



International  
Labour  
Organization

# Impact of COVID-19 on Indian Overseas Migrant Workers

*Challenges to Safe Repatriation and the Way  
Forward*

National Online Meeting with MEA, POEs and  
Overseas Recruitment Agencies

April 29, 2020

A Report of the Proceedings

# **Impact of COVID-19 on Indian Overseas Migrant Workers**

## **Challenges to Safe Repatriation and the Way Forward**

**National Online Meeting with MEA, POEs  
and Overseas Recruitment Agencies**

**April 29, 2020**

**Organised by ILO, India with support from the Work in Freedom  
programme**

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## List of Abbreviations

COVID-19: Coronavirus Disease 2019

ECNR: Emigration Clearance Not Required

ECR: Emigration Clearance Required

FE: Foreign Employer

FIMCA: Federation of Indian Manpower Export Promotion Councils & Associations

FORAI: Federation of Overseas Recruitment Associations of India

GCC: Gulf Cooperation Council

GOI: Government of India

GST: Goods and Services Tax

ILO: International Labour Organization

MEA: Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India

PGE: Protector General of Emigrants

POE: Protector of Emigrants

RA: Recruitment Agent

WIF: Work in Freedom programme

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has gripped various parts of the world leading to widespread deaths and soaring rates of infection. India's efforts at keeping the infection rates at bay presently, within the country and its leadership at the regional and international level have received wide recognition from the international community. There have been a number of concerns surrounding the welfare of Non-resident Indians, especially in the GCC region, including reports of workers stranded in destination countries, adversely impacted by lockdowns and restrictions, many terminated from the jobs, visas revoked, and at risk of infection. As a result, the Government of India is looking at possible evacuations of some Indian nationals who are stranded overseas. The Ministry of External Affairs and Indian embassies overseas have been reaching out to the Indian diaspora and migrant workers in major destination countries and are continuously assessing the situation.

Workers' experiences and situation at the destination vary based on their gender and social identities as well as skill levels and working conditions under employers. Recruitment agencies play an important role in the labour intermediation process and are usually the first point of contact for migrant workers in distress. The demand for repatriation is growing and after the easing of travel restrictions, several workers expect to return to India in the coming weeks. The Amnesty schemes announced by popular destination countries such as Kuwait, will also lead to the repatriation of irregular workers. Yet, while the situation varies across the Gulf region, some workers expect to return to work soon after the resumption of economic activities, some will return to India and hope to migrate again after a few months but there are larger numbers that are expected to return and will need employment within India in the near future. The involvement in the labour recruitment process and knowledge about problems faced by workers can contribute towards preparing an appropriate evacuation plan and prioritising workers that are most vulnerable, thus need immediate attention.

In such a context, the International Labour Organization (ILO), through its Work in Freedom (WIF) programme, hosted a dialogue to understand the challenges to repatriation and rehabilitation of overseas Indian workers, especially those in low-skilled and semi-skilled sectors. MEA officials including the office of the Protector General of Emigrants (PGE) and Protector of Emigrants (PoEs) from sending states, state-run recruitment agencies (RAs) and major overseas private recruitment agencies representing the industry participated in the national meeting. The ILO Director and PGE's office lead the discussion. Representatives of the RA industry provided an update on their perceptions of the prevailing situation, expected challenges status of migrant workers stranded; based upon the destination and target skill sectors, such as health personnel including doctors and nurses, construction workers, service sector workers, domestic workers and others.

## Brief Summary of Proceedings

The Director, ILO India, Ms Dagmar Walter, delivered the welcome address at the national meeting<sup>1</sup>. In her address, she welcomed the participants, especially those from the Ministry of External Affairs, the Protector of Emigrants from major sending states and the recruitment agencies representing the industry. She mentioned that ILO had played a role in hosting several consultative meetings on safe recruitment with the Government of India, recruitment agencies (private and state-run) and highlighted the importance of this particular meeting in light

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<sup>1</sup> This meeting was conceptualised and organised by Dr Neha Wadhawan, National Project Coordinator, Work in Freedom programme, ILO India and Ms. Seeta Sharma, Technical Officer, EU-CAMM project, ILO India with support from Mr. Shabarinath Nair, Regional Specialist, ILO (Labour Migration – South Asia) and Ms. Divya Verma, Programme Officer, ILO India.

of the COVID-19 crisis and its adverse impact on the world of work. She acknowledged the role of recruitment agencies as important intermediaries in the labour migration process; and encouraged them to play an integral role in the process of understanding the challenges involved in ushering the repatriation of workers in light of the unforeseen circumstances emerging due to the COVID-19 outbreak in destination countries.

On behalf of the Protector General of Emigrants (PGE) office, Mr. Pradip K. Yadav, Director and (PoE) Delhi made the opening remarks. He mentioned that repatriation from destination countries would need cooperation from the recruitment agencies. It is important to have an accurate estimation of the number of migrant workers expected to return. He emphasised on the importance of RAs in safeguarding the jobs of migrant workers and enabling migrant workers to obtain their pending payments to avoid large numbers of such grievances in the near future.

He said that the MEA has requested for data from RAs on ECR and ECNR migrant workers sent to various destination countries, category of work migrated for and details of their foreign employers to assist in planning for quarantine of returnee workers and drawing up related logistical solutions. He highlighted the importance of the role played by Indian missions in assessing the number of Indians requesting repatriation. He said that advance planning and arrangements for quarantine in coordination with states are being made. He mentioned the importance of medical testing prior to travel and mandatory quarantine upon return will be necessary.

Mr. Bosc, Chief Technical Advisor (CTO), WIF ILO joined the meeting from Beirut and spoke about the differences between the formal and informal sectors in Gulf countries and the relationship between the two, are important to acknowledge for this discussion. He mentioned that while many workers work in the informal sector, they are recruited through some degree of formality. Some sectors are more adversely affected than other, e.g. construction is more affected than domestic work. He emphasized on the importance of upholding workers' rights

to timely payment of wages and other universal entitlements which need to be safeguarded despite the repatriation process. He mentioned that there were reports of such violations taking place in Kuwait, and it is important for destination states to ensure that employers do not take undue advantage of amnesty to deny wage payments or dismiss workers from their jobs. He underlined the important role played by RAs in placing migrant workers. Ensuring protection of migrant worker' rights at the destination will benefit the industry in the long term.

The next segment of the meeting was dedicated to a guided discussion with private recruitment agencies, state-run recruitment agencies and PoEs. Sector specific inputs, especially on the oil and natural gas sector and the construction sector in destination countries were sought and possible means to tackle the challenges to safe repatriation.

## **Salient point of the discussion with RAs**

While some private RAs reported that the workers they placed are not seeking repatriation; there was acknowledgement of the need for repatriation resulting from downsizing and closure of projects during the meeting.

- A large number of Indian workers may have reportedly lost jobs with lockdown restrictions coming into effect. Many firms and employers are reported to be working on 30 per cent staff capacity with employees accepting salary reductions of 30-50 per cent. In some reported cases, compulsory unpaid leave has been granted for a few weeks to a span of months. Legal notifications allowing employers to downgrade salaries have further exacerbated the adverse conditions of workers.
- Larger employers will survive the lockdown and resulting slowdown, while small businesses and small employers fear that their businesses may not survive the shock. Many companies are expecting only 30% of contracts to





come through as most orders and tenders stand cancelled. Hence, some companies will pay for repatriation, while others will claim they cannot afford to cover such expenses.

- Employers in some cases, have asked workers if they would want to continue working despite the COVID pandemic and large numbers have reported wanting to return home.
- Since reports on the spread of the pandemic have reported health workers and elderly persons to be more vulnerable to infection, efforts at dispelling myths is important so that future policies avoid being discriminatory towards certain types of workers or older workers.
- Skilled workers in aviation sector, banking and other sectors are also working on reduced salary conditions, some have taken voluntary pay reductions of 30 per cent on salary packages
- Estimates provided by private RAs about workers needing repatriation varied between 5 – 7.5 lakh (500,000 – 750,000) workers expected to return due to the COVID pandemic. Data collection on ECR migrant workers to ECR countries is available, while ECNR migrant workers is necessary yet unavailable.
- Caution must be exercised not to generate expectations for all who apply to be repatriated in the registration process.
- Panic is leading many workers to request for repatriation. Many workers were anxious about the welfare of their families and given the uncertainties attached to the course of the pandemic and its rapid spread, wanted to return home to be with their family members in such times. It is possible that such workers will want to return to work after a few months, after the pandemic is at bay.
- The type of visa would also be critical to estimate the numbers needing repatriation. Many workers migrate on visit/ tourist visas and those reporting expired visas will require assistance.
- Grievances related to non-payment of wages and non-settlement of dues due to sudden termination will be a major challenge. Governments in countries of destination are providing support to their employers in this



situation by permitting delayed payments to workers. . Such grievances will need legal aid that could be provided through the Indian Embassy and NRI associations.

- In some sectors, resumption of work (transport, limited services) could resume as soon as next month while with for the construction sector, it varied depending on several factors; retendering decisions which could take a few months and if the spread of the virus can be contained in the accommodation provided to workers. Large worksite rules require doctor, nurses on site and the demand for such workers has increased.
- For the oil and natural gas sector as a refinery does not shut down, some types of work continue, e.g. maintenance work. The reported job loss could possibly have deep links to fall in demand, storage and distributional bottlenecks and dipping oil prices coupled with the local impact of COVID-19. The resumption of scale of activities may take up to a year.
- The demand in some sectors, especially the health sector has increased rapidly; UAE has reported requested for nurses on leave in India to cut short their paid leave and report back to work and are looking to hire more nurses in the near future.
- Some RAs are also attempting to adjust workers in the destination to secure their livelihoods, especially in sectors such as operations and maintenance where the demand is steady.
- Thousands of migrant workers recruited legally, with contracts and air tickets purchase for travel were waiting for deployment in India and the RA industry has been severely affected as many orders have been cancelled and the prevailing uncertainty of the situation is expected to continue for a minimum of 7-8 months.
- RAs are incurring huge losses in terms of lost business, employers cancelling orders, visas issued, medical certification, and airline tickets. RA Associations requested for a *force majeure* as they cannot be held responsible for grievances of migrant workers at the destination.
- Several private RAs expressed that many repatriation demands were due to the prevailing sense of panic amongst Indian migrant workers and the



situation will improve after lockdown restrictions are relaxed and the economy resumes functioning in destination countries.

- There are several workers in popular destination countries such as Saudi Arabia (KSA) waiting for their work permit (*ikama*) and medical certification, before the COVID outbreak and their status is unclear. In many countries, visas and work permits have expired after lockdown and their status is unclear. Exit stamps on expired visas in country like KSA will be necessary to exit the country.
- Repatriation requests could be expected from countries beyond the Gulf region, as many migrant workers in non-ECR countries could also want to return due to job loss and be with their families. Singapore and Malaysia are also popular destination for migrant workers, will deserve attention for a possibly high volume of repatriation requests.
- The plight of migrant workers at greater risk to contracting the COVID virus such as health workers including doctors, nurses, hospital sanitation staff, housekeeping workers, those providing home-based elderly care and domestic workers deserves concentrated attention.
- Women migrant workers, are concentrated in sectors such as nursing and domestic work where the demand continues to be high, stigma combined with difficult existing working conditions continue to be a challenge, e.g. elderly care, housework.
- Domestic workers report experiencing harsh and unregulated working conditions pre-COVID outbreak in the destination. Due to lockdowns, their working conditions have been adversely affected, protection against overtime work without pay and violence in the workplace is essential, as is the need to ensure safety of the worker in all types of workplaces. State RAs are reporting that workers are being asked to work more and facing increased difficulties. They are asking RAs to intervene to negotiate more pay for additional services.
- Isolated workplaces lead to limited access to important precautionary information in the wake of the COVID pandemic. Access to internet within

living arrangements will enable migrant workers to access necessary information through peers and in a language they understand.

## Comments by PoEs and State-run RA

POE Mumbai, Mr. Jayan K. Sao emphasised the importance of prioritising the category and number of workers who can be evacuated at the earliest as it will be difficult to facilitate all workers together. He inquired about the status of workers in camps and request RAs for more information in this regard, especially camps run by manpower agencies and if there were reports available on the number of workers stuck in such camps who were awaiting necessary documentation and/or yet to be placed with employers. He expressed concerns about visas that have been revoked.

Mr. Swamy, General Manager, OMCAP (Andhra Pradesh), a state-run RA, spoke about the influence of rumours in creating expectations about repatriation and its modalities. He shared that while OMCAP has not received any complaints or requests for repatriation related to COVID, there are domestic workers who have reported working overtime without pay and complaints regarding working conditions were on the rise.

Ms. Sumathi Vasudev, PoE Chennai spoke about the liaison role of RAs with registered Foreign Employers and the need to provide details of exact number of emigrants along with locations and employer details to enable to the PGE office to estimate effectively for the necessary logistics for the repatriation process. There are emigrant workers who are contacting the PoE offices in source states as they are unaware of the contact numbers for the Embassies in their country of location. Mr. B. Selvaraj, PoE Thiruvananthapuram spoke about the process of working with state governments to collect data and efforts of the Kerala government to collect data on repatriation requests. He mentioned that these requests come from various types of migrants besides workers; requests have

been received from students, tourists, and many other Indians wanting to return home. He highlighted the urgent need to work with state governments on the issue of managing expectations relating to repatriation resulting from various efforts to collect data, including state-led registration processes.

## **Categorisation of Overseas Migrant Workers on Priority Basis**

There was consensus during the discussions that workers worst affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, must receive immediate assistance in repatriation. For repatriation, an inclusion/exclusion criterion could help prioritise vulnerable workers who need to return on an urgent basis. Applications from the following categories merit an immediate response for emergency evacuation, if possible, prior to travel restrictions being lifted:

1. Elderly, non-COVID-19 hospitalised cases and unassisted migrants with medical conditions (pregnancy, heart disease, respiratory problems who are unable to access medical facilities or care in the destination countries)
2. Family emergency in India (due to death, hospitalisation, need of family member assistance) and worker wanting to return irrespective of available support at the destination

There was general acceptance of the reality that it is not possible to bring back all Indians simultaneously, a strategy needs to be devised to prioritise those who have no options to return to work and no access to emergency support.

For a better understanding of the situation in destination countries, some categories emerged from the discussion. They may be divided into seven categories:



1. Undocumented workers.
2. Workers who were working on short term employment contracts via employment visas; work completed and awaiting pending dues/return tickets/exit visas
3. Workers who reached the destination on employment visas, staying at shelters provided by manpower agencies/ destination RAs but need to return due to unfulfilled contracts as projects shelved due to COVID outbreak
4. Employment terminated due to COVID outbreak with no access to cash, nutritious food, safe accommodation and health facilities with physical distancing provided by the employer on-site. No promise of re-employment after lockdown restriction are lifted.
5. Compulsory unpaid leave due to COVID outbreak with no access to cash, nutritious food, safe accommodation and health facilities with physical distancing and no promise of re-employment after lockdown restrictions are lifted.
6. Compulsory unpaid leave due to COVID outbreak with access to cash, nutritious food, safe accommodation and health facilities and physical distancing with possibility of re-employment after lockdown restrictions are lifted.
7. Reduced wages due to COVID outbreak but access to cash, nutritious food, safe accommodation and health facilities. No promise of upward revision of wages after lockdown restrictions are lifted.

The top five categories deserve immediate attention for emergency evacuation across different forms of employment and sectors.

## Suggested evacuation response preparations in India

- Panic amongst migrant workers is explicable and there is a need to work together to reach out through Embassies, NRI Associations etc. RAs must aid in provide accurate information on COVID precautions and assuage the panic situation amongst workers placed by them. The role of state governments is also critical to provide this assurance and make arrangements for where workers are expected to return.
- The central government can steer the process and coordinate efforts. A taskforce, led by the MEA where Embassies and source state governments can aid data collection and access to plan for transportation and quarantine facilities needed.
- Liaison role of RAs to identify migrant workers and negotiate conditional repatriations with employers so workers can return to work (within 3-6 months) if repatriation is facilitated
- Recruitment agencies must urge manpower agencies, counterpart agencies/offices in destination countries and foreign employers to make pending wage payments to migrant workers
- As many returnee workers are expected to be from certain states and specific districts within the states of UP and Bihar, Punjab, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Rajasthan, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, logistics to reach the migrants back to their home state directly is required. Ships will reach migrants to only those states within India with links to the sea and pose challenges to safe repatriation with repeated quarantine, as a large number of migrants are expected to be from landlocked states.
- Ships are not a preferred option for repatriation as passengers are at greater risk to COVID infection given the challenges of quarantine and the sheer numbers that travel together for long duration.
- Point-to-point repatriation is necessary. While flights may be operational from limited airports, travel of substantial numbers of returnee migrant workers must be facilitated from destination workplace/ city to source district headquarters in home states within India.



- Importance of state governments in data collection, from the repatriation process involving quarantine to reintegration into the Indian economy necessary as a result of an immediate decline in available employment overseas and limited opportunities available locally.
- A skill registry could be created where information is collected during repatriation/ return travel and could be a possible way to collect data on the skills of workers returning to India. This could provide an opportunity to collect data on returnees and skills and match local opportunities for such skill sets in the wake of decline in demand due to COVID related restrictions.
- ILO to provide technical support and spaces for consultation between relevant stakeholders to support the welfare and protection of emigrant workers in source countries.

## Suggested evacuation response in the destination

- Foreign employers who are covering subsistence of workers at present, without payment of wages should be asked to immediately pay salaries. This will build confidence in workers to stay on till work resumes and help alleviate the panic situation.
- In case, workers want to return to India, foreign employers must be requested to settle pending dues (including wages, accommodation, food and health expenses) and covering their transportation costs for repatriation to India, including COVID related testing and transportation from worksite until home within the state of origin.
- Manpower agencies must safeguard worker's rights even though they are not deployed for work with any employer, as they may be temporary residents on their premises and not transferred to employers due to COVID related restrictions.
- People stuck in labour camps since lockdown restrictions have been imposed, must be evacuated and provided access to shelter homes/ camps in cities where repatriation can be facilitated. Many such workers will not



have necessary medical certification or stamped visas to permit return and employers must enable access to such facilities.

- Workers who seek repatriation require COVID free certificates based on approved medical testing which must be made available in destination countries, prior to return. Destination countries/employers may not bear the cost of testing prior to evacuation and for now, only hospitals and clinics are allowed to authorise the need for testing. The certification will bear limited validity so expected evacuation dates must fall within the certified safe period.
- All workplaces, including private households must ensure that migrant workers can work with necessary safeguards necessary for protection against COVID and maintain decent working conditions

## Conclusion and Way Forward

Ms Walter, delivered the closing remarks and thanked all the participants for expressing their views on a range of important issues that emerged. She stressed on the importance of information, not just about precautions related to COVID - 19 but also about local attempts; rules, guidelines, directives from government and efforts by trade unions and CSOs to provide subsistence and contribute to arresting the spread of the virus in destinations where Indian workers are stranded. She emphasised on the need for accurate data and institutionalised systems to collect relevant data in advance to deal with such a crisis in the short term and protect migrant workers and the local economy as well as for such data to contribute to multi-lateral and bi-lateral dialogues between countries.

The meeting closed with a reinforcement of ILO's commitment to create spaces for constructive dialogue, continue consultations on safeguarding the interests of migrant workers and laying emphasis on social security systems that provide

a safety net in time of crisis. Recognising the importance of working with labour intermediaries, registered RAs who are crucial to skill matching and enabling workers access decent employment opportunities locally and in destinations is essential. As responding to the situation resulting due to the COVID pandemic is the need of the hour, the meeting provided several insights to immediate needs and mid-term concerns through the voice of important stakeholders.

For more information please contact:

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## Annexures

### Annexure 1: Agenda for the National Meeting

#### Impact of COVID-19 on Indian Overseas Migrant Workers

#### *Challenges to Safe Repatriation and the Way Forward*

National Online Meeting with MEA, POEs and Overseas Recruitment Agencies

Webex Online, Facilitated by ILO

April 29, 2020, 1 – 3 pm

Time	Session	Session Plan
12:50 - 13:00	Login & Rules of engagement for this meeting	Moderator: Mr. Yogendra Uniyal
13:00 - 13:10	Opening session:  Opening Remarks by the Director, ILO India  Remarks from PGE	Ms. Dagmar Walter, Director, ILO India  Mr. Amrit Lugun, PGE, MEA GoI  Moderated by Dr. Neha Wadhawan, NPC ILO
13:10 - 13:20	Setting the context	Mr. Igor Bosc, CTA, ILO
13:20 - 14:20	Update of situation at destination  Identification of priority cases	Views from national federations Views from RAs – State-wise  Moderated by Ms. Seeta Sharma, TO, ILO

14:20 - 14:50	Current challenges & moving forward together	Protector of Emigrants Led by Mr J.K. Sao, POE Mumbai
14: 50 -15:00	Closing remarks and Way Forward	Mr Amrit Lugun, PGE Ms Dagmar Walter, Director ILO Summary and Vote of Thanks Dr Neha Wadhawan, NPC ILO

## Annexure 2: List of Participants

Protector of Emigrants (PoEs) and MEA:

Sl. No.	NAME	DESIGNATION	Place/State
1	Mr. Pradip Kumar Yadav	Director, Protector of Emigrants	Delhi
2	Mr. Vivek Sharma	Protector of Emigrants	Rae Bareli/ Uttar Pradesh
3	Mr. J. K. Sao	Director, Protector of Emigrants	Mumbai/ Maharashtra
4	Mr. Mukesh Kaushik	Under Secretary, Protector of Emigrants	Hyderabad/ Telangana
5	Ms. Sumathi Vasudev	Director, Protector of Emigrants	Chennai/ Tamil Nadu
6	Mr. Bijay Selvraj	Director, Protector of Emigrants	Thiruvananthapuram / Kerala
7	Dr. Surabhi Singh	Chief Administrative Officer, International Centre for Migration, MEA	New Delhi

Private Recruitment Agencies:

Sl. No.	NAME	ORGANISATION
1	Mr. Yogendra Singh Bondwell	Bondwell Enterprises
2	Mr. Arif Habib	Habsons Jobs
3	Mr. Amit Saxena	Ambe International Private Limited
4	Mr. Sanooj NP	ALRABIA HR CONSULTANCY
5	Mr. Ashraf Ali	H.R Group of Companies
6	Mr. Varun	Dynamic Staffing Services Pvt. Ltd
7	Mr. D.S. Reddy	Placewell HRD Consultants , Hyderabad
8	Mr. Satish Rao Chitty	GTM International, Hyderabad
9	Mr. Syed Ameerullah Hussaini	Hope Placement Services
10	Mr. Vijaya Kumar	Kannan Enterprises, Vishakhapatnam
11	Mr. Suresh Kumar Madhusudhanan	Seagull International
12	Mr. Krithivasan T.N	Overseas Manpower Consultant
13	Mr. Praful Chandra Sahu	Trademen Garments
14	Mr. Sandeep Kapoor	The Federation Of Overseas Recruitment Associations Of India (FORAI)
15	Mr. Deepak Hundraj Chhabria	Federation Of Indian Manpower Export Promotion Council Of India
16	Mr. John Thomas	M. Gheewala Global Hr Consultants
17	Mr. Shailendra Nigam	Sinclus
18	Mr. Mohammad Shakeel Ahmad	Representative of RA
19	Mr. Vijayan	Representative of RA

State-run Recruitment Agencies:

SI. No.	NAME	DESIGNATION	NAME OF THE ORGANISATION	Place/ State
1	Dr. Arja Srikanth/ Dr. Swamy	Managing Director / General Manager	Overseas Manpower Company Andhra Pradesh Limited (OMCAP)	Vijayawada/ Andhra Pradesh
2	Mr. K.Y. Naik / Ms. Nagabharati	Managing Director / General Manager	Telangana Overseas Manpower Company Limited (TOMCOM)	Hyderabad/ Telangana

ILO:

SI. No.	NAME	DESIGNATION	Country/ Place
1	Ms. Dagmar Walter	Director, DWT/CO- New Delhi	India/ New Delhi
2	Mr. Igor Bosc	Chief Technical Advisor, Work in Freedom Programme	Lebanon/ Beirut
3	Mr. Shabarinath Nair	Labour Migration Specialist, DWT/CO- New Delhi	India/ New Delhi
4	Ms. Seeta Sharma	Technical officer , EU-India Cooperation and Dialogue on Migration and Mobility Project	India/ New Delhi
5	Dr. Neha Wadhawan	National Project Coordinator, Work in Freedom Programme	India/ New Delhi
6	Ms. Divya Verma	Programme Officer, DWT/CO- New Delhi	India/ New Delhi