

INTERVIEWS WITH BANDRA MIGRANT WORKERS

Aditi talked to five migrant workers from West Bandra, where the Bandra incident happened. These interviews were taken on 4 May 2020. Originally, the nation-wide lockdown was supposed to end on 14 April 2020. However, the continual rise in COVID-19 cases across India – particularly in cities like Mumbai – forced the government to extend it further down for a few weeks. At this moment, a crowd of more than 1000 migrant labourers gathered outside the Bandra railway station in the city of Mumbai demanding a return to their hometowns and villages. These workers had responded to messages on social media, and a local news channel's report, which said that the trains would start running for the workers on 14 April 2020. Belonging to far off parts of the country, these labourers wished to return to their homes. This gathering was called "Chalo Ghar ki Ore" (Let's move towards our homes)- which was an online campaign allegedly started by an activist called Vinay Dubey. The social media posts, along with the news channels, spread the news that the trains will start working and the workers can go back to their hometowns. The five migrant workers agreed to talk to Aditi on the condition of anonymity. The general questionnaire that was followed was:

1. What are your name and age?
2. Where do you work?
3. What is the nature of your work?
4. Where are you originally from, and where did you live before the lockdown?
5. What are the living conditions like, in your current abode? How do you access to water and food?
6. Do you know what happened near Bandra Station on 14th April?
7. Were you a part of it? If yes, how did you get to know about it?
8. What did the police do about it?
9. Do you know about the trains starting for migrant workers?

10. Have any wages been paid in the duration of the lockdown?

12. Are there any specific government schemes that you can benefit from currently?

All the workers were from Jharkhand, Bihar and West Bengal- three out of them were daily wage earners and the other two had a job under a private sector for an embroidery company. The workers under the embroidery company had not been paid ever since the lockdown started. When asked about their living conditions, the workers were very upset as they told Aditi how they lived during the lockdown. All of the workers lived in a slum, and they had no access to proper food or water. The government was not providing them with food at all, and they were not aware of any of the schemes that the government was offering and the only way they got food during the lockdown was because of the NGOs, whom they referred to as “aas paas ke log” (people from nearby). According to them, the food was not even edible, the *rotis* were half-cooked and the *sabji* was just enough to survive. They stood in long lines to get food for one time. Usually, under the lockdown, they did not get food for more than one time a day. They stood in long lines, sometimes resulting in a waiting period of three hours under the scorching sunlight in March and April. When asked if distancing was followed in the queue, they said they had no one to supervise them and tell them what was to be followed, and they stood in clusters in the queue, sometimes resulting in fights to get the food first. They were made to sign a lot of forms and promised food ration, but despite that, there was no response from the government. They did not have a water supply at their homes and shared the same tap/borewell amongst a group of people/families. They did not have access to toilets at home and had to share a common toilet as well (one of the interviewees said that as soon as they would get out to use the toilet, the police beat them up). All of them wanted to go back to their villages to be with their family and one of them said “Yahan toh mar-mar ke rehte hai, vahan kam se kam izzat se rehne toh milega.” (We are barely alive here, atleast in the villages, we would live with respect). Another one said “Marna hai toh parivaar ke saath marenge” (If we die, it is better that we die with our families).

Three out of five workers Aditi talked to were a part of the incident that happened near Bandra Station. One of them got to know about the Bandra protest through the news on the television, one through word of mouth, and one joined the protest because he saw it happening. The protests were not only about the workers demanding to go back to their hometowns, but also demanding food and water. The workers were dispersed by the police by baton (lathi) charge. One of the workers Aditi talked to was hurt during this incident and mentioned that there are many workers who still can not get up from their beds, and cannot avail medical services. The other two workers were aware of it but were willingly not a part of it.

When asked if they knew about the trains starting for migrant workers for interstate transport, they were clueless but they mentioned that the police had been making them fill forms but they did not know what the form was for.

After her conversation with them, Aditi received a call from a group of anxious migrant workers who further inquired about the purpose of the conversation. Although she had clearly outlined

her objectives in the conversation and promised anonymity, they were convinced she was from the police or the government and were scared that something might happen to them because of the interviews, telling her “*vese bhi dakrar rehte hai, phir aapka call aaya toh aur dar lagne laga*” (We already live in fear, and after your call, we were even more afraid). The workers started inquiring about her whereabouts and her reason to call even though all of that was stated before the interview started. The workers continuously questioned Aditi as to her involvement with the police because they were scared that the police is going to beat them if they get to know about this. After making sure Aditi was really a student and the condition of anonymity was still intact, they kept the call.

INTERVIEWS WITH GODOWN WORKERS IN ASLALI, AHMEDABAD

Questions asked:

1. What is your name and age?
2. How long have you been working here at the factory?
3. What is the nature of your work?
4. Where are you originally from, and where did you live before the lockdown?
5. What are the living conditions like, in your current abode? How do you access water and food?
6. What are your general thoughts about the Coronavirus? What do you know of it so far.
7. What is your opinion on the lockdown and social distancing measures? Is it all necessary, the masks and washing hands etc.?
8. When will you be able to resume work?
9. Have any wages been paid in the duration of the lockdown?
10. Do you send money back home? And have you been able to do so this month? How do you do that?
11. How are you keeping in touch with your relatives back home, if any?
12. Have you tried going back to your hometown? If so, how?

13. Are there any specific government schemes that you can benefit from currently?
14. How do you spend your time in the lockdown? How do you entertain yourself?
15. Are you facing any health issues? And where would you go if you were sick?
16. What is the one thing you can do now that you couldn't do before?
17. What was your reason for going back, if you were going back?
18. How has your employer been helping you amidst this lockdown?
19. Did you participate in the clapping and lighting of candles as told by the Prime Minister?

INTERVIEWEE- VIKAS KUMAR SAH

Date: 21st April, 2020.

Language of the interview: Hindi

Mode of communication: Whatsapp Video Call.

Name: Vikas Kumar Sah

Age: 30

Originally from: Bihar

Family members: 2 sons and his mother, who live back in Bihar.

Has been working at the Godown since 2012 (that is 8 years)- His work here includes loading and unloading items.

Even though he is from Bihar, he has been living in the godown before the lockdown, where they are provided with individual rooms of their own.

They get proper supply of water in the godown. For food, they go out for grocery shopping twice a week, get the necessary items. They do it by walking to the grocery store.

When asked about what he knows about the coronavirus, he started talking about how he and his colleagues take all precautionary measures- like how they wash hands before going out of the gates of the godown, and then when they come back and if they come back after buying something (which is the only thing they go out for), before entering the gate, they sanitize their

hands, and then they wash anything they brought/bought from outside, and then wash their hands again. When I asked again, reiterating what he knew about the virus, he said all he knew was that it was called corona and it was dangerous and said “hume isse zyada kya pata karne ki zaroorat hai (why would we want to know more than this?)” and he took all the measures that were supposed to be taken “bimari se bachne ke liye (to steer clear of the sickness)”. When asked again about what precautionary measures that are being taken, he said none of them would go out without wearing a mask, along with washing hands every time they went out. When asked when they will be able to resume work, he said he thinks it would not be before the 6th month (ie, June).

I asked him if he had been paid salary during the lockdown, and he said that he has not been paid salary, but then went on to say that his employer asked them if they wanted the salary but they said no since the employer was in a financial crunch and they had enough savings. He sent money back to his family through courier but this month he could not do that. He kept in touch with his family through calls and he told them about how to work on fields in the morning and not afternoon, and how to keep oneself clean.

He did not have any plans to go back to his village during the lockdown, but he had plans of doing so in June, but now he does not think that is possible, due to which he might miss an important family function (which he sounded very upset about). Apart from that, he is not aware of any government schemes that he might benefit from.

When asked if he fell ill some time recently, he said he did not. But whenever someone fell ill, there was a small clinic nearby where they used to walk till, and it had medicines available as well, so it was not much of a problem.

Now that they do not really have work to do, he and his colleagues do the cleaning around the godown and rearrange stuff they have wanted to for a long time. He also said that he frequently gets body aches because his body is not used to the rest that it is getting during this time- “badan dukhta hai bethe bethe (body hurts while sitting idle)”

I asked him if he did the clapping and lighting of the candles as suggested by Modi, and he said yes. When I asked him why, he said because we needed to show that we support doctors and nurses and everyone who helps us during this lockdown.

Lastly, I asked them about how the employer helped them and he said he was very happy with the way his employer was helping him in terms of money, “raashan” and safety measures and kept asking them if they are doing alright or not.

INTERVIEWEE- SANJIT SAHANI

Date: 21st April, 2020.

Language of the interview: Hindi

Mode of communication: Normal Voice Call.

Name: Sanjit Sahani

Age: 32

Originally from: Bihar

Family members: 3 daughters and a wife, who currently live here with him

How did he come to Ahmedabad?- A lot of labourers from his village came here and he came through contacts.

Has been working at the Godown since April 2012 (that is 8 years)- His work here includes loading and unloading items and keeping a check of the inventory.

Even though he is from Bihar, he has been living in the godown before the lockdown, where they are provided with individual rooms of their own, along with his family.

They get proper supply of water in the godown. For food, they go out for grocery shopping twice a week, get the necessary items. They do it by walking to the grocery store, which is 1.5 kms away. Here again, when I asked him about what he knows about coronavirus, he talked about the precautionary measures, talked about “chuachut (which literally translates to untouchability, but I assume that in this context, it is regarding not touching things/people due to the transfer of the virus), dusro se doori banane ke liye (maintain distance from others) and gandgi se door rehne se (stay away from unhygienic conditions).” To this, he added that all of this should be done to save themselves from getting sick.

According to him as well, they will not be able to resume work before June end. He has not been given his salary during the lockdown, but he doesn't need it either. He does not need to send money back since his family lives here with him. Otherwise, he does it via courier too. His wife lives here and works as a maid in some houses nearby but that work has stopped after the lockdown has been announced. She now cooks for everyone in the godown since they can not eat from outside.

I asked him if he did the clapping and lighting of the candles as suggested by Modi, and he said yes. When asked for the reason, he said he did it because he liked it and no other reason.

He was supposed to go back to his hometown on 12th April along with his family, but since all the railways got shut, he could not. The reason he had to go back was because he had a wedding in the house (of his niece) which was supposed to be held between 25th April and 3rd May, which got cancelled eventually because of the lockdown.

His employers helped him understand what precautions should be taken and have given monetary support as and when it is needed.

INTERVIEWEE- SAPAN BAURI

Date: 21st April, 2020.

Language of the interview: Hindi and Bengali (interview done with the help of a translator)

Mode of communication: Normal Voice Call.

Name: Sapan Bauri

Age: 26 years old

Originally from: Jharkhand

Family members: Mother, Father, elder brother, younger sister, younger brother

How did he come to Ahmedabad?- Through a lady who works as a house help 24/7 in this city.

Has been working at the Godown since April 2015 (that is 5 years)- His work here includes loading and unloading items.

Even though he is from Jharkhand, he has been living in the godown before the lockdown, where they are provided with individual rooms of their own which he shares with another person from the godown.

They get a proper supply of clean and drinkable water in the godown. For food, they go out for grocery shopping twice or thrice a week, get the necessary items. They do it by walking to the grocery store, which is 1.5 kms away. When asked what he knew about the coronavirus, he yet again went on to list the precautions that needed to be taken- including having a 1 metre distance from every person, sanitizing hands properly, wearing masks and maintaining hygiene. When asked about his opinion regarding these measures and whether he follows it or not, he said that he does and he is very particular about “chuaa-chuii (touching here and there)”. When asked when he thinks he will be able to resume work, he had no proper answer and said that they are

still working in terms of organizing etc. He had a ticket to go back to his village by train on March 25, and the reason he wanted to go back home was that his mother has been sick for a long time and he wanted to go see her, and meet the rest of his family.

I asked him if he did the clapping and lighting of the candles as suggested by Modi, and he said yes. He said he did it because “pradhan mantri baleche eta thika habe (if the Prime Minister is saying so, it should be right!)”

He keeps in touch with his family via calls every second day and asks them about the situation there (the shops are open for 3 hours in the morning and then everything is closed and the police are continuously patrolling- “police ne bamboo bandh diya”) and tells them to abide by the precautionary measures. He sends money via a person who sends Rs. 1000 with a charge of Rs. 20 to his village, but he did not send it this time.

Again, he is not aware of the government schemes. His employers have helped him understand what safety measures need to be taken along with monetary help, if needed.

INTERVIEWEE- NIRMAL BAGDHI

Date: 21st April, 2020.

Language of the interview: Hindi and Bengali (interview done with the help of a translator)

Mode of communication: Normal Voice Call.

Name: Nirmal Bagdhi

Age: 24 years old

Originally from: Jharkhand

Family members: Mother, Father, Elder brother, Elder sister

How did he come to Ahmedabad?- Through a lady who works as a house help 24/7 in this city.

Has been working at the Godown since April 2017 (that is 3 years)- His work here includes loading and unloading items.

Even though he is from Jharkhand, he has been living in the godown before the lockdown, where they are provided with individual rooms of their own which he shares with another person from the godown.

They get a proper supply of clean and drinkable water in the godown. For food, they go out for grocery shopping thrice a week, get the necessary items. They do it by walking to the grocery store, which is 2 kms away. He mentioned that they go shopping when there is the least crowd, that is in the morning. When asked what he knew about the coronavirus, he talked about the precautions that needed to be taken- including having a 1 metre distance from every person, sanitizing hands properly, wearing masks and maintaining hygiene. Interestingly, he included Narendra Modi's speech while talking about precautions and how he clapped and lit candles as well. When I asked him about why he included that, he said that he saw a Whatsapp forward about how lighting candles could increase the temperature which would kill the virus, which towards the end of the interview clarified to him was fake. He also was specific about how coronavirus happens due to "chuna-chune (touching others)". He talks to his family every three days, and he has an elder brother working in the village but the onus of the monetary aid falls on him now, since his brother can not work under the lockdown. He tells his family to take precautionary measures. When asked when he thinks he could start working again he said that the chief minister said it will take some time and then said "ki habe januna (I do not know what is going to happen)." He sends money via a person who sends Rs. 1000 with a charge of Rs. 20 to his village, and he did it right before the lockdown started. He has not been paid wages this month, during the lockdown but says he is content anyway because he is getting "khaana-paani (food- water, essentially translating to essential items)."

He had tickets booked for 11th May, which he cancelled because of the fear of getting infected. His reason to go back to his village was because his marriage was finalized and he was going to get married on 25th May, but they have postponed that for the time being, since they do not want to take any risk. His employers have helped him understand what safety measures need to be taken along with monetary help, if needed. Apart from that, he did not know schemes by the government.

INTERVIEW WITH A SECURITY GUARD

INTERVIEW WITH A SECURITY GUARD (taken by Aditi):

Note: This interview is not anonymous since the interviewee was okay, and more than happy, for his name to be seen. However, he did not want it to be recorded, hence no recording was taken.

Questions that were asked:

What is your name? What is your age? Did you work in any other profession before this? How long have you been working in this profession? Do you live in Ahmedabad with your family? How many members are there in your family?

How has the coronavirus situation and lockdown affected you and your family?

Do you follow all the measures that the government has asked you to follow? Why?

Who all work in your family and what do they do? (follow up) Now that they do not have a job at this point, how has it affected your family?

Have you benefited from the schemes the government has provided? Have you seen someone in the neighbourhood being benefited from the schemes?

Do the people around you follow the practice of social distancing? (follow up) Do you think it is justified for the police to use physical force to disperse the crowd?

Name: Girish Gajjar

Profession: Retired Civil Engineer, now works as a security guard since the past 4-6 months.

Age: 54 years old.

He has been working since the past 38 years.

His family has 6 members including himself- his wife, three sons, and a daughter-in-law (He has a daughter but did not mention her because she is married, which I got to know later during the interview)

He lives in Ahmedabad, in a society.

When asked how the lockdown and the Coronavirus situation is affecting him, he went on to say that the public is going backwards and incurring losses. He did not mention anything about how his life is being affected. When asked, he said his family is not facing any problems because of this. He said his life is not at all disrupted by this and they carry on with their life like they used to do so. His son and daughter-in-law work in the RTO and have a driving school, which is currently closed, but according to him, that would not affect their daily life, like getting food, water and electricity etc, because they had enough savings to last for three years.

When asked how the people of the building treat him, he said they treat him like family and that he is very happy about working here. When I reiterated the fact that I was not going to share anything with the members of the society, he said that there are some people in the society who do not treat him well in terms of talking rudely to him, but he also mentioned how some people give him “chai and biscuits” twice a day.

When I was talking to him about how his life is getting disrupted, he says he still goes out and he “is not scared of dying of the coronavirus” because him and his whole family do the *mritunjay jap* everyday (which involves writing the lines in the jap and dipping it into a bottle of water from Ganga river, which is considered holy, and then drinking the water). He went on to say that wearing masks etc are just a show, and that it would not stop anything, only the *mritunjay jap* would do that. He said that the regular medicines we are told to take if we are infected with the virus would only put more chemicals in our body and we should avoid doing that. He contradicted himself in the interview later on, when I asked him if he and his whole family

followed the rules prescribed by the government. He said they followed and believed in the rules and that they took the necessary precautions as well. When I asked him about what he had said earlier versus what he said now, he tried to divert the topic.

Apart from that, when asked about the government schemes, he said that there are no government schemes provided to him or anyone in his building. He said that he was okay with not getting benefited from the schemes, but there were other people who needed it, and he said “esa lagta hai government ko ameer ke alawa kisi ki nahi padi hai (it seems like the government does not care about anyone but the rich)”. He briefly mentioned about schemes like the government giving Rs. 15000 to the people who needed it, but the money never reached them. He then went on to talk about how his family is helping a family next to his house, who were daily wage earners and now are jobless and do not have money for food, and so they provided the family with a square meal and talked about how this lockdown is bringing people closer.

He also mentioned how every night the police had to come every night to disperse the crowd who sat every night to talk (and mentioned how he was not a part of it)- and since they did not listen the policemen used physical power to disperse them, which he thought was very necessary.