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# Initiatives and Responses to Migrant Workers during the Lockdown

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*Abstract*

*This narrative describes an initiative of the National Service Scheme team at Andhra Loyola Institute of Engineering and Technology. It highlights initiatives to address the situation of migrant workers during the pandemic lockdown in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh in India. In the Krishna District of Andhra Pradesh, migrant laborers were forced to walk home, sometimes hundreds, even thousands of kilometers, to reunite with their families. It was hard to ignore these images, especially those who carried the elderly on their shoulders, and small children slumped over rolling suitcases. Most used any means of transport they found, even bicycles. Some succumbed to accidents and exposure to heat. In the midst of the lockdown, the NSS team quickly came together and planned an outreach/relief camp for migrants in Krishna District. It was chosen since many villagers were migrants and the lockdown had affected in multiple ways. The relief camp took place in the month of April, a time when temperatures soar in southern India. The students and the faculty members joined hands to reach out to the Migrants in the most despairing moments. The students commented that they saw their education from a different perspective, one that integrated curriculum and good citizenship for marginalized persons. One of the ways of infusing relevance into education is to embed it within meaningful service learning. This paper is an attempt to exhibit the Initiative and Responses to the Migrant workers during the Lockdown.*

**Keywords:** *Migrant workers, Krishna district, Lockdown, Relief Camp, Experiential Learning.*

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## 1. Introduction

COVID-19 has been heart wrenching and agonizing for almost everyone. For many, it cannot be compared to any other event during their lifetime. One of the most affected groups is migrant workers. Although previously invisible, the pandemic has made them visible.

The question of Migration remains challenged. In the political scenario people move from one place to the other for the want of labor.

When India imposed a nationwide lockdown on 24th March 2020, it came with only four hours' notice. Almost instantly, public transit and work, both formal and informal, was shut down. (The Hindu) 24th March 2020.

When the government was forced to reverse course and lift some of the restrictions, albeit in stages, migrants poured out from everywhere. Desperate, penniless, unable to afford food or rent without work, many hustled to return to their native villages, hoping to survive through family networks. In the Krishna District of Andhra Pradesh (Parth, 2020), migrant laborers were forced to walk home, sometimes hundreds, even thousands of kilometers, to reunite with their families.

Newspaper and television images depicted scores of migrants walking on the highways. It was hard to ignore these images, especially those who carried the elderly on their shoulders, and small children slumped over rolling suitcases. Most used any means of transport they found, even bicycles. Some succumbed to accidents and exposure to heat.

While I (first author) couldn't watch the images and listen to the stories plastered in the media, I could not ignore what was unfolding before me. Being a secular nun and academic, I felt helpless. My own situation as a professor required me to quickly adapt and change how I taught. The often-quoted words of the philosopher Heraclitus, 'the only constant in life is change', flashed before me.

Although fear, anxiety, and the constant warnings to stay indoors for safety preoccupied me, I became convinced I needed to respond to the situation unfolding before me. While I realized I should do something, truth be told, I also felt unprepared and paralyzed as to where to begin. I responded against the backdrop of my own institution.

## 2. The Krishna district and the Institute of Engineering and Technology

The Krishna district, named after the mighty river Krishna, is central among coastal districts and one of the oldest British administrated areas of the state of Andhra Pradesh in southern India. According to the Census, its population is 45,17,398 people spread over 934 villages. Half of the population is in rural settings but engages in menial jobs in the surrounding towns and urban areas, staying at these destination areas for their survival, easy commuting, and the temporary and informal nature of their work.

I am in the English Department of Andhra Loyola Institute of Engineering and Technology (ALIET) in Vijayawada, a city in the Krishna district. The city is the commercial, political, educational, and media capital of Andhra Pradesh. ALIET, a Jesuit institution, has a history of involvement in social justice and good citizenship-building initiatives for marginalized communities in the city and beyond.

To enable students to participate in nation building through social service activities, the government in 1969, introduced the National Service Scheme (NSS). NSS serves as a platform where the student-youth of the nation participate in real-life social activities aimed at making them conscientious, compassionate and responsible citizens. ALIET has vibrant NSS programs.

Initially, I reached out independently to a few migrant workers in a nearby village. But then the realization that I could have a wider circle networking with a community NGO got the better of me. Interestingly, I didn't have to look far. An NSS program at ALIET had already swung into action; joining their efforts was the best decision I made.

## 3. The relief camp in Satyanarayanapuram village

In the midst of the lockdown, the NSS team quickly came together and planned an outreach/relief camp for migrants in Satyanarayanapuram village, located just three kilometres away from ALIET. It was chosen since many villagers were migrants and the lockdown had affected in multiple ways. The relief camp took place in the month of April, a time when temperatures soar in southern India.

Our team comprised of ten individuals - two NSS coordinators, two professors, five students, the driver, and the director (the second author of this article).

My first day was remarkable and adventurous. I didn't know what to expect. We gathered early in the morning and began food preparations. Several food items were combined into single food packets. There were no distinctions between staff or students in how duties were assigned. As a single team we united around a common purpose which was to reach out to migrants (De Haan, 1994). Additionally, we planned some activities to be conducted with the villagers.

The food packets were transported by a vehicle to the village, where all of us regrouped. We offered a midday meal to two hundred and fifty migrant workers from Satyanarayanapuram. As well, some essential workers from some government hospitals in Vijayawada received food packets that first day.

Our visit the second day took on a different dimension as we found the people were far more responsive. They were actually waiting for us even before we got there. They were very appreciative of the food packets. The students commented that they saw their education from a different perspective, one that integrated curriculum and good citizenship for marginalized persons. One of the ways of infusing relevance into education is to embed it within meaningful service learning.

## 4. Expansion of locations and reactions from villagers

Each day we met to evaluate, plan, and strategize for the upcoming days. As the month progressed, we moved beyond the initial village to reach three other areas of the district: Christurajpuram, Arul Nagar, and Gudlavelleru. We provided outreach through food packets, conversation, and activities to 575 households. Everywhere, particularly in the furthest villages, we met migrants who were stranded, unemployed, hungry, and unsure what their next steps were.

Towards the end of a relief camp, a 50-year-old migrant worker from the northern state of Gujarat, openly expressed his deep joy and happiness. He mentioned how the four weeks of receiving food not only satisfied his hunger but gave him hope in these difficult times. His gratitude to the NSS team was summed up in his closing words which moved us all: "I never thought things would drastically change the way they have, but this experience has taught me the importance of love and service." He assured us that he will pay forward what he had received by helping someone else. To crown it all, he heard the national railways had begun 'shramik' or service trains that would enable him to return from Andhra Pradesh to his native state.

During our daily distribution of food packets, we encountered Prakash, another migrant who is 46-years old and physically challenged. He was a vendor, motivated by a friend to make a livelihood selling sweets on the streets of Vijayawada. The lockdown prevented him from selling sweets, so he pivoted to selling vegetables. When asked about the change, he spontaneously answered, "I am satisfied with all that I have." This sentence was moving and thought provoking for me. It helped me to reflect on contentment in my own life. Even though I teach my students the importance of such values, the first-hand encounter with this vendor and the NSS team during the lockdown, with all its inconveniences, taught me to be content and comfortable with change.

## 5. Other initiatives and closing thoughts

The relief camp was the gateway to other initiatives. There are 600 million internal migrants in India and their situation is complex. As the Indian economy during the spring was down by 24%, the ones most affected were the informal labor sector, comprised mostly of migrant workers. As the numbers of COVID-19 cases grew in India to where it had the third highest number of cases after the United States and Brazil, we realized the need as an institution to continue to reach out.

Initiatives to increase awareness of migrants were needed. Given the backdrop of ALIET and the versatility of Zoom to reach wider audiences, a conference focusing on the issues of migrant workers was organized. Two professors from other institutions shared their research and insights. While one highlighted the invisibility of migrants, the other offered details of how even with all the attention drawn to the plight of stranded migrants in India, female migrants are invisible in media images and public discourses.

At the end of the relief camp, our institution adopted a village named Raipalli, near Machilipatnam, a village badly affected by a tsunami. In the initial stages, the women folk were motivated and were given loans with 50% subsidies and organized into self-help groups for their economic empowerment and upliftment (De Haan, 2010). In the later stages, the members of the self-help groups had become self-reliant, earning their own income by engaging in small jobs like animal husbandry, tailoring, and gold covering work. This program is presently running successfully.

## 6. Conclusion

COVID-19 has highlighted our shortcomings and failures. Not only have we failed migrants, but we've failed female migrants even more. One of the few Indian stories of the pandemic featuring female migrants is that of a 15-year-old girl. Jyoti made a 1200 km (745 miles) trip from a Delhi slum to Bihar in 10 days on her bicycle with her disabled father riding on the back. It is not the highlighting of Jyoti that I question, but a lack of attention to female migrants. If Heraclitus highlights change is a constant, I/we too still need to change to make the contributions of migrants to the economy visible, and the plight of stranded migrants - particularly female migrants - a greater focus of attention.

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