

## They Also Serve

There are always people willing to risk their lives to struggle for change. It's the general scenario everywhere. Maoists apart there are innumerable social activists who are literally risking their lives to thwart the on-going onslaught of rapacious corporate power in India. The past two decades have witnessed India's burgeoning market grow steadily, withstanding the near-cataclysmic 1997 Asian financial crisis and the very recent 2008 global financial meltdown. Ever since the beginning of 'reforms' and 'opening up' in the 1990s, thanks to Narsimha Rao and Manmohan Singh, there has been a regressive political shift to the right, fuelled by unfettered corporate culture and the dismal failures of whatever remains of the left movement. With every passing day India's fragile economy, though the worshippers of market god, call it robust, is opening up to the outside world and merging into the international financial environment, virtually making more and more segments of the population vulnerable to uncertainties. Hopelessness that was unthinkable even a few years back, is now menacingly looming in all of society.

In this 'go as you like' atmosphere Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) today enjoy an envious and pampered position in anything national, as the crisis managers of Delhi think they are contributing fabulously to the country's development, its reform and opening up in a gigantic leap. But what about Indian workers and employees working overseas and sending huge remittances every year? In truth the impact of migrant labour on the economy could have been greater and more pronounced if barriers to the transfer of monies and their mobility were reduced.

As for migrant labour what is true of India is equally true globally for most third world countries that supply labour to the Middle East and the West to lubricate the engine of growth.

Migrants make important economic development and cultural contributions to both sending and receiving countries and their remittances have positive impacts on poverty alleviation and development in originating countries, substantially energizing the UN sponsored Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This is precisely the assessment of the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in a recent note prepared by its secretariat with a view to improving the catalytic effect of remittances.

Migrant workers, who are the main source of remittances to their home countries, numbered 86 million by 2009. The top migrant destinations in 2009 were the United States, the Russian Federation, Germany, Saudi Arabia and Canada. As a share of total population the top receiving countries were Qatar (87%), the United Arab Emirates (70%) and Kuwait (69%) and their popularity as destinations has increased owing to their core resilient labour markets as has been revealed during the recent economic crisis. Now labour demand is likely to exist, given the present state of economic recovery, in the OECD countries, due to aging population trends and continuous demand for certain jobs in domestic, health and education services.

As per UNCTAD findings, remittances are being seriously counted to combat third world hunger and achieve MDGs, even partially. In Nepal where remittances, together with urbanisation and higher wages, are said to have resulted in a decline of the incidence of poverty of about one percentage point annually since the mid-1990s.

But too many restrictions on migration are acting as a brake. Capital flows easily without facing any hindrance, legal or otherwise, but it is not really the case for labour. Stricter

requirements of visas and work permits without providing facilitated options for temporary migration in sectors where demand for foreign labour is high is simply counter-productive. Barriers also include quotas and the lack of mutual recognition of qualifications.

Representatives of labour, both nationally and internationally have failed miserably to address the problem of migrant workers though they, unlike the NRIs, serve their country in a meaningful way for enhancement of better standards of living. □