

1232 KMS: Seven Indian migrant workers head home during the COVID-19 pandemic

And an interview with director Vinod Kapri

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1232 KMS is a shocking and revealing documentary film about the plight of seven north Indian construction workers during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The film was written and directed by Vinod Kapri and recently released in India by Disney+Hotstar. It was produced by Vishal Bhardwaj, a veteran filmmaker best known for his film adaptations of Shakespeare's plays. The diary Kapri wrote during filming has been published as a book under the title, *1232 km: The Long Journey Home*.

On March 24, 2020, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a nationwide coronavirus lockdown. The announcement provided less than four hours of warning and did not include any plans for public health measures, such as systematic mass testing and contact tracing, or the provision of social support.

Suddenly stripped of any way of making a living, the seven workers whose journey is documented in Kapri's film decide to return by bicycle from Delhi, where they have been working, to their homes in Saharsa, Bihar, some 1232 kilometers away [766 miles]. The film documents their odyssey home over the course of seven days and seven nights.

Their dramatic story was part of a chaotic mass exodus of India's internal migrant workers from major cities such as Delhi, India's largest city and capital, and Mumbai, between March 25 and June 15, 2020. Some 30 million migrant workers and their families returned to their villages, many on foot, because the government suspended rail and intercity bus traffic—the largest forced exodus since the communal partition of India in August 1947.

Hundreds, possibly thousands, died while making their way home, from hunger, dehydration and rail and road accidents.

Even according to the most conservative statistics, India has nearly 100 million migrant workers. They work in textile factories and brick kilns, on building sites, as domestic servants or cleaners of commercial establishments, or try to eke out a living by hawking goods. The seven workers depicted in the film (Ritesh, Ashish, Ram Babu, Mukesh, Krishna, Sonu and Sandeep) are in their 20s. Sons of impoverished farmers with properties too small to feed their families, they travelled to Delhi to take up manual and day jobs as masons, tile cutters and bricklayers.

In addition to suffering brutal exploitation and receiving no social support, or next to none, from any level of government, as exemplified by the migrant workers' treatment during the pandemic, they are subjected to caste discrimination and state repression.

The film opens with Modi's March 24 announcement that the entire

country will be on lockdown starting at midnight. With everything—including public transport—now shut down, deprived of all income and lacking food and shelter, these seven workers began their 1232-kilometer-long bicycle journey in the hopes of reaching their home village. Veteran documentary filmmaker Vinod Kapri accompanied them on their hazardous trek.

A telling scene at the beginning of the film depicts a group of workers and their families receiving *rotis* (Indian flatbread) from a government aid agency. After a considerable struggle to get some of their ration, the workers realize the bread is stale, and they discard it on the roadside.

One of the workers from the larger crowd shouts in despair: "We'll either die on the road or reach home. But at least we won't die at the hands of the police." This is a reference to the fact that while India's governments have left the migrant workers to fend for themselves, it has mobilized state security forces to try to prevent them from reaching home, having belatedly realized that the mass migration they have caused threatens to spread the deadly virus to rural India.

The film's seven protagonists have purchased second-hand bicycles for around 2000 Indian rupees (\$US25) with the help of their families. One of the workers, Sonu, has bought a women's bicycle for 1500 Indian rupees from his employer's daughter. The overall condition of the bicycles is even poorer than the physical condition of the workers themselves. At times they have to pull and push their bikes for kilometers until they can find a mechanic.

The workers carefully work out a route back home to avoid the traffic and border police. They plan to avoid harassment at the hands of India's state security forces, who are notorious for their abuse, torture and arbitrary jailings, especially of the most impoverished workers and rural toilers. At one point, when director Vinod Kapri asks, "Why are you taking byroads through villages instead of the highways," one worker recalls how they have been brutally beaten up by the police in the past.

As their journey progresses, with mounting hardships, strangers help the seven. On one occasion, the workers excitedly explain to the director how they tried crossing the Ganga (Ganges) River by night. A group of fishermen spotted them and warned them about the depth of the water. When the fishermen saw how adamant the migrant workers were about crossing, they held them back until the next morning and then ferried them safely across.

In striking contrast with the brutality of the authorities, various individuals go out of their way in *1232 KMS*, even to the point of risking problems with the police, to provide the migrant workers with

food and shelter. In one heartfelt moment, Ritesh becomes emotional missing his newly wedded wife at home. In another, Ashish breaks down in tears toward the end of a video call with his mother.

Although all of the workers at the center of the film are financially destitute and returning home penniless, Ashish reveals that he holds a university degree. In response to Kapri's question, "Do you feel there is a lot of discrimination between the rich and the poor in our country?" Ashish replies, "Yes there is. The truth is actually there is no place for the poor, they are treated like caged animals." He continues: "Though I am a graduate, I am forced to work as a low-wage construction labourer, because of unemployment and the pathetic economic situation of my family."

As the film approaches its end, the workers reach the Bihar border with about 350 kilometers still left in their journey. The Bihar police get hold of them and take them to a dilapidated makeshift "quarantine centre" to screen them for COVID-19 symptoms. When one worker requests food, a police officer is captured on film replying, "If you have been hungry for eight days, then what's the need to eat now?"

Finally, after traveling 1232 kilometers to reach their village and seeing their family members, the workers are seen crying out for joy.

However, Kapri's film goes on to reveal that their relief, like that experienced by millions of other migrant workers who finally made it home in spring 2020, would prove short-lived. Because of the lack of jobs in their native villages, all seven workers depicted in the film were soon forced to return to major cities like Delhi and Mumbai, to find a means to support their families. Meanwhile, India's governments recklessly reopened the economy, thereby ensuring the country would be ravaged by a second, even more devastating wave of COVID-19 infections and death.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* pointed out earlier this year, India is being ravaged by two pandemics, both of which are products of the bourgeoisie's ruthless pursuit of its selfish class interests—a pandemic of infection and death by asphyxiation, and a pandemic of joblessness, wage cuts and hunger. *1232 KMS* vividly documents the plight of the migrant workers at the beginning of the pandemic and in so doing lends weight to this socialist analysis.

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World Socialist Web Site reporter Yuvan Darwin recently spoke with Vinod Kapri, the director of *1232 KMS*.

Yuvan Darwin: You traveled with and documented the journey of seven migrant workers who were fleeing from Delhi to their village in Saharsa, Bihar as the first wave of India's COVID-19 pandemic was unfolding. How did you come to emotionally bond with these unorganised or informal sector workers? How did your view of them change?

Vinod Kapri: I would say it's not just a journey of 1232 kilometers. It's a life journey for me. Many people in upper middle class families, even including me, do not inquire about or are not interested in knowing the names or social conditions of these labourers who come to work in their homes for construction or carpentry work, etc. But after making this film, I realized their sufferings, their pain, and realized they are among us. Now, whenever I meet these labourers I try to learn about their social conditions. I strongly believe that my film will help change the perspective of the majority of people regarding their outlook on migrant and unorganized sector labourers.

YD: An International Labour Organization study has revealed that approximately 95 percent of India's internal migrants lost all their means of livelihood during the Modi government's ruinous, ill-prepared lockdown. Nearly 1,000 lockdown deaths were documented

by researchers last year. Could you explain the situation facing these migrant workers/daily wage labourers especially in Delhi as the pandemic has continued to develop in India, including a massive surge in infections and death between April and June 2021 and further lockdowns without any compensation for these workers?

VK: I would say that the migrant labourers were completely broken in the first lockdown [implemented by Modi on March 24, 2020]. Now the second wave and the lockdown [implemented at state levels during April-June this year] have completely shattered not only the labourers but also their whole families. These seven migrant labourers who I documented last year in my film have returned home in the second lockdown and they have been left without money and proper food for the past four weeks, and they are clueless about their future. The Delhi government had enough time before announcing the lockdown, but they never cared about compensation for these migrant workers.

YD: The Indian state, whether under Congress Party or BJP-led Union governments, has spent a minuscule 1.5 percent of GDP on health care for decades. But it spends immense resources, i.e., \$US73 billion in 2020, to develop and expand India's military. During the first year of the pandemic, as a further 230 million Indians saw their incomes pushed below 375 rupees (\$US5) per day, the holdings of India's 130 billionaires nearly doubled to \$594 billion. How do you view these events and also the pro-investor, neo-liberal policies of all the establishment parties, including the so-called left parties such as the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI)?

VK: We call India the largest/biggest democracy, but I would say this is completely false and a lie. Real democracy is "for the people, by the people." But here in India, 90 percent of people are jobless, they are dying of hunger. People are not getting medicine to cure the virus, not getting beds or oxygen, and the crematoriums are full. I blame the "herd immunity" policy of all the establishment parties. For the past seven years we have only been witnessing the communal narratives of BJP governments, such as "Hindu vs. Muslims," "Hindustan vs. Pakistan" in the media. BJP parliamentarians have proclaimed unscientific conceptions, such as that cow dung and cow urine are solutions for coronavirus. This exposes the real reactionary character of the political establishment and parliament as well.

And in Kerala, where the CPM is ruling, the death toll is above 6,000. I would say the Kerala CPM has followed the same herd immunity policy as the BJP and engaged in "social murder" along with the BJP.



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