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Continuing our coverage of migrant workers and how their return to work is unfolding, this edition presents the situation of workers from the textile industry in Surat. As lockdown restrictions were slowly lifted, migrant workers gradually made their journey back to their workplaces, far from home.

It is important to put things in perspective by keeping in mind that the returning workers have been unpaid for nearly six months and devoid of work, except for any sporadic opportunities in their home villages or towns. Most of these workers feed their families using the wages they earn every day. For families living on the edge of destitution, six months of being home-bound without work have already pushed many into taking loans to buy ration.

Surat has a large textile industry consisting of large scale manufacturers and small scale handlooms and mills. The city has been one of the textile hubs in Gujarat, known for its textile industry. This edition’s story delves into the lives of migrant workers that are employed in small scale looms and workshops and undertakes tasks like stitching, dyeing, and embroidery.
These workshops chiefly employ workers from UP, MP, Bihar, Orissa, and Kuch and Rajkot region in Gujarat. 90% of the migrant labourers working in the industry are back in Surat.
The business hasn’t picked up speed up to pre-pandemic levels for most small businessmen. Consequently, workers are unable to find adequate work.

A business owner explains how earlier he used to receive 1000 to 1500 pieces of cloth as raw material for his workshop every day to perform embroidery. These pieces were divided amongst his 10 employed workers who used to get Rs. 10 for working on every saree.

Now, the owner expresses a concern as he’s only getting 300-500 pieces a day and is subsequently only able to employ 7 workers to work on them. On some unfortunate days, there is no cloth to work on.

From our comprehensive survey on migrant workers which covered their financial information pre and post the pandemic, there are some startling facts that emerge. There has been a drastic fall in the earnings of textile workers. On average, every worker has seen their earnings fall to 60-70% of what it was before the pandemic.

With the dependent family members ranging from 3 to 7, the workers, some who are the sole breadrunners in their family, have been one of the worst affected communities by the pandemic.

Apart from a reduction in salaries and profits, finding work hasn’t been easy either. Some workers are barely managing to secure work for 20 days a month, as opposed to working on 25-28 days a month before the pandemic.

In embroidery workshops, some daily-
wagers are running 8 machines now compared to 6 machines pre-pandemic which forces them to work for nearly 14 hours in a day.

The owners of these workshops and mills have to take care of the food and accommodation of their labourers. Most businessmen take loans on interest for procuring material from the market and paying their workers.

Due to the nature of the business, they receive a profit on their product about 3 months later, leading to massive liquidity issues. Hence, to cover the running costs of the business, they have to borrow until they receive profits.

Moreover, there are numerous operating expenses: maintaining mill machines, paying electricity bills and rent, hiring a supervisor, etc. They also have to deal with policemen who harass them and take hefty bribes for transporting their material on two-wheelers or during the lockdown timings.

A factor that came crashing down on the textile industry and workers was the partial lockdown that was imposed in Surat.
By Diwali last year, the business was picking up the pace for the textile workshops; however, to control the increasing COVID-19 cases, the administration imposed a night curfew in Surat post 9 pm. This night-curfew significantly impacted textile businesses because the transportation of the material (from the workshop to the market) was usually conducted after 9 pm.
Another event that has hindered a steady revival of the industry is the ongoing farmers’ protest in and around Delhi. A lot of textile businesses operating in Surat have their head offices in Delhi.

The finished material that is exported across the country first reaches the capital. The blockade on highways has disrupted the transportation services in and out of the near capital region.

A combination of the partial lockdown and farmers’ protest has created new challenges for these small businesses that have already been unable to recover from the effects of the pandemic.
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