

India: Rs 2 crore in 9 months: A helpline is assisting workers recover wages

Friday 5 August 2022, by [PALIATH Shreehari](#) (Date first published: 4 August 2022).

India Labourline, which focuses on wage disputes, compensation delays and rights violations, offers a useful model to reach India's huge unorganised workforce.

Yellapa, 35, was a relieved man. For nearly three months, he had struggled to recover Rs 4,000 worth of wages that a construction contractor owed him and his wife. As a migrant construction worker, Yellapa earns around Rs 700 a day in Bengaluru, a city he calls home for most of the year, save for a few months when he returns to his village 600 km away in north Karnataka's Kalaburagi district.

"I had been trying to recover the wages owed to me and my wife for a few months, but the contractor kept making excuses and delayed paying the pending wages. Then I found the helpline number on a card that was distributed here," Yellapa told *IndiaSpend*.

We had met him in southwest Bengaluru's Hosakerehalli labour hub in early July, where he was waiting along with other labourers to find a day's work from contractors. After contacting the helpline, Yellapa was finally able to recover the wages through mediation.

That helpline is [India Labourline](#), which was set up for migrant and informal workers in July 2021 by [Working Peoples' Charter](#) in collaboration with the [Aajeevika Bureau](#). The Working Peoples' Charter is a coalition of organisations working on labour issues, headquartered in Mumbai. Aajeevika Bureau Trust works for migrant worker welfare in south Rajasthan and urban Gujarat and Maharashtra.

Soon after the nationwide Covid-19 lockdown was imposed in late March 2020, there was an [exodus of workers](#) with the [abrupt closure](#) of work sites in India's metropolitan cities and large towns, which are major employment hubs for millions of informal migrant workers.

Around [11.4 million](#) migrant workers - more than the population of Uttarakhand - found themselves stranded without jobs, shelter, food, transport or any organised support system, and headed back home with their families and belongings. Many made the journey on foot, resulting in at least 971 non-Covid deaths, including of 96 workers who died on trains, *IndiaSpend* [reported](#) in March 2021.

India Labourline was also [set up in response](#) to migrant worker [distress](#) witnessed during the Covid-19 [lockdowns](#). "We saw how workers were abandoned by governments and employers during the lockdown. Most did not have a contract or social security at their work destinations," Working Peoples' Charter national coordinator Chandan Kumar told *IndiaSpend*.

The labourline primarily focuses on registration and resolution of wage disputes, and cases of wage compensation delays and workers' rights violations. It also provides information on workers' entitlements and welfare programmes.

Until June 2022, the helpline has registered more than 3,600 cases - excluding calls for information

on welfare entitlements - involving wage disputes amounting to Rs 8 crore, and recovered a total of Rs 2.1 crore in resolution of compensation and wage theft cases, according to helpline data accessed by *IndiaSpend*.

The India Labourline model is useful and can be scaled up with the support of the Union and state governments as the required investment is small enough to be financed through philanthropic initiatives or corporate social responsibility funds, experts on labour and migration told *IndiaSpend*.

The idea is to support labour governance and extend this model to different parts of the country, Sushovan Dhar, director, India Labourline, told *IndiaSpend*. "We are not creating an alternative to state mechanisms but trying to inform the state about fixing gaps in labour governance. A labour helpline alone will not fix all issues," said Dhar.

Filling an important gap

In June 2021, while [responding](#) to a petition on migrant welfare in light of the lockdown-induced exodus, the Supreme Court [mandated](#) that government registration of unorganised sector workers be expedited. More than [90%](#) of India's workers are employed in the informal sector.

The government began registering an estimated [380 million](#) unorganised sector workers on its [e-Shram](#) portal in August 2021. Around [280 million](#) (74%) of workers have been registered, as of August 2, 2022. Of these, more than [70%](#) work in agriculture, as household domestic workers, or in construction, like the workers who gather at the Hosakerehalli labour hub every day.

The monsoon drizzle meant fewer workers than usual had turned up at the Hosakerahalli labour hub that day in early July, when we accompanied the India Labourline team on their outreach work.

Routinely, around 500 workers like Yellapa awaited work opportunities on either side of the busy main road, quickly huddling and negotiating wages when a potential employer arrived, the team informed us. While male workers, who outnumber women workers, earn anywhere between Rs 600 and Rs 1,200 a day, based on their skill, women earn much less, at around Rs 500.

As state coordinator Muniraju T, tele counsellor Francis Gunavante, and field mobilisers Gayathri Raghu Kumar and Srikanth gave out pamphlets and cards with information on the helpline, a crowd of curious workers slowly gathered.

Some approached intently, seeking work, while others who had witnessed the exercise previously wanted to understand how they could get "[labour cards](#)" -for example, Karnataka Building and Other Construction Workers' Welfare Board Benefits card - made and access other worker entitlements in the expensive metropolis. Some attempted to explain the workings of the helpline to their coworkers.

When Gayathri, armed with an A4-sized form, spoke to a clutch of workers, a few opened up to the possibility of resolution of longstanding complaints that contacting the helpline promised.

Rajesh, a stocky mason in a black cap and white shirt from Ballari district in east-central Karnataka, shared his plight with Gayathri, who noted the basic details of the case. The distraught worker, who had not completed primary school, had wages due to him since the lockdown in 2020. "That person owes me Rs 8,000. I do not have his number but I can identify the house," said Rajesh. He choked up on learning there was some hope of recovering his hard-earned wages.

The Karnataka India Labourline team has registered more than 1,000 cases over nine months to June 2022, the most among all states. The cases came to light mostly through calls from migrant

workers in the city. It has fully resolved 319 cases and partially resolved 49, and recovered nearly Rs 70 lakh, or a third of all wage recoveries by India Labourline, till mid-June 2022.

Effectively, the labourline began operating in October 2021 after setting up state offices and recruiting people, said Dhar. “We were able to recover Rs 1 crore in six months and the rest [Rs 1.1 crore] in 3 months.”

While India Labourline is phone-based, many workers tend to share problems when they directly interact with staff during outreach, in the states where India Labourline has facilitation centres, the team said. Besides Bengaluru, India Labourline has state facilitation centres in Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad and Lucknow.

The helpline is accessible to workers from any location in India, but by default calls tend to be mostly from workers in cities, which are employment hubs. The main call centre, located in Mumbai, runs from 8 am to 6 pm.

It has seven counsellors, who between them speak Hindi, Marathi, Kannada and Telugu, to respond to workers’ calls. The labourline is implemented in the cities with the support of local organisations. In Karnataka, it is implemented with the support of [Grameena Koolikaarmikara Sanghatane](#), which literally means “rural manual workers association”, or GRAKOOS.

“Our basic approach is to popularise the helpline among workers and encourage them to call on the labourline for any rights violations,” said Divya Varma, programme manager, policy and partnerships, Aajeevika Bureau, at their state centre in Bengaluru.

The [Social Security Code, 2020](#) mentions the need for creation of [helplines or facilitation centres](#) to help unorganised, gig and platform workers with registration and support. The Union Ministry of Labour and Employment had [launched](#) a workers’ helpline in April 2020, during the nationwide Covid-19 lockdown.

It was, however, [ineffective](#) in terms of dealing with the crisis in labour governance that predated the pandemic, said a June 2021 [report](#) by [Stranded Workers Action Network](#), a [cross-country volunteer group](#) which came together in [March 2020](#) to mobilise relief for stranded migrant workers.

The “Ministry of Labour’s helplines are not helplines but post offices at best”, the report [said](#). This was echoed by India Labourline staff, who told us that the helpline was a temporary one only for Covid-related relief, and that there was no Union government labour support helpline similar to the India Labourline model.

IndiaSpend has asked senior officials at the Ministry of Labour and Employment about its plans to create a labour helpline as mentioned in the code, and whether it would consider adopting a model similar to India Labourline. The article will be updated when we receive a response.

Earning trust

“Most workers complain about wage theft or delay in payments. Although there are some disputes related to Employees Provident Fund and Employees State Insurance [for organised sector workers], and a few calls relating to compensation for injury, most cases are wage disputes in the construction sector,” said Gunavante, one of the Kannada tele-counsellors who fields nearly 25 calls daily.

Once a case is registered, for instance on a wage dispute, the counsellors make calls to the contractor or employer to telemediate the dispute. Some of them agree to make the payment, while others may not. If telemediation is unsuccessful after multiple attempts, it is escalated to the state

team which makes field visits to mediate with the employer. They inform employers about the consequences and a possible legal escalation.

“In case calls do not work, we try to meet them [employers] at their office or work site ideally. We prefer not to go to contractors’ homes for mediation. As a last resort, we escalate to send a legal notice [through lawyers],” Muniraju, the Karnataka state coordinator who is part of GRAKOOS and is involved with field mediation, told *IndiaSpend*.

He emphasised the need to interact with workers to build trust with them. “I estimate that if we share 100 cards, we receive up to eight cases. Workers will respond only when they start trusting us and that will happen only if we visit them.” The team also follows up with them about their cases before 10 am, before they go out to work for the day, he added.

Presently, India Labourline is estimated to cost more than Rs 2 crore annually, per India Labourline data. By October 2022, the helpline is expected to expand to 11 additional cities, largely covering southern and western urban work destinations, said Dhar. It is based on a decade-old labour helpline set up by the Aajeevika Bureau in Rajasthan, teams of both organisations told us.

Rajasthan model

Labourline is based on a similar phone-based [helpline](#) run by Aajeevika Bureau, in partnership with the Rajasthan government.

When Amitkumar Gupta, 32, a welder from Uttar Pradesh started working with a contractor in Mumbai in October 2021, he was promised Rs 18,000 as monthly wage. In February 2022, he was sent to Indore for work. Between February and April he was not paid his wages, he claimed.

As the spring festival of Holi arrived in March and a wedding in the family loomed in April, he was distressed. Gupta had never encountered such circumstances in a job he had been doing for nearly 15 years, he told *IndiaSpend*.

He called a landline number he found on the internet which was received by the labourline set up by Aajeevika Bureau in Rajasthan, which helped him obtain his due wages. “I did not know which state the call was connected to, but it is very useful for workers like me,” says Gupta.

“Now I can fearlessly go anywhere to work knowing that I can access support if I face such problems.” Gupta said that there were other workers with him who had not been paid fully and were waiting to hear from the same contractor before deciding whether to register a complaint on Aajeevika’s labourline.

In 2009-’10, Aajeevika Bureau set up an offline support system for migrant/informal workers in Udaipur and nearby regions of southern Rajasthan, to help resolve wage-related issues and access information on entitlements.

Mediation was an apt mechanism to recover compensation from employers because migrant workers were unable to stay in their place of work and enter into litigation, Santosh Poonia, programme manager (Legal Education, Aid and Advocacy) at Aajeevika Bureau, told *IndiaSpend*. Realising that the issues it was receiving from workers were not exclusive to the Udaipur region, Aajeevika set up a phone-based helpline in 2013.

Mediation through a phone-based system is beneficial for both parties in terms of time and money, said Poonia. “Employers know that if a case is genuine and a third party is mediating, then getting into litigation will not help them. Litigation is our last resort,” he said.

Soon after it was set up, the Udaipur labourline had started to receive 50 cases through the helpline and around 30 offline cases each month. “Nearly 40%-50% cases were getting resolved. [In 2015], we approached the state government [for support and expansion] and have been running it [through the dispute resolution centre of the government] since December 2015,” said Poonia.

From 2015 until June 2022, the Rajasthan helpline has recovered Rs 33.5 crore and resolved 60% of the 18,177 cases it has registered, according to Aajeevika data.

“It helps the workers, and our work becomes easier as well, because many issues get mediated and resolved through the helpline,” said Gajaraj Rathore, a labour welfare officer in Rajasthan. The toll free number helps workers raise complaints of non-payment of wages and some of the cases are forwarded to the labour department, he added.

The Aajeevika Bureau helpline received more than 1,27,000 calls in 2020 and 2021 - more than 40% of all calls since 2015 - due to the pandemic-related lockdown and travel restrictions which affected informal workers.

The proportion of cases resolved, however, fell during the pandemic, said Poonia, as employers, facing financial issues, were asking for more time to resolve pending wages.

The Aajeevika helpline, though costing just around Rs 60 lakh annually to operate, recovers “around Rs 40 to Rs 50 lakh [in disputed wages] per month and is also able to impart rights-related information and awareness,” said Poonia.

PHIA Foundation, a non-governmental organisation, has been running a similar toll-free [helpline](#) in Jharkhand along with the state government since 2016, to help informal workers access labour welfare programmes.

After the nationwide Covid-19 lockdown in 2020, the Jharkhand government launched a State Migrant Control Room helpline to facilitate provision of aid and relief to stranded migrant workers, which was managed by the foundation.

The intervention helped create a database of migrant workers, mapped workers’ skills, and provided awareness on welfare measures, according to information shared by PHIA Foundation.

The helpline continues post-Covid to provide support to these workers, such as in obtaining pending wages and compensation in cases of accidents, according to a June 2022 [analysis](#) by the International Institute for Environment and Development, an independent research organisation in the UK. The Jharkhand helpline is another model that could be expanded across India, the analysis noted.

Hurdles for women workers

Most of the complaints on both India Labourline and the Aajeevika helpline are made by male workers.

Women workers tend to report their problems to their husband or male relatives, India Labourline staff said. Another challenge is that [women workers](#) may not have [access](#) to a [mobile phone](#), making it difficult for them to register a case, or follow it up.

Take the case of Parvathamma*, who hails from rural Tiruvannamalai district in northern Tamil Nadu, around 200 km east of Bengaluru. While Parvathamma did not know her age, she told us she had been working since the days when the daily wage rate for women - now nearly Rs 500 - was Rs

10 in Bengaluru.

She said that she, along with another woman worker, had worked for 30 days for a contractor, but had received only half the payment. She, however, was unable to retrieve the contractor's number and did not have a mobile phone of her own, she told the India Labourline team during their outreach work at the Hosakerehalli labour hub.

Rural women and women with no schooling are less likely than most other women to have a mobile phone that they themselves use, and are less likely to be able to read text messages if they have a mobile phone, said the [National Family Health Survey-5](#).

Cases reported by women will also depend on the work sector, said the India Labourline team. For instance, more cases are registered in the garment sector cities, where workers are mostly women, than in the construction sector, where male workers dominate.

Government backing

Labour and migration welfare experts and scholars feel that helplines similar to India Labourline and Aajeevika can be useful for India's millions of itinerant workers.

A mediation helpline is usually related to formal workers and would be useful if it can support all stakeholders including informal workers and government officials, said [KR Shyam Sundar](#), labour economist, and visiting professor at the Xavier School of Management in Jamshedpur.

"It provides easy access to the labour department official who otherwise hides behind a plethora of bureaucratic walls, but the question is whether the labour department officials have enough patience and time to resort to this system."

Sundar felt that ideally, trade unions must actively support the helpline system even though they might feel that their function of intermediating between the government official and the worker is being supplanted by a direct communication system.

While helplines are useful and allow migrant workers to access documents and entitlements, government participation will empower civil society organisations and non-profits, said Ram Babu Bhagat, head, department of migration and urban studies at the [International Institute of Population Studies](#) in Mumbai.

It will help organisations working on labour welfare to create a platform to support vulnerable groups like migrant workers, and collate a database of issues faced by these workers, he added. Sustaining such initiatives will not take a huge investment. An element of philanthropy like corporate social responsibility funds may be required.

"We are trying to work with state governments, but it depends on the interest governments show. The labour department in Lucknow responds promptly to our complaints and issues notices to employers," said Dhar. He added that the helpline had not yet had an opportunity to engage with the Union government.

**Name has been changed to protect their identity*

Shreehari Paliath

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