SURAT : The Unending Plight of Migrant Workers

- A Report By Pravasi Shramik Adhikar Manch

The Cost of the Gujarat Model : The 'Choice' Between Slavery & Starvation

The Finance Minister of Gujarat, Kanubhai Desai presented the state budget for 2025-26 in February 2025, an analysis of which puts the GSDP (**Gross State Domestic Product**) projections for Gujarat[1] at around Rs 29,82,032 crores. These projections and growth stories rely heavily upon the manufacturing and services sectors, the contribution of these sectors roughly being 44% and 36% of Gujarat's economy, respectively (2023-2024). The Surat Economic Region (SER), comprising six districts in southern Gujarat, is centrally located between 2 major economic hubs of India, namely Mumbai and Ahmedabad. Although SER accounts for only 10.8% of the state's total area, it generates 25% of the state's GDP and has a per capita GDP of approx. $4,586 (FY 2023), which is 1.2 times higher than the state average and 1.8 times higher than the national average.[2]

But hidden behind these 'figures of growth' is the dark reality faced by millions of migrant workers. The manufacturing and services sectors are heavily dependent upon migrant workforce from states like Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal, Maharashtra etc. However, the huge number of migrant workers from these states which generate wealth for Gujarat's businesses remain entangled in an unending quest for mere survival – most of whom work for 12 hours or more under tremendous pressure and without leaves or social security. The beginning of October saw a plethora of news items reporting the mass exodus of migrant workers who keep the industrial areas and businesses of Surat running throughout the year. However tension between workers and employers had already started simmering by mid–August when workers from Vedanta Industrial Area in Amroli, Surat led agitations demanding weekly leaves and had to face state repression in the form of FIR against 500 people. Eight people were also arrested by Gujarat Police in this case. The discontent among workers could not be suppressed by these brute measures and by October the news of workers' agitations demanding better wages, safe working conditions and most importantly a week's off **in a work-week consisting of 84 hours of gruelling work** were to be found in plenty of media reports.

A team of Pravasi Shramik Adhikar Manch consisting of Comrade Vinod Singh, Comrade Sandeep Saurav, Comrade Sadrul, Comrade Anandbhai & Abhishek visited different areas of Surat and interacted with migrants from different states including Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal & Odisha. The team also met local union organizers as well as leaders of INTUC, AITUC, CITU and people actively engaged with the struggles of textile sector workers – who constitute the bulk among the masses heading back to Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and other states.

[1] https://prsindia.org/budgets/states/gujarat-budget-analysis-2025-26

[2] NITI Aayog, Economic Master Plan for Surat Economic Region, Pg 13

The Unending Round Trips: From Gujarat to Home-States & Back

However, the exodus of migrants from Gujarat is neither a new phenomenon nor an isolated occurrence. Whether we talk about COVID curbs, industry closures, mass-layoffs, abysmally low wages or discontent due to unsustainable working hours without weekly leaves – migrant workers remain the worst affected over the years. To add to the already existing issues of livelihood and survival in Gujarat, migrants face another dangerous ordeal while travelling back to their home-states because of lack of long-distance trains. A migrant worker from Jharkhand's Giridih district described the arduous 42-45 hours bus-journey in cramped cabins from Surat to his home district as extremely difficult to endure.

In March 2026 when the gas prices soared because of US–Israel aggression against Iran – workers flocked railway stations to return to their home-states.[3] Videos of a migrant worker filmed outside Udhna Railway Station in April 2026, went viral across various social media platforms in which the worker with great anguish declared, *" Ab nahi aaunga dost, ab nahi aaunga, bata dena"*[4] (Let them know I won't return, I won't return anymore). The plight of diamond workers because of mass-layoffs, wage-reduction, zero-social security, industry closure has been continuing for too long in the famed Diamond Cutting & Polishing Industry of Surat forcing many workers to even commit suicides.[5] Many workers facing lay-offs and wage cuts have time and again been forced to leave Surat for survival.[6] A pattern of exploitation and struggle keeps repeating itself – workers fleeing back to their homes because of job and wage uncertainty and complete failure of Gujarat Government to provide any kind of support or security and then a journey of survival to Surat again or other greener-looking pastures because of complete apathy of governments back home.

The Cycle of Exploitation : Gaon-Chalo Andolan In Modi's *Amritkaal*

While some chose to fight the inhumane working conditions, low-wages and job insecurity, many in textile industry chose the journey back home. During conversation with union-organisers and workers in Surat the team of Pravasi Shramik Adhikar Manch found that the workers had started going back after repeated appeals had fallen on deaf ears of the employers and protests had attracted FIRs and arrests instead of any remedy by the state. Various concerns of textile-workers of Surat show striking similarities with the issues raised during series of spontaneous protests across the country in 2026 – from Barauni, Panipat, Bhagalpur, Buxar, Jamshedpur, Haridwar, Manesar and Noida to Korba, Singrauli and Petnikota and many other places. In Gujarat alone protests had erupted on multiple occasions during earlier months of 2026 in Vapi, Dahej, Surat, Vadodara etc.

[3] https://www.ndtvprofit.com/india/gas-shortage-triggers-worker-exodus-in-surat-textile-units-hit-as-migrants-head-home-reports-11247002

[4] https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=OT3yh4WXas0

[5] https://theprint.in/india/job-losses-factory-closures-pushing-surats-diamond-workers-to-the-edge-71-suicides-in-18-months/2339805/
https://www.newsclick.in/surat-diamond-units-losing-sparkle-after-massive-lay-closure

[6] https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/ahmedabad/slump-in-diamond-industry-compels-workers-to-leave-surat-amid-festive-season-9645221/

The police-action with active backing of the industrialists during protests by the migrant workers and trade unionists led to another round of FIRs and arrests on 15th October, 2026 (the first being in August, 2026). Many workers and union leaders were detained while trying to raise their demands before the collector's office in Athwalines, Surat on 15th of October. Our team was able to meet some of the union leaders and workers who faced police action and they discussed with us various demands of the migrant workers employed in textile industry.

Major issues and demands of the textile sector workers who talked to us included the following :-

1. ***Weekly offs & Work Hours*** – The migrant workers employed in different textile units told that working for 12 long hours and sometimes even more without breaks or weekly holidays left them extremely tired and drained. The workers said that the industry owners had demanded wage reduction in lieu of weekly holidays. This when many workers complained about inadequate staffing leading to operation of multiple machines by a single worker for extended hours. The trade union leaders told that three letters listing the demands of workers had already been submitted to the labour department and employers but the government had turned a blind eye to all the representations.
2. ***Extremely Inadequate & Untimely Wages & Zero-Social Security*** – Workers in the textile industry said that most of the workers earned monthly wages ranging from 13,000 to 18,000 though there were some who also earned between 21,000 to 30,000. The wages were often paid late and in some cases employers kept deferring payment for months. The workers also stated that statutory provisions, including those of medical benefit, PF, bonus etc. were simply not honoured.
3. ***Mass Layoffs, Job Insecurity & Police Crackdowns***– The union organizers as well as the migrant workers gave detailed descriptions of how mass-layoffs and threat of immediate termination kept them on their toes. With no livelihood support in their home states, workers are often left at the mercy of employers. The Gujarat Government has not only failed to ensure the rights of these workers but has actively pursued the policy of crackdowns and arrests. Union activities are severely curtailed using both the private and state machinery, leaving workers without any effective bargaining power. Recollecting the events of 15th October, the migrants said with disdain in their eyes that 'satyagraha' in the land of Gandhi is no more an option for them as they are not even allowed to protest peacefully for survival. Almost all attempts by workers to raise their demands in recent months had been met with deployment of huge number of state forces and completely unjustified and harsh treatment of protesting migrant workers.

   Even our team had to face the intrusive Gujarat Police who decided to gate-crash our meeting in plain clothes despite it not being announced in public. They left only after strong objections by the people present in the meeting.
4. ***Frequent Workplace Accidents*** – Gujarat beyond its images of vibrancy and growth is the state with highest number of industrial accidents in India.[7] The stories narrated by migrant workers gave no contrary picture. We were told that accidents during operation of machines in textile industry were quite frequent. However, workplace accidents in

[7] https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/gujarat/2026/Aug/04/gujarat-witnesses-heaviest-factory-fatality-burden-with-2282-deaths-in-10-years

most cases led to treatment without any employer support and often remained unreported. In the textile hub of Surat, accidents at workplace not only lead to physical harm to the body but also mean loss of employment and wages with almost no support from employers.

Apart from the demands listed above, many workers especially from Jharkhand & Bihar complained about the lack of train connectivity and resulting inconvenience in terms of time, money and physical exertion during travel as a major issue affecting their lives as migrants in Gujarat.

Conclusion :

The reality of the exhausting 84 plus hours of manual labour every week and the government's 'Ease of Doing Business' model would surely inspire the confidence of corporate blood suckers like Narayan Murthy and S N Subrahmanyan in Modi's 'good governance' but these conditions serve to exploit, starve and oppress millions of migrants from states like Bihar, UP, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha etc. Though the Modi Government tried to generate a false narrative around the implementation of the four labour codes through numerous ignorant and congratulatory media reports – the actual effects of implementation of these anti-worker labour codes can be seen in the condition of migrant workers of Surat and numerous other places across the country. The attitude of the Union Government towards the issues of these workers can be gauged by the highly insensitive remarks made by the Union Textiles Minister Giriraj Singh who visited Surat on 9th of October.[8] "Mill owners and workers are two sides of the same coin. The ideal relationship is one in which the mill owner treats the worker as family, and the worker considers the mill owner part of the family," the minister had said these words when migrants from Bihar were being denied even basic human rights.

Despite all repression and threats the valiant struggle by the migrant workers in Surat shows that no amount of threats can stop workers from demanding their rights and fighting for dignity and better living conditions. Pravasi Shramik Adhikar Manch demands that the state and central governments stop pursuing anti-worker policies and ensure living wages, holidays, 8-hours workday & social security for these migrant workers. We also demand revocation of all FIRs registered against protesting workers and union leaders and putting an end to threats and intimidation by employers. The state governments in states with outward migration should take proactive steps to stop the exploitation of workers and formulate policies for the welfare of all workers who are compelled to look for employment opportunities in other states.

We would also like to thank Comrade Sujeet Pathakji, Surat District Secretary, CPI, Naishadh Desai, President INTUC Gujarat and various other union leaders and workers who extended all support to our team during our visit to Surat.

[8] https://m.thewire.in/article/rights/over-70-textile-workers-activists-in-surat-detained-amid-protest-for-weekly-day-off-timely-wage-payment/amp

https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/surat/political-elements-trying-to-create-unrest-in-surat/articleshow/134842037.cms