

DIGNITY DISPOSED

*A Report on Crematorium and Burial Ground workers in
Bengaluru during the COVID-19 pandemic*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**ALL INDIA CENTRAL COUNCIL OF TRADE UNIONS (AICCTU) –
KARNATAKA**

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‘Dignity Disposed’ is a report on crematorium and burial ground workers in Bengaluru city. The report documents how generations of (almost all) Dalit workers have been compelled to work in slave-like conditions to give the rest of the city a final good-bye. Whether it is BBMP run facilities or those run by religious institutions – criminal neglect of workers is rampant. Minimum wages, ESI, Leave, Insurance, decent accommodation and a choice of livelihood – all seem to be denied to the workers. The pandemic has made things worse. Workers are working 14 hour days, staying over in crematoriums for days on end and sleeping on gunny bags while literally breaking their backs to deal with the surge of deaths.

About the report

According to some newspaper reports, there are 42 crematoriums and 58 burial grounds in Bengaluru. Additionally there are temporary open-air crematoriums which have been set-up to handle the huge number of cremations/burials. A team from AICCTU (2 members and a volunteer) visited 26 crematoriums/burial grounds between the 4th-8th of May and interviewed workers. The report is based on these interviews and other publicly available information including circulars issued by the government in regards to COVID-19 related deaths and burials/cremations. The questionnaire used for the survey and the summary of visits to each facility (by facility we mean crematorium/burial-ground) are also listed as annexures.

Major Findings

The report documents the ***current inhuman working conditions due to the surge of deaths***. Prior to COVID-19, the bodies to be buried or burnt were minimal to around 0-5 bodies a day in the crematoriums. After COVID-19, notably post April 2021, each site receives a minimum of 5 and stretches to approximately 75 bodies a day. In the electric crematoriums, workers start their day around 6.00 – 7.00 am. and continue working till late in the evening around 7.00 – 8.00 pm. In the 3 crematoriums where wood is used to cremate the bodies, the process takes much longer. Workers start work around 5.00 am and finish sometimes even at 1.00-2.00 in the night. ***Not a single circular issued for burials speaks of measures to be undertaken to address the impact on workers due to this overload.***

It is shocking to note that even minimum wages are not paid and near total absence of any statutory benefits due to workers. Wages are paid very arbitrarily, once in 3 months, once in 6 months and sometimes even upto a year. They are paid at rates ranging from Rs. 1,000/- a month to Rs. 10,500/- a month. The minimum wages of Rs. 13132.60/- is not paid to the workers, and the Minimum Wages Act is blatantly contravened. The workers are mostly dependent on the largesse of the families who perform the last rites of their loved ones. ***In complete violation of all labour laws - Leave, ESI, PF, Bonus, Gratuity all of these have been denied to the workers. The labour department has not even taken note of the same.***

Expectedly the workers face severe health hazards. What is distressing to note is that there is a lack of any support from the government or private employers.

The report documents a few specific instances of health hazards and workplace injuries. It observes how the workers suffer from slip disc, hands being burnt, crushed fingers among other occupational hazards. But workers are neither provided with ESI facility, health insurance either in the form of private or government health schemes nor are they provided any other medical facilities. ***This culture of neglect of the workers health has continued into the pandemic.*** These workers have not been vaccinated. All crematorium workers do not even get the required PPEs from BBMP. None of the grave-diggers wore PPEs while digging a grave nor when they would close the grave. None of the workers were provided with sanitizer or soap solutions to maintain hygiene levels after handling of dead bodies. ***Even testing is not made available to all workers. The WHO guidelines about precautionary measures, government guidelines – none of these are being followed at any facility.***

A significant number of workers, especially in burial grounds, stay in the premises in conditions which cannot be considered human. Due to the surge, many workers in electric crematoriums are also forced to stay there overnight for days at a stretch. Workers in some facilities do not even have access to water or toilets and even women are forced to go out in the open to relieve themselves. Those who ensure the dead get a final resting place do not even have proper facilities to sleep, with some workers even using gunny bags to sleep on. In one of the facilities, the living quarters of the workers were very close to the spot where the bodies arrive and recent burials have taken place. Living inside these walled facilities, their neglect has been invisibilised to the rest of society.

The workers speak of wanting to ensure that atleast their children are educated and can move away from these caste-ordained occupations. It is time that the government, the religious institutions operating these facilities and the city at large ensure that the workers who have been robbed of their dignity, of their wages and of their dreams – are compensated. A detailed investigation and study of the neglect has to be undertaken and specific measures for their welfare art to be undertaken immediately.

Recommendations

1. **Protection during burials/ cremations:** All crematorium and burial grounds workers should be provided with PPE kits - one for each burial / cremation. Masks, gloves, sanitisers and bleaching powder or hypochlorite solution for use during the digging and covering of the grave, as the case maybe.
2. **Testing:** Free testing must be conducted for all crematorium / burial grounds workers on a regular basis as per prescribed protocol. The same must be organised by the BBMP or the private trust in-charge.

3. Vaccination: Since all crematorium and burial ground workers must be considered as frontline workers, they must be vaccinated on priority. Along with the workers, the families of these workers who are also susceptible to contracting the disease should also be vaccinated on priority basis. Many of the families live on the premises of cemeteries and crematoriums, thus making them as vulnerable to the virus as the workers themselves.
4. Sanitisation Initiative: As per the recommendations and guidelines issued by various authorities in regard to dead body management, crematoriums must be sanitised everyday as per protocol. Similarly, the houses of workers living on the premises of the crematorium / burial grounds must also be sanitised.
5. Ensure Job Security: Regularise the services of all the workers in cemeteries and crematoriums, irrespective of whether the burial grounds or crematorium is managed by the BBMP or a private trust. All measures to secure their jobs and livelihoods must be made by the relevant authority.
6. Wages: At the very minimum, minimum wages of Rs. 13,132 must be paid to the workers every month. In fact, fair wages must be paid to the workers. Workers must receive full wages on or before the 7th of every month. The workers must be issued with wage slips every month, and be provided with their ESI and EPF account numbers, along with ID cards for every worker. The BBMP must ensure direct payment of wages to these workers via bank transfers. The Labour Department should ensure that those working with privately managed cemeteries also receive minimum wages and that all benefits as that of the BBMP workers are provided to them.
7. Overtime: There is an exponential increase in workload for the workers since there are a large number of deaths during the renewed waves of COVID-19 infection – be it COVID or non-COVID. The workers are working above and beyond their usual working hours. The BBMP and the State Government needs to ensure that the workers are compensated for the hard labour put in by the workers.
8. Risk Allowance: These workers must be provided risk allowance for they are exposed to the grave risk of contracting the COVID-19 infection as they are conducting the last rites of COVID-19 victims. This must be paid over and above the wages due to them.
9. Social Security: Every worker in crematoriums and cemeteries must be provided with ESI and EPF facilities, and must also be provided with gratuity and pension benefits upon superannuation. Yearly bonus and incentives, and all other benefits accrued statutorily must be extended to these workers.
10. These workers must be recognised as beneficiaries under the Central Government 50 lakhs insurance Scheme.

11. Housing: The workers live on the premises of cemeteries and crematoriums with scant resources and basic amenities. They must be provided with BBMP quarters with all basic amenities including water, electricity and sanitation.
12. A committee must be set-up to look into the working conditions of these workers. The committee will recognize that the occupation is caste-based and take concerted steps to ensure that the children of these workers have adequate access to education and employment, among other opportunities etc. The committee will make recommendations to overhaul the manner of functioning of crematoriums and cemeteries, in a manner that ensures dignity, health and wages for these workers, and enables their children to move out of the caste-based occupation. It must also look into compensation to be paid to these workers and their families for forcing them into caste-based occupation and with a view to rehabilitate these workers. The committee must consist of members from the Social Welfare Department, Labour Department, Health Department, among others.