Voices of Sisters
Horizons
Migration

Sr. Sujata Jena giving awareness training on rights, entitlements, government schemes, and provisions for migrant workers at Delta Company, Ernakulam, Kerala, January 19, 2024 (Courtesy of Sujata Jena)

by Sr. Sujata Jena

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Sujeet Tigga, a 27-year-old from the Sambalpur Diocese in the eastern Indian state of Odisha, once dreamed of becoming a priest. He was undergoing formation in a seminary when tragedy struck — his father suffered a fall while working in the jungle, leaving him ill and unable to continue providing for the family. Faced with this harsh reality, Sujeet made the difficult decision to leave his priestly formation and take on the responsibility of supporting his loved ones.

Determined to find work, he traveled over 1,300 kilometers from his home in Badkhalia Village, Odisha, to Chennai in South India, where he found employment in a company called Emerging from Equipment (Pvt. Ltd.). The firm specializes in manufacturing cutting-edge components for plowshares, a far cry from the path he had envisioned for himself.

"My priority shifted from serving God's people as a priest to becoming the breadwinner for my family," Sujeet shared. For the past six years, he has been toiling in the factory, earning Rs 700 ($8) for 12 hours of strenuous labor. He carries the weight of responsibility, having already arranged the marriages of three of his sisters and continuing to support his siblings' education. His voice carries a tinge of regret as he reflects on the limited job opportunities back home.

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When asked if he still aspires to the priesthood, he expressed his desire but acknowledged his family's needs must come first — at least for a few more years. "Only after fulfilling my responsibilities can I think about myself and my future," he said with quiet determination.

Sujeet's story is not unique. Ajay Kerketta, also from the Sambalpur Diocese, once dreamed of joining the Missionaries of Charity Brothers, but had to forgo his calling to support his siblings' education. In total, 22 young men, ages 19 to 27, work in the same factory, struggling to make ends meet. Among them, 19 are Catholic and from the Sambalpur Diocese, each carrying the burden of their family's well-being. Except for one, none are married, dedicating their hard-earned wages to supporting their parents and siblings. Their stories paint a poignant picture of the harsh reality that forces many to trade their aspirations for survival.

I met Sujeet in January 2025 while traveling through South India, particularly Kerala and Tamil Nadu — more than 2,000 kilometers from Odisha — to visit migrant workers. My mission was to meet them, listen to their stories, seek justice for families who had lost loved ones in tragic workplace incidents, and strengthen ties with organizations, labor departments and church institutions supporting migrants.

Forced migration and unemployment

During my visit, I met migrants in factories, marketplaces, bus and railway stations, parishes on Sundays, hotels and even on the streets. It was heartbreaking to see young, energetic men toiling long hours for meager wages, struggling just to survive. Yet, back home, they had no opportunities.

Sr. Sujata Jena with the young migrant workers at Emerging from Equipment (Pvt. Ltd.) company, Chennai on January 22, 2025 (Courtesy of Sujata Jena)

I approached them, letting them know I was there to see them, to listen and to help in any way I could, even though we were strangers. But in those moments, we

connected — sharing our struggles, hopes and dreams. I felt a deep connection, like we understood each other, even without words.

Northern Indian states like Odisha, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Assam continue to be the primary sources of migration to South Indian states such as Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra. The lack of employment opportunities in their home states pushes young men to migrate, often into exploitative working conditions.

According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), India's unemployment rate rose sharply between May and June 2024, from 7% to 9.2%, the highest in eight months. Many young migrants are unskilled, making them vulnerable to low-paying, labor-intensive jobs with little to no social security.

I was surprised to witness that every week, on Fridays, a bus departs from Raikia, Kandhamal district of Odisha, for Kerala, carrying around 50 migrant workers seeking employment. These workers pay Rs 3,000 ($34) for the journey, which takes two days. They lament that if they could find 20 days of work in their own state, they would not need to leave. Yet, they have no choice. Some leave behind young children, who grow up without their fathers; others leave behind elderly parents, hoping that their sacrifices will bring a better future.

Sr. Sujata Jena giving awareness training about rights, entitlements, government schemes and provisions for migrant workers St. George Latin Church, Kalady, Cochin, Kerala, January 19, 2025 (Courtesy of Sujata Jena)

What does the government do?

As per available data, the government has issued licenses to companies to transport workers to different states, with either no guarantees or only limited guarantees regarding wages, layoffs and workplace benefits.

In the last six months, I have witnessed more than 30 migrant workers return as dead bodies — a heartbreaking reality. Yet, the government keeps no data on this and washes its hands of the issue.

If South Indian states can attract industries and companies, why can't states like Odisha and Bihar do the same? The government must invest in small-scale industries to create local jobs and prevent mass migration. Instead of prioritizing large corporations, which automate jobs and exclude unskilled workers, policies

should focus on developing industries that provide sustainable employment for the youth.

While India's GDP grew by 8.2% in 2023-24, the benefits are concentrated in a few large companies rather than being distributed among the working class. The government must take responsibility for ensuring that economic policies benefit the poor and unemployed, not just the elite.

The government must recall the Talisman (Amulet) of Mahatma Gandhi, which serves as a guiding principle: "Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest person you have seen, and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to them."

The role of the church

The church has been widely engaged in providing education and health services. Recently, the church and some religious congregations have been at the forefront of supporting migrants, particularly in destination states. In Kerala, some parishes conduct special Masses for migrant workers, followed by free meals.

However, new challenges have emerged. Many young migrants fall into illegal activities, including drug abuse, trafficking and alcoholism. Sex work, broken families, lack of education for their children and poor living conditions are growing concerns.

Sr. Sujata Jena interacting with the young migrant workers at Emerging from Equipment (Pvt. Ltd.) company, Chennai on January 22, 2025 (Courtesy of Sujata Jena)

It is time for the church and more and more religious communities to prioritize their ministries, journeying with migrant workers and providing them with skill training coupled with spiritual and moral support. We can support them by advocating for policies that ensure fair wages, safe working conditions and economic opportunities in their home states. As individuals, we can walk with them, listen to their struggles and extend our hands in solidarity.

In this Jubilee Year of Hope, what could be the greatest grace in life? It is to share the burdens of others and help them overcome their pain and suffering through accompaniment and empowerment. We are called to bring light to these struggling workers. Let us be the voice of the voiceless, standing for justice, dignity and compassion. Together, we can ensure that migration is a choice, not a necessity. We owe it to those who have sacrificed everything for their families to create a world where they no longer have to.