


Daily wage workers in coffee plantations struggle with no pay

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For representational purpose

BENGALURU: Anitha A C and her husband Chakravarthy A C have been working in a coffee estate in Ulugulli village of Kodagu district for the past 10 years. The nearest bank to their estate is 4-km away in Suntikoppa. There are four banks and three ATMs in Suntikoppa but none of the estate workers have debit cards.

Anitha earns daily wages of Rs 263 or around Rs 1,500 per week. She has been to the bank thrice to exchange her existing notes since demonetisation. “It costs Rs 60 to go to the bank. Plus, we get an off only on Sunday when the bank is closed. I can’t forgo a day’s labour to go to the bank. In the kaapi

season (November-December), we get Rs 400 or Rs 500 extra, but this time our owner has had problems in giving us cash,” she says.

The estate owner Bose Mandanna (69) is the former vice-chairman of Coffee Board of India and knows the law to the ‘T’.

“According to the Plantation Act, I cannot transfer the wages to their bank accounts. I need a go-ahead from the minimum wages board and the labour commissioner for that. Stringent action will be taken against me if I do that. I need Rs 30,000 to Rs 40,000 to pay my 12 regular workers and the additional labour that I employ in the harvest season. I have withdrawn from my own account and borrowed from the local ration store to pay them,” he said.

There are other estates near Mandanna’s which he says are more than 10 km away from the nearest bank. “It costs them Rs 120 just to travel to the bank which is half of the day’s wage,” he says.

If this is the condition at his 32-acre coffee estate, the bigger ones are in more trouble. This is the time when the Arabica coffee beans are harvested.

H T Promod owns a 400-acre estate in Hulikere in Chikkamagaluru district where he cultivates coffee, pepper, areca and cardamom. He has 200 workers, half of them permanent, and requires Rs 2.5 lakh per week to pay their wages. “We are a five-member family. All five of us had to draw and I had to withdraw from my four loan accounts to pay my workers,” he said.

His manager A G Vishwanath, who has been working in the estate for 38 years, said the nearest bank is 15 km away in Chikkamagaluru. “We have made 50 per cent of payments to our workers. It is unlikely that we will be able to make the total payment even by December end,” he said.

Payments are made on Saturday so that they have money to buy essentials on Sundays. “If they are paid in Rs 2,000 notes they cannot give even pay the bus fare,” he said.