

Just Another Immigrant Story

I had been a silent witness of the massive movement of migrants towards their far away homes.

A message from [Sangeeta Isvaran](#), a friend on 20th June 2020, broke that silence. The message said a boy from Assam is on the streets of Coimbatore, the city closest to me. He had apparently asked his employer at the factory for old dues and in return, was asked to move out of the living quarters. The police were chasing him wherever he rested as he was alone and was perceived as a Covid threat to that area. A camp could not be set up for him in a government school as he was not part of a group. He had spent the last 100 rupees he had with him on food. He had spent a night under a bridge.

In a way, these boys got the timing wrong. Most of the migrants had left in special trains weeks ago. The schedule of Shramik trains, carrying immigrants, was coming to a halt. Chennai, where such trains originate, was under total lockdown.

I learnt his name was Rohit. He did not have any ID cards. He did have a cell phone, a smart one at that and a battery pack. And he could send his location details.

I called and spoke to him in the little Hindi I know and asked him to stay put. Vivek, a young social worker who has slept for 2 hours or less every day in the past 3 months, showed up on the spot as I was talking to Rohit. He works with Sangeeta and her team and co-ordinated Coimbatore Covid work.

He told me Rohit had found 3 other people on the street, all from Assam, and in similar conditions. Since we live on a farm, it is relatively easy to accommodate such situations. My husband was all for taking in the boys. I communicated that to Vivek. He gave them some money for food and said he can try to find them accommodation in the city and we could make a decision by the evening about the farm move. He requested them to stay put as there was no chasing by police during day time.

Many of our friends chimed in on the situation and Raja Anna, one of our friends, offered to pick up, feed, house and employ three friends of Rohit on his farm till they can travel with ease. He was already working to send migrant workers home and was too aware of what's going on and was getting ready to pick them up.

When I called Rohit to communicate that, he simply said "Ma'm they are walking home. I called them when I found them missing after lunch. And now they are not even picking up their phones"

My heart was sinking just imagining what lay ahead in the 3000 km journey. My mind was confused by what primal instinct chooses a harsh journey over other primal instincts of food, water and shelter. At that point, we could only wish them well and start focusing on Rohit.

Vivek and friends brought Rohit home safely in a car after night fell. We were happy to see that he could sleep well. He ate whatever was offered, when it was offered and kept saying I want to go home. He was uptight and did not want to indulge in small talk.

I asked a friend of ours from a neighboring state of Assam to come and chat with him. He opened up a bit and we spoke about the possibility of him getting employed locally till the situation improved. Then he opened up a bit more and shared about his mother and brothers. About how his villagers may be scared of him bringing Covid when he goes back home. Post dinner, we went back to resting waiting for another day to unfold.

And then, magically, another message from Sangeeta said there is a possibility of a special, last train to Assam from Chennai the next day. Two buses would be arranged for 100 plus such immigrants stuck in our city to reach Chennai railway station, 500 kms away, without hiccups. From Chennai, two trains would carry 1500 immigrants left behind for a distance of another 3000 kms.

Vivek came at midnight after his field work so he could sleep for a few hours and drop off Rohit at the bus point very early, the next day. When he innocently asked me to put an alarm for 4 am and wake him up, I understood how tired his body must be.

At 4 am Rohit looked confused and showed no signs of happiness that his Going Home process had started. I was relieved when he sent me a happy picture from the bus.



And relieved again when Sangeeta sent me this message
"Rohit got onnnnnnn the train... he was totally spaced out, kept wandering off.

He wandered outside the train station and I had to run round and round to find him; then posted a minder for him till he got on the train."

And he is one of the 1.5 lakh immigrants that were sent home safely by volunteers working over time. And they are among 92 lakh immigrants nationwide who were looking homeward with deep yearning.

After the train crossed about 2000 kms, Rohit started sending messages of gratitude to everyone who had been part of this life in the past few days. Non-stop!

I wonder if any system, by itself, can handle this yearning, these numbers and this urgency. It takes a human being to say Yes to the deep yearning expressed in a strange language. It takes a human being not to reduce them to a number in the ocean of necessary head counts. It takes a human being to make sure the boy does not wander away exactly when the train is about to leave. It takes a human being to receive the deep gratitude that was swelling within Rohit when his foot touched the land of Assam.

My deep bows to Vivek and his gang of young friends, Raja Anna and his big heart, Sangeeta Eswaran, her team, Ananthoo of reStore, his friends and countless such humanes who said Yes to so many Rohits.

And to Indian railways and the Supreme Court of India for making sure the intentions and hard work of these heroes didn't go wasted.

You have all enriched my understanding of what it is to be an Everyday Hero when everything seems improbable and hence, everything is possible.

- By Nisha Srinivasan.

About Nisha- Nisha lives with her husband Ragu and 13 year old farm-schooled son Aum, at their farm near Coimbatore. Not long ago, the family lived in US with comfortable careers, till one night Nisha woke up mid-sleep and told Ragu, let's move back to India and dedicate our lives to service. And rest as they say, is not history but a slow story. When not working on their once barren now fledgling farm forest, she can be found volunteering for the Naturecure community Akarma or for ServiceSpace, or meditating.