

# THE MIGRANT WORKERS OF INDIA

An Ongoing Photographic Essay by Shubhodeep Roy

Dedicated to the resilient souls the migrant workers of India whose unwavering strength illuminated the darkest hours of uncertainty.

This project stands on the shoulders of support from esteemed organizations and institutions whose commitment to social welfare has been invaluable:-



EUROPEAN UNION  
Delegation to  
the Council of Europe



*Global Campus of Human Rights*



This project owes its realization to the collective efforts of numerous individuals and organizations whose contributions extend beyond measure. To those unnamed heroes, countless supporters, and the many more whom words fail to capture, your impact is deeply felt and sincerely appreciated.

In the symphony of life, my lens sought to capture the poignant melodies echoing from the lives of those often unheard—the migrant workers of India. This photographic essay unfolds against the backdrop of the unprecedented COVID-19 lockdown, a crucible that tested the mettle of these unsung heroes.

As the pandemic's tremors reverberated globally, millions found themselves stranded in unfamiliar cityscapes, far from the solace of their homes. "The Migrant Workers of India" is not merely a visual chronicle; it's a tapestry woven with the threads of resilience, hope, and the indomitable spirit that defines the human experience.

From the bustling streets of Kolkata to the quiet corners of barren bus stands, each frame encapsulates a fragment of their journey—a journey marked by toy parrot sellers, brick kiln workers, farmers, and rickshaw pullers. These images transcend mere documentation; they encapsulate the collective heartbeat of a community navigating the labyrinth of an unforeseen crisis.

This project is a testament to their struggles, not confined to the lockdown's temporal boundaries. It transcends the temporal, weaving a narrative that extends beyond the immediacy of the pandemic's first wave. It endeavors to capture the evolving stories of these resilient souls as they navigate a post-pandemic world, where challenges persist, and yet, the human spirit refuses to yield.

Beyond the frames lies a reflection—an acknowledgment of the interconnectedness that binds us all. "The Migrant Workers of India"

invites you to delve into their stories, to witness the undying hope that threads through their existence. As we navigate these visual narratives, we are reminded that their journey is not isolated; it is a shared odyssey, a testament to the collective strength that emerges in the face of adversity.

Join me on this odyssey through the lens, where each image is a portal into the lives of those who form the backbone of our society—the true heroes in the mosaic of our shared humanity.

The project consists of two chapters, each capturing a distinct phase in the lives of India's migrant workers.

Project Chapters:

**1. Resilience amidst Lockdowns (2020-2021):**

In the initial phase of the project, I documented the lives of the Migrant Workers of India during the stringent lockdowns of 2020 and 2021. This chapter captures their struggles, sacrifices, and unwavering spirit amidst unprecedented challenges.

**2. Navigating the Aftermath (2022 and Beyond):**

The second chapter delves into the lives of these resilient individuals as they navigate the aftermath of the pandemic. The lens shifts to portray the enduring impact on their lives, offering a glimpse into how they persist through economic downturns and continue their journey.

## Resilience amidst Lockdowns (2020-2021)

This is a story, which is very close to my heart, each of the below shots is a story documented during the lockdown. I have tried to tell the story of some migrant workers, people who were recalling their horrendous experiences during the Covid-19 lockdown in Kolkata, India. Where they had migrated with their family to work as casual construction laborers, street vendors, and some other jobs. Their anxieties about returning to their hometown. In Kolkata, they had been stuck for over a few months with little food and money. Reflecting those of the large numbers of Migrant workers who migrate from remote, rural regions of Bihar to big cities in West Bengal & Assam. Migrant workers numbered more than 8.1 million people among this segment. Indian migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic have faced multiple hardships.

In the wake of India's 25 March 2020 decision to impose a national lockdown, domestic migrants took desperate measures to reach home amid the pandemic and policies taken to contain it, at both the central and state levels. Migrants' often long treks home were made in the most inhospitable of conditions, frequently with tragic results.

Indian Migrant Workers Paid the heaviest price for COVID-19. The men who keep INDIA running. Labourers who do everything from constructing buildings to cleaning sewers. They come to cities from Rural India. In search of work. Every morning they wait at street corners, for contractors who might have a job for them. But the pandemic have struck a hard blow. With factories and workplaces shut down due to the lockdown imposed in the country, millions of migrant

workers had to deal with the loss of income, food shortages, and uncertainty about their future. Following this, many of them and their families went hungry. Thousands of them then began walking back home, with no means of transport due to the lockdown, In response, the Central and State Governments took various measures to help them and later arranged transport for them. According to me, heroism does not always mean an act of bravery. Heroism is also staying strong during the harsh strong times and taking care of all his responsibilities. In my eyes, they are all heroes, who fought hunger, poverty along the virus. I had a little chat with them, the people I have documented, to know their untold stories.

Description of Photograph 1 -

*Photograph 1 - The Birdcatcher*



This Picture was shot in Kolkata, India. I was out shooting in the street, where I noticed this man selling toy parrots, I found it very interesting as the man was totally odd in that environment. I ducked in the road in order to take a low-angle shot of the man holding those birds and luckily it was the time in the evening where all the birds (especially crows) were returning to their nests and that's how I got the shot. I have tried to juxtapose the real birds with those fake ones; this shot was taken during the 6 months lockdown, local vendors like this man were severely affected as they could not step outside the home and their business is falling down due to the restrictions imposed by the government, but still, this local vendor who has left his village and shifted to a big city (Kolkata) in search of a decent income has anyhow stepped out of his house risking his life to the virus and was selling toy parrots in hope that someone will buy them and he will earn some money. The reaction in the man's face shows it all that "Hope is a good thing, probably the best of all things, and no good thing ever dies." Apart from all the hardships and pain, this man believes that someday things will change and life will be better.

*Photograph 2 – The Street Vendor*



Description of Photograph 2 -

This picture was shot on an empty bus stand in Kolkata, India. I was in that area documenting the scene. Usually, during the normal days that bus stand on the heart of the city is full of crowd and hustle-bustle, but due to the lockdown the area was deserted, I found this man selling balloons on the street, after having a little chat with him, he explained that how he has been severely affected by the lockdown, men like him, who have left their hometown and have shifted to big cities, hoping to earn some money for his family. And since the whole transportation system is closed they can't even return back to their village also.

*Photograph 3 – The Migrant Worker.*



Description of Photograph 3 -

This my personal favourite in the series. The eyes of a brick kiln worker peep out above a makeshift mask. The brick kiln worker's predicaments were similar in nature with the kilns abruptly shutting down rendering thousands of labours without any source of income or even accommodation.

*Photograph 4 - The Worker At The Farms.*



Description of Photograph 4 -

India is home to about 120 million smallholder farmers who contribute over 40% of the country's grain production and over half of its fruits, vegetables, oilseeds, and other crops. Much of the global share of food staples such as rice and wheat come from India, and almost half of the population in India depends on agriculture for their livelihood. But due to lock down the whole industry has suffered a huge setback, affecting many farmers. This shot has been taken on the outskirts of Kolkata, where I met this man who works as a farmer and was recalling his experiences of being stuck in a foreign town without a proper source of income and food. Among steps announced to ease credit for small farmers, the government said that the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) will extend an additional

refinance support of ₹30,000 crores for crop loan requirement of rural cooperative banks and regional rural banks to help these people.

*Photograph 5 – The Labourer*



Description of Photograph 5 -

This is a story of a labourer, working in an election rally, who has been stuck in the city since the lockdown. He was a construction worker, but due to the closure of the system, he was forced to quit his job and take up these seasonal jobs just to earn his bread. When the government announced the lockdown, labour migrants in cities found themselves in the void of having lost their job, sometimes their housing, and in large numbers of cases their income. Many of them had no alternative but to return to their home villages and as transport was cancelled as part of

the lockdown, often on foot, exposed to hunger, and risks of infection, harassment, and poor conditions of forced quarantine. Migrant workers that stayed in cities often found working conditions worsen.

*Photograph 6 – The Fruit Seller*



Description of Photograph 6 -

I have tried to tell the story of Ram Das, a migrant worker from a small town in Bihar, India, recalling his horrendous experience during the Covid-19 lockdown in Kolkata, where he had migrated with his family to work as a local fruit seller in a market. His anxieties about returning to his hometown in Bihar. This shot was taken in Kolkata, West Bengal near the Esplanade bus stand, where hundreds of workers were waiting and trying just to be on a bus that leaves for Bihar. I am into street photography, I was there documenting the scene where I took this shot,

after taking the shot, I had a little chat with him where he told me his name, what he does, and how he is surviving the lockdown with his wife and children and for how many days he is trying to return to his hometown. In a bid to contain the spread of coronavirus infection, the government of India announced a nationwide lockdown in March 2020. But what followed over the next few months was the exodus of migrant workers from cities to their native places

*Photograph 7 – The Factory Worker*



Description of Photograph 7 -

Please Turn Over.

A shot of an unknown factory worker, working in the factory, while the lockdown has been imposed. I think of a hero as someone who understands the degree of responsibility that comes with freedom, such as a worker working in harsh conditions even during the pandemic, risking his own life for the sake of his responsibilities as a father, a son, and a husband. Not all heroes wear capes, and not all heroes get recognized by society.

*Photograph 8 – Hope Of A Father*



Description of Photograph 8 -

A story of hope, a shot of an old man during the pandemic. Due to the lockdown, imposed by the government unemployment rate rises in every sector of the market. This old man's son was a labourer in Kolkata who had migrated from Bihar with his family and had lost his

job due to the lockdown, but still, he believed that someday the sun will shine, and their condition will improve. They didn't give up, and they not only survived the virus but also poverty. This family is a true example of heroism and courage. The story of this man shows that no situation is permanent in life. During a 6 month lockdown, he couldn't step outside the boundaries of his house, but he remained calm and hoped that one day everything will become normal again, and someday his condition will improve.

### *Photograph 9 – The Barber*



#### Description of Photograph 9-

I was walking through the streets of Kolkata, where I found a small old fashioned empty Barber Shop where a Barber was sitting, it was the time when just the lockdown was over in India and people had

just started coming out of their houses maintaining Covid-19 protocols, I was having a conversation with the barber, all I got to know that how his business was declining day by day due to the effect of the pandemic and after lockdown while having the conversation he looked at his mirror that's when I took the shot focusing on his reflection in the mirror. For me, this picture is a reflection of a common man, who is working hard by running a barbershop, during these tough times of pandemic too.

### *Photograph 10 – The Shopkeeper*



#### Description of Photograph 10-

A shot of a local non-essential shop that got severely affected due to the covid 19, Over the past year, India has emerged to be one of the worst affected nations globally by the Covid-19 pandemic, the resultant lockdowns, which are springing up again across the country with the

rise in cases had an impact on thousands of small scale business. As only the essential services (Medicine and Grocery) were only allowed to open for a short span of time. The workers of these small shops were the ones who were affected the worst, as many of the workers and labourers were migrants and they were not even paid properly. This is a shot taken before the 2nd wave of Covid -19 when the guidelines of the lockdown were a little linear and these shops were given permission to open for a few hours only. Even after opening, these shops suffered huge losses due to fewer customers.

*Photograph 11 – The Idol Maker*



Description of Photograph 11-

Kumartuli is a traditional potters' quarter situated in northern Kolkata, West Bengal, India. The city is renowned for its

sculpting prowess. It not only manufactures clay idols for various festivals but also regularly exports them. The second wave of coronavirus has made the artisans of Kumartuli, the famed colony of clay modellers in north Kolkata, anxious if they are facing the same scenario of last year when Durga Puja organizers ordered smaller, less priced idols to suit their reduced budget induced by the pandemic. Kumartuli supplies idols of gods and goddesses to various parts of the country and abroad and the artisans earn the most during the Durga Puja, the largest festival of West Bengal, India. The modellers said they are also worried that the already dwindling number of their workers (mostly migratory) may further go down as the apprehension of a total lockdown from mid-May is gaining ground in the neighbourhood where many people have been affected by Covid-19. This is a shot of Tarun Pal an Idol maker in Kumartuli, who have shifted from Orissa to Kolkata to work as an Idol maker but have been severely affected by the pandemic. For approximately 6 -7 months during the lockdown, Tarun Pal didn't work on a single idol, a first in his career as an idol-maker. Prior to the coronavirus outbreak, Tarun would make approximately 30 small and large idols in one season, ranging from 10 feet in height to as small as two feet. This year, however, he has been forced to cut down on that number drastically. Everyone in Kumartuli is facing a similar situation. The costs of the raw materials have increased following the lockdown and the prices of the idols have also increased. But customers don't want to spend that much money.

*Photograph 12 – The Taxi Driver*



Description of Photograph 12-

A shot of Adinath Sahu a Taxi Driver from the city of joy Kolkata, who have migrated from a small town in Bihar to work as a Taxi Driver in the city, he is already without income due to the lockdown in this situation he finds it very difficult to pay house rent, dues for the vehicle and meeting food expenses, his little cash reserves are depleted, and any further extension of the lockdown period is bound to push him and many other taxi drivers like him into desperation. Their fear that the worst is yet to come is not unfounded. For many, keeping the vehicles idle for a stretch of a few weeks has already started causing deterioration in the condition of the battery and other things. The wounds of the previous lockdown itself hadn't healed. Many taxi

drivers are still paying off debts incurred during the previous lockdown in 2020. The government had allowed the movement of taxis for emergencies during the lockdown. However, Adinath said it is not feasible to run the taxi depending on those customers. Facing troubles in the second wave of the virus, several taxi drivers sold off the cars to make ends meet. My protagonist doesn't even know how this will end, but every day he risks his life to the virus to earn some money so that he can return home when the lockdown will be over.

*Photograph 13 – The Rickshaw Puller*



Description of Photograph 13-

The Government's decision to impose lockdown restrictions has spelled trouble for daily wagers in the state. Hand-rickshaw pullers, whose livelihood depends on ferrying people to and fro regularly, are

facing a pecuniary crisis. A shot of a Fifty-year-old rickshaw puller Balbir Mahato who said that a good day would fetch him Rs 300-200, but now making Rs 30 to 40 is a big task. If people do not come out, how could he work and earn money? He arrived in Kolkata from Jharkhand to work as a rickshaw puller nearly two decades ago, he stated that he cannot go back to his native place as he feels there is no work to be found there. The sole earner of his family, the anxiety about how he will keep going should the so-called lockdown be extended.

*Photograph 14 – Another Rickshaw Puller With The Same Fate*



Description of Photograph 14-

A shot of another Rickshaw Puller with the same fate, Babulal Shyam a 60-year-old rickshaw puller from Bihar whose income has drastically come down due to the lockdown imposed by the government and is struggling hard to make both ends meet in these extremely tough

circumstances. He has to work at this old age also to earn his bread, he doesn't even know when he will be able to return to his hometown. Many of the Rickshaw Pullers do not even own rickshaws, so they hire one on rent for Rs30 per day. Hence, they had to shell out that amount as well from their daily earnings, which hardly leaves anything for them.

*Photograph - 15 - The Garage Mechanic*



#### Description of Photograph 15-

A shot of an unknown Garage Mechanic working during the lockdown in order to earn some money, since most of the garages were closed, he still tries to open it for a short span of time hoping to gain some customers, but there are very few and most of the days there are no

customers at all due to the restrictions on private vehicles, he still hopes that someday thing will become better for him and his business will resume again.

## CONCLUSION

These people, I don't even know the names of all these people. They are just the representation of millions of people like them who got affected, food shortages, and loss of income, but still, they didn't give up, each and every day is a struggle and a battle to be fought, these are the people who build the society,

**THE FEAR OF CONTRACTING COVID IS ECLIPSED BY THE BATTLE FOR SURVIVAL AMONG THOSE FAMILIES.**

The government of India has also taken various steps to help them, like Due to the suspension public transport facilities, migrants started walking towards their home state on foot. Subsequently, buses and special trains were permitted by the central government subject to coordination between states. During the initial, more than 58 lakh migrants were transported through specially operated trains and 41 lakh were transported by road and free ration for migrants and farmers during the national lockdown

I believe all those people who have left their hometown and sacrificed their safety and life to work and to take care of his family is a hero. These people are just the representative of all those unsung heroes. In life we get in touch with so many people, people divided in their different worlds and only their stories stay in our hearts.

In the first “The Migrant Workers Of India”, I Have Tried to document how the pandemic affected the lives and livelihoods of migrants in India.

### On Chapter 1

I have tried to tell the story of 15 such Migrant Workers who had migrated long distances with or without their families to work in big cities but unfortunately, they were stuck and couldn't return to their homes due to the pandemic and the lockdown imposed by the government. I was deeply moved and saddened by each of their stories, their frustration about the loss of income and all the struggles these people have faced. I really must admit that after the documentation, now I take life and things more seriously and try to value each and everything I have in my life.

This was indeed a long term project, it took about a year for me to work on this topic. This project was initiated during the unlock phase of the lockdown during the first wave of the pandemic.

I had always been fascinated with people’s lives and their stories. Photography has given me a deeper understanding of humanity. And to do that I always have to interact with the people I am photographing so that they can accept me in that environment while following this process, I come across many people. And I experienced a little bit of their life while listening to their stories. And this is how I created this project. I strongly believe in the power of photography to change people’s perspective towards social changes and issues. My

photographic journey is not only to capture the social, political and financial issues and conflicts, but also to portray the artistic beauty and enduring power of the human spirit. I am on an endless journey of documenting the untold human stories through my lens. All I wanted was to tell their stories on their behalf.

## Chapter Two: "Navigating the Aftermath (2022 and Beyond)"

As we turn the page to the second chapter, we delve into the lives of these resilient individuals as they navigate the aftermath of the pandemic. The lens shifts, offering a poignant portrayal of the enduring impact on their lives and the challenges they face as they continue their journey beyond the initial wave of COVID-19.

The country slowly emerged from the pandemic's first wave, but for migrant workers, the road ahead was fraught with challenges. The economic downturn led to job losses, pushing them further into the shadows of uncertainty. Yet, amidst this darkness, their indomitable spirit remained unbroken.

In their eyes, I witnessed an unyielding determination—a refusal to be extinguished. The visuals in this chapter tell a profound tale of perseverance, echoing the enduring power of the human spirit. While their lives may seem unchanging, their struggles persisting, their

resilience shines through. Like the timeless words of Robert Frost's poem, they have "miles to go before they sleep."

Through my continued photographic journey, I aim to reveal the untold stories of India's migrant workers as they navigate the aftermath. This chapter serves as a testament to their strength, portraying moments of hope and resilience. Despite the challenges, their spirit remains unwavering.

As conditions for these individuals seem to echo the past, I am committed to an ongoing documentation. I will keep on capturing their stories, unveiling the persistent struggles and unbroken spirit of the migrant workers of India. This project extends beyond a mere snapshot in time; it is a continuous narrative of their journey—uncharted and enduring.

*Having walked through the early mornings of Kolkata, I've borne witness to countless moments like the one captured in these photographs. Each dawn brings forth a silent symphony of hopes and struggles, played out on the canvas of the city's quiet streets. The resilience etched on the faces of those standing in line, the anticipation in their eyes, and the unspoken stories carried in the chill of the morning air—these are scenes that unfold daily, unnoticed by many. These moments are not isolated; they are threads woven into the fabric of the city's narrative. Through my lens, I've aimed not just to document but to amplify the echoes of these silent struggles, hoping to make the unseen seen and the unheard heard.*





## **Resilience in the Wake: The Unseen Struggles of Kolkata's Migrant Workers – Documentation in Progress**

As of 2024, the migration of individuals from lower-income backgrounds continues to shape the streets of Kolkata. Many have come seeking work, leaving behind their homes in distant towns and villages, hoping for a better future in the city of joy. Yet, despite the promise of opportunity, their lives remain a daily struggle—marked by long hours, fleeting moments of hope, and an enduring resilience that keeps them moving forward. Through my ongoing photography, I aim

to capture their untold stories, shedding light on the quiet strength that drives them as they navigate the challenges of this bustling metropolis





















As I navigate through these profound yet often unnoticed narratives, my commitment endures. The journey with the migrant workers of India continues—a chronicle of their resilience, quiet strength, and the undying hope that propels them forward. The camera remains poised, ready to encapsulate the myriad moments that weave the fabric of their lives. There are miles to go before I sleep, and in each step, I find a renewed purpose to tell their stories, to cast a spotlight on their struggles, and to ensure that their voices resonate beyond the margins of silence. The odyssey persists, a testament to the enduring spirit of those who persevere in the face of adversity.

## About Me



*Self Portrait*

I am Shubhodeep Roy a 22-year-old internationally award winning photographer based in Kolkata, India. I have a Bachelor's Degree in Commerce from the University Of Calcutta. Photography is my passion and I have started doing it from a very young age. I have been working on social responsibility projects and trying to photograph socially important issues. My photographs have been exhibited globally and have been published on several occasions nationally and internationally.

Being a photography enthusiast, I have been travelling near and far to capture interesting human stories for the past few years, exploring and documenting a range of different aspects of human life. Capturing the human element is always key to my photography, and through my photos, I want to share my unique perspective and experience. I don't know if or when this unquenchable thirst will come to an end!

**Thank You.**