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Cos go all out to get back migrant workers

Arrange Transport, Assure Local Village Elders

Namrata Singh & Rupali Mukherjee | TNN

Mumbai: After the exodus, it's now the return of the migrant workers. They made a difficult trek back home during the lockdown as factories downed shutters without any warning. But organisations are now rolling out the red carpet to get them back to work.

Companies are using a combination of measures — right from convincing village heads and the workers themselves of their safety, to arranging for their transportation — to bring them back from various states. Hiring agencies **TOI** spoke to said that with limited sources of income back home, a number of workers had themselves evinced an interest to return to the workplace.

Faced with labour shortages over the last three months, a Mumbai-based pharma company with plants in the Western belt organised buses to get its employees back. Many of these are working in key functions of research and development. Since pharmaceuticals fall under essential services, drug manufacturing plants were operational during the lockdown imposed due to Covid-19. Coupled with shortage of raw materials, packaging materials and logistics, average capacity utilisation at pharma manufacturing plants across the country was affected by 40-50%. Now, it has limped back to near-normal levels, and is around 80% in most units, with the labour issue getting sorted.

RPG group company KEC International, where half of its migrant workers had left for their hometowns, has seen a significant number returning

to the project sites. KEC International MD & CEO Vimal Kejriwal said, "In a way, two-thirds of our workers are back with the company. We are definitely receiving feelers from a lot who want to come back."

KEC International tapped into its employee database, engaged with supervisors who handled workers and the sarpanch at villages to reiterate that the workers and their safety will be taken care of on their return. "WFor some locations, we are even consi-

in a cement plant, while the rest is local labour. "We want to change the proportion to 80% local labour at our loading and packing facilities," JSW Cement CEO Nilesh Narwekar said.

On the other hand, to ensure that essential commodities reach consumers across the country during this pandemic, ITC went through an extensive process of mobilising the entire supply chain. "There were instances where we had to convince villagers that

COS TO GO FOR MORE LOCAL HIRING

> In addition to usual train & bus routes, cos didn't shy away from **using even flights** to get back their migrant labour

> **Accommodation** and other on-site perks were also offered

> Still, top execs had to directly interact with village elders & employees themselves to **showcase safety arrangements** at project sites



> **Permissions** had to be taken from **authorities** at both places — workers' home towns as well as at the project worksites

> **Workers were eager to return too** as they hardly had any options to earn in their hometowns

> However, having learnt a lesson, cos plan to increase **local hiring to reduce effect of such a problem** in future

dering getting them by flights," said Kejriwal. In addition, the company has also hired locally to ensure operations are not hampered. Kejriwal said 95% of the company's sites are now operational.

JSW Cement also arranged for transportation in mid-May to get a few groups of employees for some of its plants after getting the relevant permissions from local administration. However, as part of its risk-mitigation strategy, JSW Cement has now decided to employ a greater portion of local labour for its packing operations. At present, migrant workers account for 80% of loading and packing operations

our facilities adhere to the highest levels of safety norms. We created awareness through videos, demonstrated our safety precautions by bringing people to our facilities," said an ITC spokesperson. Today, the whole supply chain of ITC is running end-to-end.

Dabur India, too, has recruited workers from villages and towns in the areas near its manufacturing units. Executive director Biplab Baksi said, "Wherever we are facing a shortage, we have sought and received permissions from state authorities to hire workers from other states. All safety protocols mandated by each state are being followed."