

Home-based Worker's Oral History



Life and livelihood on a footpath: Rajasthan's Madhu in Mumbai

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Madhu, 26 years, lives on the sidewalk in the Mahim suburb of Mumbai. Over the last 12 years, she and her family have been making baskets out of bamboo culms. After being married, Madhu started working as a bamboo-basket weaver. Her usual day begins at 6am with peeling the bamboo culms in preparation for weaving the basket. The entire family works together on the handicraft. She produces two baskets every day and sells them for Rs. 60 to Rs. 120 each depending on the buyer. The cost of the bamboo is Rs. 80 per culm. It is necessary to acquire a

bunch of 120 culms at once, and they are sourced at markets in the Parel neighborhood in Mumbai.

When creating the bamboo baskets, Madhu and her family encounter a number of difficulties: “We frequently get cuts on our hands while weaving. As we live on the footpath, theft is a constant concern. Every morning, we must give the *safaikarmachari* (municipal sweepers) Rs. 20. While cleaning the streets, they occasionally also confiscate our products. We have to spend twice as much money to get it back. They beat us as well, but we have no choice.”

Madhu and her family are spread across different sidewalks. They use paid public toilets, and water from residential buildings for their daily requirements. Madhu and her family had to beg for food because they completely ran out of food when the COVID-19 lockdown was declared. They sent their children to beg and get some food because they were afraid the cops would beat them up if they walked around. They were forced to drink contaminated water from the taps near public restrooms since those facilities were also locked up. As soon as the trains began to run, Madhu and her family headed back to her native place in Rajasthan. They saved some money by working on fields in her native place, and as the lockdown was lifted, they headed back to Mumbai.

Although they still continue to make bamboo baskets, their sales have now decreased considerably. No one wants to buy their baskets since every home now purchases plastic containers. Madhu complains that “We frequently experience harassment from police officers and employees of the municipal corporation. We migrated to Mumbai in order to eat, but instead, we fill the tummies of the police officers.”

This story illustrates the living situations of migrant informal workers who reside in temporary structures on footpaths (sidewalks), streets, or other public areas. They are evicted without any alternatives for rehabilitation and as a result, often live as homeless migrants in the city. These workers often belong to vulnerable sections and marginalised groups (such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Denotified Tribes, Nomadic Tribes) and have suffered disproportionately during the lockdown. Madhu’s story emphasises that, in addition to the historical burden of marginalisation, their inability to access fundamental necessities and rights has been made worse by their poor conditions, robbing them of a sense of self-respect and dignity. The pandemic has demonstrated the exclusion and gaps in the access to social security, cash transfers, and public distribution systems for urban poor in India. It has emphasised the urgent need to expand the safety net for the urban poor.

