

We Never Begged in Our Lives But Were Forced To

Denis Giles, Andaman & Nicobar Islands

The 45 year old Jakir Hussain Pasha alias Rasheed hails from 24 Paragana District in West Bengal and has been earning his living as a migrant labourer in the Andamans since past couple of years. Travelling thousands of miles from his hometown, Rasheed made it to the Islands in search of livelihood opportunities to support a family of three back in his hometown.

Skilled in masonry, Rasheed was able to earn a daily income of approximately Rs. 1000/-; enough to support his stay in the islands and his family members.

The 20th of March 2020 was a turning point in the life of Rasheed and thousands of such migrant labourers in the Andaman Islands, who are solely depended on their daily income. With the lockdown announced by the Prime Minister, Mr. Narendra Modi, the labourers had vague idea, what lay ahead.

With bare minimum ration articles at home, the labourers somehow managed a week, without any income or money remaining to purchase more. Most of them had used diesel for cooking but closure of petrol bunks in the Islands had added to the situation.

Helpless and hungry, the labourers started venturing out in the nearby colonies with their children to beg for food. Many had tears in their eyes, as this was the first time in their lives that they were doing something, which hurt their self-esteem.



“We never begged in our lives but were forced to”, said Rasheed in a heavy voice and moist eyes. There were hundreds of them standing beside Rasheed, with faces covered, following the government’s instructions of social distancing. They were collecting food that was cooked and served by eight youth volunteers in the area, who came forward as a blessing in disguise to the helpless and hungry.

“The volunteers have come as angels to support us”, said Rasheed adding that they only wish to return to their hometown.

When the youths saw us begging, they decided to collect provisions from people around and serve cooked food to us. They did this twice in a day and are continuing to do so. “We have no words to thank them”, expressed the labourers with folded hands.

After the report on the situation of migrant labourers came up in newspapers, government officials led by the lone Member of Parliament of A&N Islands, Mr. Kuldeep Rai Sharma had rushed to the spot to take a stock of the situation. Ration articles were donated by the Member of Parliament while names and other details of the labourers were collected by the officials. But that seemed to be just an action taken report in government files, with no response or any assistance later.

With the youth volunteers continuing to support the needy through individual contributions from the members of the society, the labourers eagerly wait to return to their homes. Hundreds of people belonging to the islands remain stranded in mainland India with no proper decision taken by the Andaman authorities. It’s only after the islanders are brought back that the migrants stand a chance to leave the islands for good.