to rely on the rations and relief items received through PDS and NGO.

The ration kits that the government distributed during the lockdown included rice, dal and wheat only, but other essential items like oil, spices and salt were not given in those ration kits. The quantity of ration being provided was not at all enough for feeding the whole family. She says that the months of lockdown was such a miserable

time when for the first time in her life she felt so helpless and had to undergo a lot many difficulties to arrange for the most basic of things like spices and salt.

## **RANJANA**

Ranjana works as a domestic worker in civil lines. She says that the lockdown forced them to sit inside the house and no one could go out to earn, and the government did not think or care about anyone. Moreover, the people whose houses she used to work in, did not come forward to



help her in these desperate times. She remarked, “if we do not go out for work then who would give us money, who would feed us”. She shared that during the lockdown period, one day when she was going to work, Daroga Babu stopped her. Trying to explain the urgency and direness, she tried to convince him that if she didn’t go and work, then she won’t be able to feed her children, but all her attempts to convince him failed. It was such a time of fear and miseries. She shared that she had heard that the PM has appealed to people not to cut the payment of domestic workers, but the reality for her and many others like her was the opposite, wherein most of them were denied salary during the lockdown.

She further shared that she along with a group of women had deposited money to a chit fund agency through an agent for a year at four hundred rupees a month. They also had signed bonds for the same, but the

moneylender has been refusing to give money, citing the Corona pandemic as a reason wherein his hands are also tied. At last, with sorrowful eyes, she shared how very few people took the initiative to come forward and help them. APF was one of them who supported them with both ration and health kits.

### **SUSHILA DEVI**

Sushila Devi works as a utensil cleaner in one house. She has an amputated leg because of which she is unable to work as efficiently as others. Her husband is a driver and together they manage to earn five to six thousand rupees per month. Due to the amputated leg, all her life she has faced a lot of troubles. But



the lockdown imposed due to the coronavirus pandemic was one of the hardest phases in her life. She says it was a time of hopelessness for them as they were sitting idle inside their home for a very long period of time and were not able to predict what would happen.

She recalls the humiliation she and her family faced when they were unable to pay their house rent. During the lockdown period, none of them could find a job. Moreover, people were not willing to allow domestic help to enter their houses. None of her employers whose houses she worked in extended any kind of monetary help, even out of courtesy. She remarked that if she had owned even a small plot of land, she wouldn't have faced this situation.

## KANTI

Kanti works as a domestic help in two houses and her husband is a daily wage labourer. During the first two phases of lockdown, they didn't have any work. The family's personal savings was the only hope for survival in the lockdown period. Kanti has one daughter, who lives with Kanti's sister. During the lockdown period, on a visit from



her aunt's place to her mother's place, Kanti's daughter fell on the way and fractured her hand. Kanti shares the experience of getting hospital services during the lockdown months. She recalls how she took her daughter to a private hospital for treatment, where they ended up spending around three thousand rupees. This was an unprecedented expense, forcing them to discontinue her daughter's treatment due to lack of money. With relief in her eyes, she shares how an associate from Awadh Peoples' Forum, Neelam ji took on herself to get the due treatment done of her daughter in the district hospital.

Kanti along with a women's group used to deposit five hundred rupees every week from the last two years to a chit fund group. She recalls and shares that when she had reached out to the agent to withdraw money, the agent started giving the excuse of lockdown and denied to return the money. In tears, Kanti said, "if we had not got free ration from APF, we would have suffered a lot".

## **SUNITA**

Sunita works as domestic help and her husband is a daily wage labourer. She has two sons. The family was busy in the preparations for her son's marriage when the nationwide lockdown was announced. Consequently, this created chaos in their family since everyone lost their earnings due to loss of work and thus the marriage had to be postponed.



She shares how she was very upset with the government, as, on one hand, the government was encouraging and appealing to all that no domestic help should be fired from their work and no landlords should force the tenants out of the houses in such a crisis but on the other hand, the government itself was unable to implement its own words. During the lockdown period, prices of all essential commodities had risen and it became challenging for her to run the home. She shared how the government authorities came twice only for the distribution of ration. While in the first round, her family had received ration kits for free. But in the second round of ration distribution, she had to pay for the supposedly free ration. She later said social organisations saved her family and her from hunger by supporting them with food and dry ration kits during the corona crisis.

## **CONCLUSION**

In Faizabad, women constitute a significant workforce of the domestic help sector. The COVID-19 lockdown



period has added new angles and perceptions for understanding the growing vulnerability of domestic workers. There is no labour legislation for the protection and safeguarding of the rights of domestic workers. This pandemic has worsened the already existing socio-political and economic discrimination that is meted out on domestic workers. The discrimination against women was very much prevalent and only increased in the time of nationwide lockdown.

The working class already struggle with their lives, given the lack of job security and unstable incomes. The lockdown has given an opportunity to revisit the existing legislations in the context of serious violations of human rights as well as violence in domestic spaces faced by individuals during the lockdown period. The State must ensure wage security, livelihood security, food security and rent protection for domestic workers. The trade unions and sangathans like Awadh Peoples Forum should forge campaigns to demand fast-tracking registration of domestic workers to the Unorganized Workers Social Security Board as per the Supreme Court's notification issued in 2017.

## POWER LOOM WORKERS

The total population of Tanda is 2.5 lakhs of which 90% of people are dependent on power looms for their livelihood. Tanda has been producing clothes even before the independence of India. Each and every family in Tanda some way or other contributes to the production of tons of clothes. Other than weaving, people are engaged in making threads, few are manufacturing frames of the looms and few are also working as the mechanic. Some carpenters make wooden frames for handlooms. The working class of Tanda continuously makes efforts to complement each other to better the loom industry.

The power loom industry provides the basic need of clothing to the country. It is one of the important industries in India with a massive raw material and textile manufacturing base. The structure of the Indian textile sector is extremely complex with the modern, sophisticated and highly mechanized sector on one hand and the Handloom industry on the other. The small-scale power loom industries fall somewhere in the middle of these two.

According to a study by the International Journal of Advanced Research in Commerce, Management & Social Science (IJARCMSS) on IMPACT OF COVID-19

ON POWER LOOM SECTOR India manufactures 5% of cloth through the organized sector, 20% through Handloom Sector, 15% through knitting sector and 60% of Indian cloth are produced through decentralized power loom sector. The decentralized power loom sector is the lifeline of the Indian Textile Industry.

Unlike other major textile producing countries, the Indian power loom industry consists mostly of small scale, non-integrated spinning, weaving, finishing and apparel making enterprises. Weavers are the main pillars of the textile industry or power loom sectors. The socio-economic condition of the weaver in Tanda is very poor. They are surviving in a very pathetic condition facing challenges of livelihood every now and then. They are not in a position to fulfil their basic requirements. Most of the weaver family consists of eight to ten members and it's very hard to survive with their large family size on low wages.

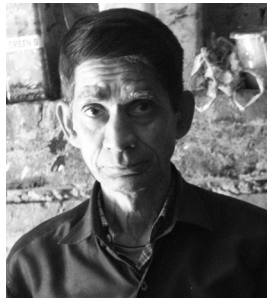
The business was closed for nearly two to three months as a result of the lockdown imposed due to COVID-19. Very Few power looms resumed work after getting permission to operate, but most of those looms were struggling to operate due to the reflux of migrant workers. There was a severe lack in procuring raw materials and even the demand was at an all-time low.

In the meantime, the government had announced that the subsidies on electricity which was sixty-five rupees per loom per month will be abolished and the new rates of rupees fifteen hundred per loom per month will be considered. This was a major jolt for the workers. As per Muslin Alam, weaver's leader, the new tariffs will break

down the sector as the rates of the finished products does not fetch a good margin of profit.

### **ZAHID HUSSAIN**

Zahid is an art teacher by profession and served sixteen years. He is a diploma holder in painting from Bombay Art College. He says the skill of painting he has got is bestowed to him as a family tradition. His family since many years are involved in designing and painting clothes. Till March, he was teaching in Fatima Girls Inter College, a private school in Tanda, but the COVID-19 induced lockdown took away his job and reduced him to a small clothing designer. Now he designs clothes coming out of the local power loom units.



He lives with his wife and two children. Both of his children were going to school but because of the nationwide lockdown and job loss of Zahid, the elder child could not continue his studies. Zahid says at first, he managed with the meagre savings he had, but when the cash dried up, he was compelled to borrow money from friends and relatives. As he was under debts and saw that there was very little hope of the school restarting its function, he decided to take up the work cloth designing as a full job. He earns two rupees per piece of cloth he designs. In a month he makes around six thousand rupees after giving the labour charges and material costs.

Zahid is very upset about the way authorities have dealt with teachers. He says the government must create

opportunities for skilled and qualified teachers like him and not let their talent go to waste. He said teachers are the foundation of a nation and the state must show its commitment towards teachers who had lost jobs due to lockdown.

### **AKBAR ALI**

Akbar Ali works in his small power loom setup of ten looms. His family of five solely depends upon the income generated by toiling their sweat twelve hours every day in their looms. The whole family gets involved in the work. Working in power looms is his ancestral profession. Before the corona pandemic, his family was somehow managing the daily chores. But with the lockdown imposed their situation deteriorated. Weekly he used to make about five to six thousand rupees before the lockdown hit.

He says more than coronavirus the unplanned lockdown has affected their sector. The contractors who



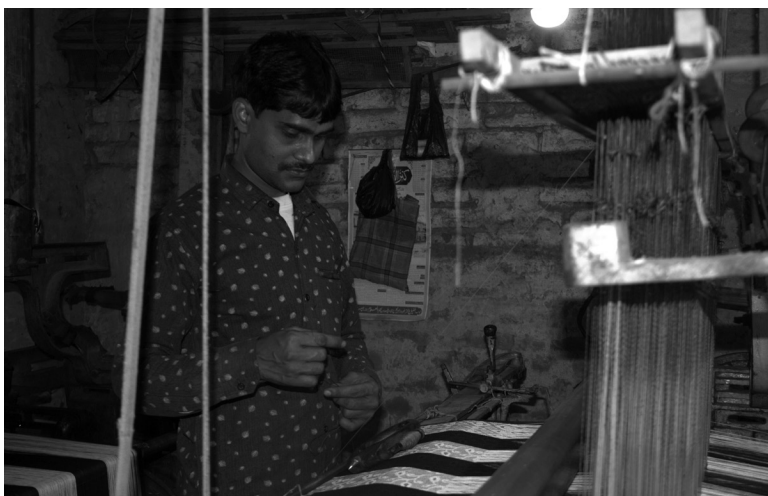
used to place orders for clothes stopped giving orders and also denied to release of the earlier payments. The demand and supply chain were also affected. Later he had to borrow twenty thousand rupees for dealing with the basic needs of his family.

He also informed that the government has decided to end the subsidies on electricity tariffs on power looms. It has increased the charges from sixty-five rupees to fifteen hundred rupees per loom per month. Akbar says the new tariffs are nothing but harassment of the working-class weaver population. He has been depositing the electricity bills according to the old tariffs till now. But the online bill generated shows that his dues reached One Lakh Sixty-one thousand rupees. He said that the new tariffs must be rolled back and if the government wants then it can put slabs according to the number of looms a unit possesses. This will also help in creating a level market for competition between big and small weavers. Akbar, at last, said that the owners and weavers must be compensated or Else, this entire industry will collapse.

### **MD ZABIULLAH**

Zabiullah is a weaver who works in the power loom unit of his neighbour as wage labour. He lives with his wife and two children. He earns approximately two to three thousand rupees a week. He works for 12 hours from 10 am to 10 pm every day. If he takes a leave, then he doesn't get paid for that particular day.

During the lockdown, he was sent away due to work shutting down, with meagre amounts being given to him as a relief. At that point of time prices of food were rising



and there were no wages and it was getting difficult for his family to survive. He had to borrow five thousand rupees for the treatment of his son who was not in good health during the lockdown. Even in the hospital, he had to face discrimination as doctors were reluctant to touch the patients. He didn't even receive the monetary relief announced by the government during the lockdown. He has been going regularly to the bank enquiring about the promised amount but every time he had to return empty-handed. The relief measure announced by the government to help weavers has hardly reached them.

### **TAUKIR AHMED**

Taukir works in looms but has never owned one unlike others in his village. He works twelve hours a day without any paid leave throughout the year. He earns rupees Eight Hundred on an average every week. He is suffering from diabetes and leading his life with various health problems.

Once he injured his toe of his right leg while working in the loom, the injury never recovered as the infection was malignant and he had to lose his right toe.



Taukir's family includes his wife and four sons. Because of the lockdown his son had to drop out of school and now works in looms as a labourer. His wife's name was on the list of receiving money which was announced by the government but never received the amount in their bank account. After the work resumed, he was not able to work properly because of health conditions. The heavy medication has made his body very weak.

During lockdown he had no work, it was a livelihood crisis before weavers like Taukir. After the first few days of lockdown, he ran out of money for daily expenses. He was being given rice and wheat rations by the locals and NGOs. The government ration came twice once it was given for free but the second time, he had to pay for it.

### **ZAHIR ANWAR**

Zahir owns a small unit of power looms. He lives with his wife and three children. He manufactures the thread required for looms. During lockdown there were many problems but they somehow adjusted with whatever possible resources they had. As the nationwide lockdown was announced he had just three thousand rupees in his hand. He said that it was a scary period and the family had no clue what would happen next. The first two phases





of lockdown were full of uncertainties. The person who used to provide raw materials to Zahir suddenly took away everything. The big weaver had abandoned him.

Later Zahir had to borrow money from his friends who were government employees. He used to borrow two to three thousand every month, within six months his debts rose to thirty thousand rupees. After six months he started to get small orders with which he could earn three to four thousand per week. But this money is not enough for his family to fulfil all the basic needs. He is still unable to pay the debts. During lockdown even though there was no work but he had to pay for space where he runs his power loom unit. He says not even a single landlord has reduced or exempted rents during the lockdown even after the appeal of the government. After many negotiations, the owner reduced the rent from two thousand to seventeen hundred rupees.

Zahir also said that the government subsidies on raw materials are always received by the big weavers. the small weavers only had exemptions on the electricity bills which are again being rolled back. The existing union is not very strong to negotiate and bargain with the concerned officials on the issues. The government is an expert in ignoring the demands of the union. In this confusion, many weavers paid the electricity bills on new tariffs till July 2020. But now people have stopped paying the bills as it has become very difficult to recover the principal amount invested if the new electricity tariffs are in place.

### QAMAR ALI

Qamar owns five power loom machines and himself works for twelve hours every day. He lives with his wife and two children. He says it was very frustrating for them to sit inside their small houses without any work during the lockdown. His family faced the problem of a cash crunch as the demands for clothes dried up. They were in a deep



financial crisis. During this period his family didn't receive any government help. He got free ration just once which was not enough to feed a family of four.

Qamar said that there is a huge drop in demand for clothes which is a big reason for the slowdown in business. The looms in the village had stopped operations for several weeks as there were very few demands. He says that most weavers are not able to weave new sarees due to a lack of raw material. Most weavers depend on big weavers for raw material. The big-weavers invest in the raw materials and then ask the weavers to make clothes according to various specifications and later buy the end products. Since the lockdown, this demand and supply has reduced by fifty per cent. He also said that the government has repealed the subsidies on electricity bills and the move of the government has compelled people to sell their looms. He says the new generation of the community is slowly drifting away from taking weaving as a profession.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is very disheartening to see that the people who are catering to the needs of clothing in the country are deprived of basic needs like proper health infrastructure, quality education and a proper public distribution system.

The Uttar Pradesh government had already ended subsidies for power loom industries since January 2020 had overburdened weavers. The power loom industry generates a handsome amount of employment opportunities but the decision of the government to reduce subsidies has broken the backbone of the sector and the lockdown because of the corona has hammered all the

possibilities for the sector to boom. Weavers are the main pillar of the textile industry or power loom sectors, but they are at the bottom of the economic pyramid of this sector. They are suffering enough due to the ignorance of the government and bureaucracy.

First demonetisation, then GST and now the unplanned lockdown has crumbled the whole sector. There is a need to have a comprehensive market strategy, financial and technological support from the government for ensuring sustainable growth of the power loom industry. The concerned should take notice of the serious problems (related to market, finance, labour etc.,) prevailing in the small-scale power loom industry of Tanda. There is a need to address the issues related to the price of raw material, interest burden and deficiency in infrastructure.



## MIGRANT LABOURS

The sudden outbreak of covid-19 has unboxed the defects in our systems to counter a humanitarian crisis. The implications of COVID-19 will be felt and recognized even after decades. In the timeline of world history, it will be regarded as the toughest war on human existence. During this humanitarian crisis, people were terrified and had to deal with a lot of uncertainties. The virus has threatened the existing systems socially, politically, and economically.

The Prime Minister of India announced an absolute nationwide lockdown on 24th March 2020. Within a notice of just four hours, the nation shut down. The policymakers didn't even think to give a window for people to accumulate rations, medicine, and other essentials. If a small window of a week would have been proposed the disaster inflicted by the lockdown could have been lessened.

It shouldn't have been very surprising for anyone that many people decided to migrate back to their native homes, as they had no alternatives left once the lockdown was imposed. After having faced the brunt of the first phase of lockdown, the migrant labourers decided that they had a better chance of survival if they head back to their native place.

The plight of migrant workers during the lockdown has shown that it is not just the economic growth but the Indian ruling class has failed to uplift its social understandings. The class discrimination by the state on its citizen was distinctly visible. On one hand, special flights were arranged for the evacuation of Indians stuck abroad on the other hand the government ignored the working-class population. Due to the suspension of public transport facilities, migrants had to walk hundreds of miles to reach their native villages. It was such a time when the 'haves' were trying to ease their hectic schedules of online meetings through entertainment in their luxurious houses, the 'have-nots' were left to spend their days under the shade of trees, bus stops, etc.

Public Transportation resumed on 1st of May 2020 for the first time since 22nd March 2020. According to PRS data, "Between May 1 and June 3, more than 58 lakh migrants were transported through specially operated trains and 41 lakhs were transported by road." But there is no data available for people who walked back. There were many incidents reported about the death of migrant workers. But the Modi govt told Parliament that it does not have data of migrant workers who died during the lockdown. As per the estimation of ministry of labour and employment over 1.04 crore migrants returned to their home states, with Uttar Pradesh receiving the highest number of workers at 32.4 lakh. The CMIE (Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy) predicted 112 million job losses from April-May 2020, the majority of which are the self-employed and the casual workers. According to the World Economic Forum, India has around 139 million migrant workers.

Ghufran Siddiqi, an activist from Faizabad said that the migrant workers who were returning to their native places had to face enormous challenges and discrimination during their journey. On their way back when people tried to drink water from hand pumps in some unknown places they were chased down by the locals. He said, the migrant workers had to go through miserable situations when they were quarantined in government facilities. The migrants didn't even receive the entitlements announced by the government.

### **RAM KUMAR**

Ram Kumar makes a living from selling vegetables. He has two daughters, both of whom are married. His wife died two years ago. His grandson lives with him. Ram Kumar goes out to the market to sell vegetables with his grandson in the morning and comes home in the afternoon to cook food for himself and his grandson. He again goes to sell vegetables in the afternoon and then returns home by evening.

Ram Kumar earlier used to sell tea at the Faizabad railway station. Even after he got his license from the Railways, the people of GRPF (Railway Police) used to harass him by asking for money every day. Later he decided to move to Allahabad as he was fed up with the harassment and started working at the Allahabad railway station as a tea vendor.

The work was running well, but suddenly everything was put to a stop due to the outbreak of pandemic and the consequent lockdowns that were imposed. Ram recalls and shares how after spending a month in Allahabad, all of

his savings got exhausted and his contractor also refused to assist with any monetary help. He requested several railway drivers to help him to return to Faizabad, but no one agreed. When it seemed that the lockdown would not end soon enough, he decided to leave Allahabad on foot and go back to his native place.

From whatever little money he had left, Ram bought two packets of sattv and on the way he purchased some radish and green chillies. Wherever he got water on the way, he used to stop and eat sattv with radish and chilli.

Ram walked from Allahabad for three days and two nights to reach Faizabad. He says that he did not have anything to eat and drink after coming home. His neighbours and volunteers of Awadh Peoples Forum helped him with ration and other necessary items.

### **ARVIND KUMAR**

Arvind has been working as a brick kiln labourer in Amravati district of Maharashtra since 2009. At the site, he was responsible for *jhukai* (putting coal in furnaces).



Each year he used to work at brick kiln sites for 5-6 months and later return back to his village and do labour work. In between, Arvind once tried to start his own business in Faizabad. But not being able to make enough earnings from the business, he was not able to sustain it. Since he couldn't save

any money, Arvind decided to return to Amravati again for work and came back to the site in January 2020. He



shares how this was a very unlucky decision that he took. Even during the months of lockdown, work at brick kiln sites didn't stop. Work continued, through the lockdown months until June, but later had to be stopped because of the unavailability of workers and scarcity of raw materials.

Despite having worked for six months, whatever Arvind did by his labour was not compensated by the contractor since he refused to pay dues to the workers. By this time, all savings Arvind had been also exhausted, thus compelling him to borrow money from the contractor. From this borrowed money, he booked a Tata Sumo to travel approximately 1000 km back to Faizabad from Amravati. After paying the vehicle charges he was left with just 2500 rupees as his savings after working for six months in harsh conditions. This saved money helped him run his household. Arvind says during the lockdown months, the prices of essential commodities have risen, and it is getting tough to run the daily chores of the family.

### **ASHOK KUMAR**

Ashok Kumar works as a lapidarist (diamond cutter) in Surat, in a diamond making company. In the year 1988 he ran away from his home and reached Surat. For some time, he worked at a tea stall. After some time, he met an acquaintance who helped him to get a job in a diamond making company. For making a piece of diamond he used to get eighty-five paise. He could earn twelve to fifteen



thousand rupees monthly.

During the lockdown his work stopped. The factory owner paid the dues of march. Somehow, he survived for two months with the little amount he had with him. When the train services started, he had wanted to come back to his native place. He paid rupees seven hundred fifty to an agent and got his reservation. He said that it was very difficult to get tickets at that point of time as the agents were charging a big amount even for the free tickets.

Ashok says that working away from home and the lockdown has taken away a lot from his life. The work of cutting diamond needs a lot of precision and concentration, his eyes were affected by this and now he finds difficulty in his vision. After eight months of lockdown when he returned to Surat he got a paralysis attack, later he had to return home. Now he cannot even think of going back to Surat as his capacity in baking diamonds have reduced. Earlier he used to make 800 pieces but now it is very difficult for him to even reach 200 pieces per day.

Ashok had borrowed five lakhs from the bank and his friends for spending the amount in his daughter's marriage and his son's higher studies. He is now facing a lot of problems in repaying the debt. His son is pursuing B.Ed. and daughter is preparing for the entrance exam of ITI. His son has to deposit a fee of rupees forty-five thousand for continuing his studies but their situation is so tough that it is very difficult for them to even buy vegetables. He is not able to find a suitable job for himself and is very worried about the fact that how will his children continue their higher education. At present he is in search of a job and is ready to do anything coming his way.

## RAM SHANKAR

Ram Shankar used to work in a textile factory in Surat, Gujrat. Witnessing the lack of job opportunities and



economic condition of his family He left his native at a very tender age and reached Surat. Till the lockdown was announced he had completed 30 years of work in Surat. He used to earn up to twelve thousand rupees per month there. He says, after the janta curfew the work in the factory was halted and

people started to return to their native places. They were paid the salaries of the first twenty-one days, the factory owner for a single time provided rations during the first phase of lockdown. Later he had to survive on his savings.

Ram Shankar was spending his time ideally but with a hope of returning to his native soon. One fine day he was informed by his acquaintance that a bus is leaving for Jaunpur and few seats are available in it. Ram Shankar immediately reserved his seat and paid four thousand rupees. On May 1, the bus reached Allahabad and from there the bus went straight to Jaunpur. After getting down at the Allahabad highway he walked about 25 km in between he took help from a truck driver and reached Pratapgarh. but while getting off the truck His legs got dislocated.

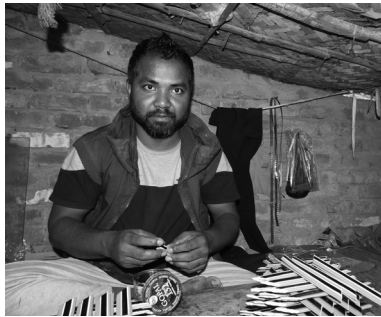
Few people helped him to get to the hospital. The doctor after preliminary check-up and x-ray gave him a little medicine and asked him to leave. It was not possible

for him to walk at night as his pain was not decreasing and he had to spend the night at the veranda of hospital. When he reached Faizabad the authorities in the name of the corona test, only took the temperature and stamped the quarantine mark in his arms. He was home quarantined for 21 days under the supervision of the village head.

Now he badly wants to go back to work at Surat as the family income has reduced by a bulk share. but his health is not permitting it but the condition of his legs is deteriorating.

### **SHAKEEL**

Shakeel holds a B.A. Have studied till. At present he works in a small shoe manufacturing factory. He wants to have his own employment. Shakeel had also gone to Kuwait a few years ago in search of work. But there was no work there



and on the contrary, all the accumulated capital was also spent. Right now the condition of his family is not very good. Father has a small pan shop and the livelihood of the entire family depends on it. Shakeel further explains that during the Corona epidemic, the government of the country had to do something for the public apart from issues like temples and mosques, but the government did not do it. It does not matter to the government whether the people live or die.

## **CONCLUSION**

The pandemic resulted in a severe crisis of mobility. The government's inability to provide necessary services to the migrant workers should also be a lesson for civil society and community-based organisations to understand the gaps in the system. The migrant crisis has revealed the unholy nexus of the corporates and the state it has always tried to ignore addressing the issue.

The lockdown has taken a toll on the mental health of the migrant workers. They are already a vulnerable population and COVID-19 aggravated their vulnerabilities such as fear of transmitting the disease, the absence of family and most importantly how they will survive without wages in the upcoming days.

In the coming days NGOs and Unions must advocate with the state to provide medical and psychological entitlements of the migrant workers along with food and shelter requirements. Migrant workers always remain entirely outside the ambit of social benefits and key legislation. The Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act and the Building and Other Construction Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act (1996) are very informally engaged while resolving disputes. There must be agencies which collect accurate data and give proper recommendations to the state so that migrant workers don't remain excluded from various governmental schemes due to their 'neither here, nor there' status.

## STREET VENDORS

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant lockdown led to the closure of all markets in Faizabad. The lockdown impacted heavily on incomes of the street vendors. The lockdown which was announced with a short notice of four hours suddenly left the roads and streets empty. For nearly three months, streets in every town and city were deserted because of complete restriction on movement of people and suspension of all public transportations. This led to street vendors losing their source of income.

Street vendors are one of the most important and integral parts of the informal economy and the workforce. They are the backbone of the Indian economy. According to a study by ISST, the street vending economy approximately has a parallel turnover of Rs 80 crore a day and every street vendor supports an average of three others as employees or partners or workers on commission.

An informal activity like street vending is often associated with rural to urban migration. Most of them don't own land or houses in the city they work in. Even the carts or small vehicles on which they sell their goods are mostly rented. During the lockdown when there was no income, the landlords continued pressuring their tenants to pay the monthly rents, despite the head of the Indian

State appealing to landlords to not force their tenants to pay rent for two to three months.

Other than the economic impact, the lockdown has had an extreme social impact on the lives of street vendors. Since the nationwide blanket ban was imposed for movement out of houses, the police and administration were so inconsiderate and inhumane that the vendors were fined and harassed for even selling essential commodities like fruits and vegetables. Police personnel and civic volunteers used to intimidate street vendors in the name of maintaining public order.

The COVID-19 lockdown period has throughout been very harsh on street vendors. They have drained all their savings and earnings in trying to feed themselves during the extended lockdowns. Even before the pandemic, access to quality education and healthcare were distant and difficult for them and the lockdown has only worsened their situation, as they have been forced to struggle to arrange food and basic essentials for their families.

Ashish Kumar, an activist who works on the issues of unorganized sector labourers informed that more than forty thousand street vendors are operating in Faizabad. He says if the lockdown would have been imposed with proper notice and proper planning the intensity of troubles suffered by the working class would have lessened.

### **MD. ASHFAQ**

Ashfaq is a vegetable vendor. He lives with his wife and three children. His family is run on the income that comes from selling vegetables. He shares how the imposition of the lockdown and the following months

has slowed down the pace of his life. Before the lockdown, he was making ends meet by his daily earning of 300-400 rupees. But since the lockdown and following that period, the cost of basic items has increased. At present daily earnings of even 500 rupees is not enough, as oil, flour, rice and other essentials have become so expensive.



His work took a major blow when the lockdown was imposed. A lot of the old stock of vegetables was getting spoilt. Procuring and selling vegetables throughout the lockdown period was the biggest challenge. He shared how they had to go to the vegetable market/mandi at night and wait till morning to buy the vegetables. When they tried to go out to sell their vegetables on the roadside police used to harass them and chase them. Often narrow lanes within the bastis, colonies were taken to go out and sell vegetables. Many times, the police used to beat them up with lathis. With sad eyes, he recalls how he can still feel the pain from those injuries. At last, he said, “Baccho ke bhooke pet ke aage corona ka dar kuch nahi hai” (the fear of corona is negligible in front of the hungry stomachs of my children). He was almost in tears while narrating the story.

### **SUBHASH**

Subhash is a street food vendor who puts up his food cart near schools and colleges of Faizabad. His family of 8 people are dependent on his earnings. Before the lockdown, he



managed to earn around 500 rupees a day, which has now come down to barely earning 200 rupees a day. The lockdown period was a period of distress for the entire family. He faced a lot of problems in being able to pay his rents, as he could never save any amount of money even during the pre-COVID-19 days.



Due to a constant shortage of money, affording smartphones for his children was totally out of question, resulting in his children to drop off from their studies since they couldn't join the online classes in school. After having spent a long period of time without any income, Subhash shares how he was forced to borrow money from moneylenders at very high rates of interest, purely for buying essentials to run his family. He says that his life has gone back by a year due to this lockdown and the pandemic.

### **VIJAY KUMAR**

Vijay Kumar is a street vendor who has been selling vegetables for the last 30 years. His family comprises seven people. The entire family's livelihood is dependent on selling vegetables. During the lockdown, his children could not attend the online classes as they neither had a smartphone nor had enough money to purchase a new phone.



Vijay explains that his life went through more difficult circumstances during the lockdown. He had to regularly go to the vegetable market with his son at around 1 a.m. or else they would not get good quality vegetables. After that, they had to spread the vegetables in the cart early in the morning.

Selling vegetables was the only means of their livelihood. During the lockdown, they somehow managed to sell vegetables by hiding from the police along the streets. The biggest challenge during the lockdown was that many small shopkeepers and migrant labourers started selling eggs, fruits and household goods. They were also trying to make a living by selling vegetables in those times of crisis. This had a direct impact on Vijay's business as well, since due to harsh summer heat, perishable vegetables had a

reduced shelf life and he was unable to capitalise from the whole consignment they used to buy.

Vijay Kumar has not been able to pay the electricity bill for the last 6 months this year. He also received notice from The Municipal Corporation for paying house tax. He had to take money on interest from the moneylender to repay the taxes.

## **CONCLUSION**

Since long before the coronavirus hit, street vendors have been struggling for justice, equality and dignity as workers. street vendors faced harassment, bribes or confiscation of goods on a daily basis and evictions on a regular basis. Only a few valued their contribution to the local economy.

In order to revive businesses of street vendors the union government announced rupees Five thousand crore as a stimulus package that will provide rupees ten thousand to street vendors as initial working capital. But during our visit to Faizabad we didn't find a single recipient of the stimulus package.

The Union, state and local administration must focus on the need to provide street vendors with Spaces near the market., ID proofs from the municipal corporation so that the harassment from authorities stops. District state and national level committees must be formed so that proper studies can be conducted and pro street vendor legislation can come up. There must be an announcement of free Medical and health facilities. Pension schemes exclusively for street vendors must be initiated with immediate effect.

## HOMEMAKERS

A homemaker's work never ends. Women have always been kept under lockdown by the patriarchal society. Indian women have forever been confined to looking after their husband, rearing their children, taking care of their husband's parents and round the clock, running around on one foot for engaging in domestic chores. Society as a whole has always failed to recognise the labour-power of housewives. In other words, the labour of these women has always been unnoticed, unpaid and unappreciated. The nationwide lockdown announced by the government was a diktat for many, but for housewives it wasn't much of a change but the same old game with an increased burden of household chores.

During the lockdown period, each and every person's work was affected in some way or the other. From the very first day of lockdown, it was the women whose work never stopped, but grew with time. It is next to impossible if we try to quantify the amount of work carried out by housewives during the lockdown. The recognition of homemakers has always been due, since the inception of the modern world order. Many people argue that loving and taking care of the family must not be monetised. If we take this argument people in defence forces must not

be paid salary as they are supposedly taking care of their motherland.

The homemakers from working class homes were worst affected by the pandemic. The National Commission for Women (NCW) registered an increase of at least 2.5 times in domestic violence complaints since the nationwide lockdown, according to official data. The Hindu reported that during the first four phases of the COVID-19-related lockdown, Indian women filed more domestic violence complaints than recorded in a similar period in the last 10 years. But even this unusual spurt is only the tip of the iceberg as 86% women who experience domestic violence do not seek help in India. In Faizabad many families broke during the pandemic induced lock down and the onus of rebuilding the family was totally left on the women.

### **BINITA**

Binita is a housewife who lives in a rented house with her husband Anand and her children. Anand works as an electrician. Anand and Binita got married against the wishes of their family, since Binita belongs to a Dalit family. Anand's family were totally against this love marriage and that too an inter-caste love marriage! As a result, both of them were disowned by the family and disinherited from the family property.



For the last eight months, Binita has neither been able to pay the house rent nor the school fees of her children.

Since the lockdown was imposed, Anand has also been unable to find work anywhere. Consequently, Binita was compelled to work as a domestic help in the nearby houses for the family to be able to survive. Binita says that she never went out to work as a domestic help in people's homes. But today she is doing it only for the sake of her children.

Upon being asked why she doesn't get her children admitted to the government school, she responds that the children have already been studying in a private school and since the government school is run in Hindi medium, it will be very difficult for the children to adapt at this juncture.

Binita further states that her life has gone through a very difficult phase during the lockdown. Her husband had invested all the capital saved in his lifetime to start an electrical equipment shop. But within two months of the opening, the lockdown was announced and they were unable to recover even the rent for the shop. Later they had to shut down their shop as all the money they had, got exhausted.

The total of the school fees of three children, including two thousand rupees of room rent, totals to expenses of 5600 rupees a month, apart from the expenses on daily household needs and medicines etc. Today they have become a debtor from not just their landlord but also from the school where the children are studying. Even after the relaxation in the rules of lockdown was announced, the family had to face the scarcity of food.

Awadh Peoples Forum helped this couple with ration and cash assistance of Rs 5000. With the hope that Binita

and Anand will repay the debts and school fees of their children, Binita continues to work as a domestic help and is now comfortably running her house along with her husband. Her children have also continued their education.

### **MUNI BEGUM**

Munni Begum is a housewife. She stays with her mother, husband Pappu Sonkar and her five-year-old son. Pappu and Munni got married against the wishes of Pappu's family. In a place like Faizabad, inter-religious marriage between a Hindu-Muslim couple can draw tension and create chaos in the locality. But both of them never feared this. They went against all odds and married each other. Later Pappu was disinherited from the family property.

They own a small shop earning from which is the only source of household's income. They started this shop not much before the announcement of nationwide lockdown. Munni says that the lockdown brought with it all sorts of sorrows in their life. They have never faced a scarcity of ration, like they did during the lockdown. The prices of ration and other essential commodities were also on a rise during that period.

Munni begum broke into inconsolable tears when she remembered the incident, she faced at a government hospital. She narrated how when one day she suddenly started feeling uneasy and unwell, her husband rushed her to the nearest government hospital to seek treatment. When she reached the hospital and approached the doctor, the initial response of the Doctor was complete refusal to attend to her. She felt humiliated seeing the behaviour

of the on-duty doctor. She shares, while examining her, the doctor didn't even touch her and asked her to stay at a distance. In the name of treatment only a bottle of saline was administered. Later when she was admitted to the hospital, no hospital staff took proper care of her and after 2 days of being admitted, the Doctor started pressuring her to get a discharge and leave.

### **JANATUN NESA**

Janatun runs a small shop in Tanda. Small-time shopkeepers have taken the biggest hit during the lockdown. She had started the shop a year before, when her husband was diagnosed with diabetes and his health deteriorated. At that time, they had to sell their land and power looms to arrange money for the treatment and for also starting the shop. But due to lockdown, the sale in their shop went low and they had to incur huge losses as COVID-19 fears have severely impacted sale of items.

During the lockdown, her husband's health further deteriorated. They managed to take him to a local hospital in the middle of curfew timings with a lot of difficulties. When they reached the hospital, the staff very rudely behaved with them. The doctor didn't come for a check-up and the compounder closed the door on their face. The local hospital just wanted to refer the patient to PGI hospital without even the initial procedures of check-up. Later they had to bring her husband back home and within a few months in the month of November 2020, he passed away.

She is now alone and surviving on the income from the shop. She needs fifty thousand rupees to restart her



shop. She has filled up many forms for widow pension but is yet to receive any money.

### **KIRAN CHAWLA**

Kiran Chawla is 20 years old and is a B. Com graduate. She lives together with her parents and younger brother in 8 X 12 feet rented room. Their room is very compact which hosts a kitchen, two beds and a dining space in this small space. One of the beds had to be taken out to make space for



us to sit. Her father works in a small Dhaba in Faizabad, where after working hard for 14 hours he gets paid just 150 rupees a day. Kiran takes tuition classes for school students to extend financial support to her family. Kiran dreams of getting a decent job so that she can help improve the condition of her family. She has also been looking for a job for a long time now.

Due to the lockdown, both the father and daughter lost their jobs. Kiran shared that due to lack of money, the daily needs of the house could not be met because of which her parents started having frequent quarrels. Troubled by all this, both Kiran's mother and father left their home, leaving her and her younger brother alone. Kiran further shared that both the siblings faced a lot of difficulties as essential things like tea, sugar, milk, vegetables, and rice were getting over at home. She neither had any income nor any source to earn as people stopped sending their children for tuition classes. The crisis was such that they

failed to pay the house rent. All this chaos resulted in Kiran dropping out of her further education. Kiran's mother still repents that she left her children alone at home in the dark times of pandemic and the consequent lockdowns.

## **CONCLUSION**

Women spend more time on “unpaid caregiving services for household members” as compared to men. Their contribution has always gone unnoticed and unrecognized. The problems of homemakers can never be solved with government intervention. It requires a total behavioural change of the society as a whole.

The state must take lessons from the happenings during the lockdown and on war footing work along with social organisation to ensure that the sense of recognizing the labour of homemakers is given priority.

These can be only done through rigorous behaviour change communication programs at the grassroots level. Community based organisations and local administrations must collaborate together to bring in a drastic change. Or else the condition of homemakers in this patriarchal society can never change.

## INFORMAL SECTOR SKILLED WORKERS

The poorest and most vulnerable people live and work in the informal sector and more than 90% of the workforce in India are employed in the informal sector. Informal sector workers comprise a significant proportion of the Indian work force and contribute significantly to the Indian economy. Due to demonetization & a poorly rolled out GST, the informal economy was already under shocks. The COVID induced lockdown has further aggravated the economic functions.

Workers in the informal sector have little social security and are economically and socially marginalised making them vulnerable to the effects of the government's nationwide lockdown to address the COVID-19 pandemic. workers who engage in low paying work are the most affected. The fear of contracting the disease had left the workers to face the brunt of the pandemic.

The people working as small shopkeepers, cable operators, electricians were excluded from debates on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. While there were discussions on helping domestic workers, security guards, gardeners and other house helps, very little was discussed about self-employed and daily wage workers in sub-urban cities like Faizabad.

The situation was worse than a war and even worse than the global recession of 2007. According to a study done by Action Aid, on Workers in the time of COVID-19 states that 80 percent of workers from the informal sector lost their jobs during the lockdown. Most of the workers weren't earning adequately before the announcement of lockdown. During the lockdown they further lost their primary income sources as there were no jobs or functional business. At that time, the prices for essential commodities also increased and it created havoc in the life of workers.

### **AJAY MAURYA**

Ajay has been working as a cable operator for 15 years now. He has a family of 4 people. Ajay used to earn 15000 rupees a month, on an average before the lockdown was announced. During the lockdown, he couldn't make half of the money he used to earn before the lockdown. He says that the



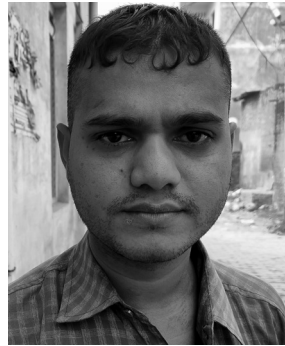
lockdown was such a period where people were struggling to feed their family, and entertainment was not at all a priority. He said, 'pehle bhojan phir manoranjana.' (first, feed yourselves then think of entertainment), because most of the households were caught up in making ends meet to feed their families.

Ajay recalls his family was also struggling to make ends meet. They survived the difficult times using their savings. They were expecting that the government would

lay off the electricity bill and tuition fees of children, but the expectations were in vain as the government didn't even subsidize the charges. In the name of relief, the government was distributing just khichdi, which was also not at all enough to feed a family. Awadh Peoples Forum and few other non-governmental organizations came to rescue the needy he shared.

### ALIM

Alim has worked as a barber for the last 5 years. He says barbers are among the worst affected professionals during the COVID-19 crisis. Even before the lockdown was announced his earnings were going below average as people feared the spread of coronavirus and reduced showing up to salons. After the lockdown was announced, his shop was closed for two months. A shutdown for even a week incurs significant losses and they had closed operations completely for about two months.



Alim didn't have any other source of income. So, during these two months, he used to do haircuts for a few of his customers in his residence, to earn a few bucks for survival, by even risking himself getting contracted to the deadly virus. He says the fear created around viruses has impacted their profession acutely and it will take a long time to overcome these problems.

## **SUNIL KUMAR**

Sunil Kumar has been working as a taxi driver for the last 14 years. He lives with his family of 14 members. Since the lockdown was imposed



Sunil did not have any work or means to earn. He says the imposition of lockdown has immensely impacted the drivers who rely on their vehicles for a source of income. For six months he had to sit idle without any work till October. The lack of tourists, adequate trains and holidays of educational institutions has heavily impacted on his income.

He said that before imposing the lockdown the government should have at least informed its citizens that it would have helped people to arrange ration and other important essential commodities. Sunil also had a very optimistic approach towards lockdown where he says the lockdown has reduced pollution levels.

## **AZIZ ULLAH ANSARI**

Azizullah has been working as a cobbler for 20 years. He engages in this work for two to three months every year. For the remaining nine to ten months, he makes a living by pulling a rickshaw. After the announcement of the lockdown for as many as eight months, he had no work and was



also suffering from medical ailments. There were no work opportunities and he had to ask for money from others like a destitute. But even this

money was not enough to reduce the sorrows of his family. Later Awadh Peoples Forum came forward to help them out.

He says all the factories were shut down as the government had no plans to rescue the small and medium scale industries. Aziz said that the government has betrayed poor people by imposing an unplanned lockdown. When he was ill during the lockdown and went to the hospital, the doctor was very reluctant to even touch him. Aziz was very upset about the events and said that the citizens will give a befitting reply to the government in the coming days.

### **RAJ KUMAR**

Raj Kumar is an electrician by profession and has a family of eight people. His household's expenses are run by the income of only one person. Raj Kumar says that for 10 years he used to work in an electrical shop as a daily wager.



He used to earn around seven to eight thousand rupees a month working in the shop. Gradually, with some savings, he rented a shop and started his own business in February 2020. Then when the nationwide lockdown was announced it became difficult for him to pay the rent of the shop. Due to this, they had to close the shop. This caused him a loss of about one and a half lakh rupees. He also lost all his savings.

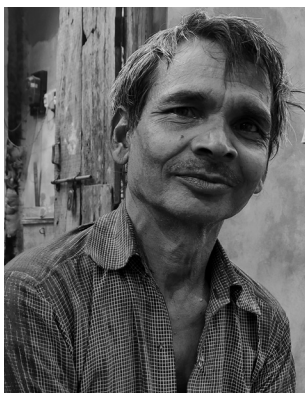
Due to the closure of markets for the last seven-eight months, he has not been getting work anywhere. The situation is so bad that Raj is ready to take up work as a daily wage again. He shared that since the spread of coronavirus people have stopped celebrating festivals with enthusiasm and fervour, due to which many people like him are suffering and still facing its impact. Raj hopes that after some time, the situation will improve and things will return to normalcy. He was very optimistic that by Diwali things will get alright.

Raj also shared how if non-government organisations would not have extended their help, it would have been impossible for working-class people to survive and many people would have died out of hunger. He said he will never forget the solidarity and support received from the Awadh Peoples Forum.

### **RAM LOTAN**

Ram Lotan has been working as a daily wage worker for 20 years. He lives in a small 10x10 feet room with his wife. He has four daughters, who have all been married. With extreme sadness, he shared that the marriage of his daughters has cost him a lot of money, and he is still





paying the interest of the loans he had taken for the marriages.

He recalled and shared that before the lockdown, life wasn't very easy. His wages used to constantly fluctuate from fifty rupees a day to three hundred rupees a day. Many times, employers denied paying citing small issues and excuses. After

the lockdown was imposed, Ram didn't have any work for six months. During the lockdown, he tried to sell vegetables, but could not sustain his business due to lack of experience and capital. He is drowned in towering debts and the burden of repaying his debts has started to affect his mental health now and then.

He also said that if rations and relief support were not made available, it would have been very difficult for him and his wife to survive. Angered with the government, he shared that there was no help extended to him by the government or the leaders of political parties. He remarked how they are just good at showing gimmicks and never show up when citizens face real troubles.

### **TRIBHUVAN**

Tribhuvan used to work as a bicycle mechanic and his wife works as domestic help. As days passed, he shared how he felt that there were no signs of the lockdown getting



over, gradually compelling him to close his shop. Upon the imposition of lockdown and the consequent period following it, his wife also lost her job. Their livelihood and running the household was dependent on his and his wife's income.

They have five girls, two of whom are married. The third girl was about to get married, but the marriage was halted due to the sudden lockdown. The grief of his daughters not getting married was such that he could not stop his tears.

Tribhuvan has now started to work as a daily wageer. But earnings from this work aren't enough, since he could not find work every day. His old father lives with him at his home and his father has been ill for a long time. He says due to lack of income, he has been unable to buy medicines for his father regularly, and they are somehow surviving through this period of crisis. Tribhuvan shared how he got very little ration from the government, with the help of which they tried to survive the lockdown.

### **GANGA RAM**

Ganga Ram has a family of seven. He along with his elder son help in supporting their family financially. Before the lockdown, Ganga Ram worked at a clothes shop and the elder son worked with a contractor. But both of them lost their livelihoods as soon as the lockdown was announced. Ganga Ram's wife has not been in good health for the past 6 months. She



has been suffering from kidney stones and even had to be hospitalized for a few days. On the advice of the doctor, she underwent an operation in a government hospital, but all the necessary medicines had to be purchased from a private medical store, which turned out to be very expensive for the family.

Ganga Ram says that all his savings got exhausted while making ends meet during the lockdown. There was a constant food shortage in their home. In the initial stages of the lockdown the owner of the shop where he used to work extended some help. But later he also pulled his hand out. His son's contractor also ran away without paying the dues of his labour. Sighing with relief he shared that his family did not go hungry since Awadh Peoples Forum kept providing them with ration during the time of crisis.

## **CONCLUSION**

When a crisis hits it becomes the duty of the government to intervene to safeguard the rights of its people who are vulnerable. During the lockdown the workers in the informal sector had to face tremendous miseries. But policy makers were least bothered about analysing the situations at the grass root level. Because of the misplaced priorities of the government the condition of the Indian working class deteriorated. The situation would have worsened if civil societies would not have taken the responsibility to extend help to the suffering people.

The government announced Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan, a stimulus package of rupees Rs 20 lakh crore for restoring the losses incurred during the COVID-19

crisis. But in reality, people at community level don't have any clue about the implementation of the scheme.

Organisations working in urban areas like Faizabad must focus on advocating with the administration for implementation of the stimulus package. The government must provide additional aid to help small shopkeepers to start their businesses. The minimum wages must be implemented strictly so that the daily wage labourers get the legitimate remuneration of their work. Overall, the state must take care of the healthcare situation and improve the health infrastructure.



## AFTERWORD

As we look back at these stories, we are reminded of the deep inequalities of our times. Collecting, compiling and translating the stories were an attempt to show what the situation at the ground is, and how far the promises of good governance hold ground – even when a large amount of public money was spent to advertise the grand success of our governments in handling the crisis. The lives of people were caught in abject state of poverty, discrimination and exclusion.

This document also comes to be a reminder to our own collective amnesia as a society – of thinking that all becomes well soon enough, and that the lockdowns were a mere inconvenience, or to imagine that it had limited impact. What we saw was that the lockdowns exposed the preparedness of governments to handle or avert such unforeseen situations, which could have prevented the crisis caused to so many lives.

The failure of public health systems, lack of education opportunities for the masses, inherent discrimination against the poor — and a crumbling economy unable to sustain or create livelihood for majority of people — the working classes — were among the few things that governments could have handled better. Social security schemes, or the distribution of free rations were all outside the access of those we met and interviewed. We

only that it was not the case for people across the country.

Had the local social-religious charitable organisations, civil society groups or concerned individuals not taken timely action through distribution of ration kits or cash support, so many people would have simply died of hunger – without any savings, income or scope of finding a means work. Many working-class families became socially and economically more vulnerable than they were before the lockdowns were imposed. It was also a period where social relationships were strained. Falling incomes and uncertainty made people take loans from their employers, friends and families for even basic needs – including rations or internet usage for education. So many people tried to go out to earn a living – but were beaten up by the police or asked to stay home until told otherwise. Very few people could really afford that!

If anything, the period of lockdowns taught us the need for governments, officials and others to be sensitive to the needs of the poor and marginalised communities. We hope for a collective future where working classes at large – a vast majority of this large country – are not so deeply vulnerable in their daily lives, and our ruling classes can learn to listen to them, and care, and act.





