

WORK WOES

Migrant labourers leave Kashmir Valley as unrest hits wage work

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The worst affected are those who depend on daily wages or on hawking.



Image credit: Tauseef Mustafa/AFP

One recent evening, a group of seven men gathered a few kilometres from Srinagar's fruit mandi, bags hanging from their shoulders and hastily packed utensils in their hands. Many trucks leave for Jammu and other parts of India from the mandi, and the group was waiting to pay one of the truck drivers for a ride out.

The group, which included two masons, comes to Srinagar every year from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and rents the same room in a poorly ventilated building. They work in construction and on tiling the roofs of houses. But in the two weeks since July 8 as violence swept through Kashmir after Hizbul Mujahideen commander Burhan Wani was killed in an encounter with security forces, the Valley has shut down. There have been curfews and many commodities are in short supply.

These men are among the thousands of migrant workers who have fled the Valley since July 8.

The shutdown has led to a shortage of construction supplies as a result of which contractors are unable to continue work. The group at the mandi had been idle for a week. “We don’t think we will get work anytime soon, it is better to leave than sit idle,” said Ghulam Rasool, one member of the group.

Another member of the group said that they needed work in order to survive. “The locals can manage ration and supplies but we are outsiders here,” he said. “We won’t be able to manage expenses if we do not find work.”

For over two decades now, migrant workers have helped fulfill Kashmir’s labour demands. Lakhs of migrants work in agriculture, horticulture, brick kilns, and construction. Thousands of migrants are employed as domestic workers while others hawk goods on the streets of towns in the Valley.

These workers cannot sustain themselves for long without some work or sales – both of which have plunged amidst the unrest.

An exodus

Every day, buses full of migrant workers have been departing from the Tourist Reception Centre in Srinagar. Most head for Jammu, where they take buses and trains to other parts of India.

Some others opt for goods trucks to ferry them out of the Valley.

Another indicator of the exodus of migrants from the Valley is the fact that the clusters of tents spread across parts of Kashmir have reduced. These tents house migrants who collect waste for recycling or deal in items of everyday use like brooms. Many of the rooms rented by workers have been vacated.

It is common for migrant workers to leave during turmoil or disaster but this usually results in an acute shortage of labour in the next few months, when demand for labour outstrips supply. For instance, following the floods of 2014 many migrant workers left, **slowing down** reconstruction work.

Those who stay

Life is especially difficult for migrants in hawking jobs as sales have plummeted.

Guru Dev, who hails from Bihar, is one of them.

Dev sells fresh fruit juice at a roadside stall in Srinagar. He normally sets up his stall under the shade of a chinar on an avenue near the usually crowded Lal Chowk. However the unrest has led to a drop in the number of customers as cars and pedestrians rarely stop to buy juice.

During the summer, when Srinagar sees a rush of tourists, Dev usually made at least Rs 2,000 a day, charging Rs 30-Rs 40 for a glass of juice. However, these days he earns around Rs 600 a day.

He said that since he deals in perishable items, he is compelled to stay to finish his stock as leaving would mean incurring further losses.

“The profit from my earnings is less than Rs 200,” he said. “Most of my acquaintances have already left and I too will leave as soon as my stock is exhausted.”