



THE NEW EXODUS  
The Untold Stories of Distressed  
Migrants during Covid-19

A Rapid Research Report, 2020

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## The Untold Stories of Distressed Migrants during Covid-19

A Rapid Research Report, 2020

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# Message



**T**he pandemic has laid bare the fault lines of Indian society and exposed the vulnerability of millions of migrants. Despite contributing heavily to wealth creation in cities, migrants have remained disadvantaged, powerless and invisible. Going by very orthodox estimates, close to 40 million migrant workers were driven back to their native places by despair after their jobs were gobbled up by the pandemic. Pictures of migrants with families, including children, walking barefoot in the blistering summer heat, carrying headloads of belongings and mothers clutching babies on to them were heartrending. Why they had to flee in desperation and distress when their work was important? Couldn't the society, which took so much from them, meet the subsistence needs of migrants? Doesn't the travail of migrants matter to the world? Society is fumbling for an answer. That's nothing short of a tragedy.

Invariably every time when a disaster strikes, the poor are the first to get affected and the worst affected. Covid-19 pandemic is no exception. It has pummelled the migrants into a wretched shape. The pandemic has shredded their livelihoods, robbed them of their savings and thrust on them an agonizing uncertainty over their future. They will dodge the virus if they are lucky, but it is highly unlikely they will escape from the fangs of an imminent livelihood crisis.

The term 'social distancing' got a lot of currency in the pandemic times. Ironically, migrant workers, from times immemorial, have been victims of social distancing of a different type. Most of the migrants come from underprivileged backgrounds. They are Dalits and Adivasis who had no way to eke out a living in their native places because they were kept away by the wealthy and powerful few. Because they were distanced by their own communities with little hope, respect and wealth, they moved to cities to earn a living and to stitch together a modest future for themselves and families. The pandemic is now driving these

socially distanced migrants back to their villages and into a regressive system that offers little hope to them. The world needs to see migrants from a more humanitarian lens rather than a utilitarian one. Given the huge contributions that migrant workers have made to economies, infrastructure, urban life and ease of life, they deserve a lot more respect than what society has given them this far.

Caritas India had recently conducted a research on the distress of migrants which threw light on the struggles, agonies and uncertainties of migrant workers who have returned to their native places. The findings of the research, I am sure, will not only serve to inform the humanity about the pressing needs of migrant community but also can influence the shaping of interventions for ameliorating the sufferings of migrants. I am glad to release this report which summarises the findings of the research with the intense hope that the interests of migrants will be respected more and tangible measures will be taken to empower them.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Paul Moonjely'.

Fr. Paul Moonjely  
Executive Director  
Caritas India

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# Key Findings

23%

migrants spent more than Rs. 5000 on their return journey

29%

workers will no more go for migratory labor.

51%

migrant workers' families have much less to eat

34%

migrants can no longer afford the food that they used to have before the pandemic.

69%

migrant workers need immediate work/wage labor support.

46%

migrant workers' children have discontinued schooling

95%

migrant workers have lost all means of livelihood

31%

migrant workers have lost all their savings

93%

migrant workers have not received work under MGNREGA

40%

migrant workers have not received benefits of PDS

47%

migrant workers received no food and monetary support so far

12%

migrant workers walked long distances to reach home

16%

migrant workers travelled for 6-10 days to reach home

52%

migrant workers travelled more than 1000 kilometers to return home.

47%

migrant workers didn't have enough to eat during return journey

47%

migrant workers received no support during return journey

19%

migrant workers received no food and monetary support so far

28%

migrant workers were disallowed from entering villages on their return

# 01

## Introduction: Unfolding of a Misery

The pandemic that has been raging across the country has unleashed cascading miseries on migrants who have always languished on the margins of the society with little public and government attention.

The coronavirus pandemic, sweeping the globe for the last four months, has triggered an enveloping devastation across all sectors of human activity. While the economy of the second most populous country in the world is stuttering worryingly, distress levels are climbing up steeply, more acutely among the labour class including migrant workers. Covid-19 pandemic battered the vulnerable migrant community hard and exposed it to indescribable agony and distress. The pandemic that has been raging across the country has unleashed cascading miseries on migrants who have always languished on the margins of the society with little public and government attention. With minimal social protection and access to welfare arrangements, the migrant community had to bear the brunt of the pandemic. The union government had abruptly clamped down a nationwide lockdown to arrest the Covid-19 pandemic on 24 March 2020. Unfortunately, the lockdown turned out to be a terrible blow to the migrant population. Lacking job and money, hundreds of thousands of migrants have been staring at scary uncertainty and a certain prospect of starvation.

While the country's rapid response of imposing the lock-down is hailed as instrumental in slowing down the spread of the dreaded disease, it also raised concerns on the exacerbation of

existing inequalities and vulnerabilities especially for the migrant communities. The announcement of lock-down turned out to be the chilling announcement of the beginning of unending misery for migrant workers who have always been battling vulnerabilities and marginalisation. Hence, the repercussions of the pandemic on low-skilled migrant labourers and informal workers have been devastating. With no end to the pandemic crisis in sight, the migrant communities, which have found themselves stranded in the places where they work or in the unfamiliar places where they landed up on their way to native places, are fighting for their survival. The agony of migrants has been slipping from bad to worse since they are neither allowed entry to their home states nor given relief at the places where they are. Their home states see them as potential carriers. Many states fear a sudden spike in cases that may overwhelm the under-equipped and unprepared healthcare facilities. This explains why there is reluctance among some states to open their borders to allow the migrants to return home. The sufferings of migrants are expected to continue even after the end of Covid-19 pandemic because by then they would have already lost their livelihoods and would have spent their meagre savings for subsistence and travel. For the hapless migrant community, therefore, the post Covid-





19 world is going to be equally, if not more, challenging as the pandemic time.

Caritas India conducted a national-level rapid research to assess the extent and severity of the distress and uncertainties of migrants and how the pandemic had impacted their life and livelihoods. The distress of communities largely relates to the areas of subsistence, livelihood and access to public welfare services. The research touched upon areas of fulfilment of the basic needs, livelihoods, access to rights and entitlements and experience of harassment, discrimination and exploitation.

### 1.1. METHODOLOGY

The study covered 624 migrant workers - 394 men, 228 females and 2 transgender persons - who had returned to their villages from the place of work in the wake of the pandemic and the crippling lockdown. At least 50 migrants

each from ten states with very high density of migrant population were covered by the study. Information was collected from migrant workers in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Assam, Chhattisgarh, Telangana, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Maharashtra and Odisha.

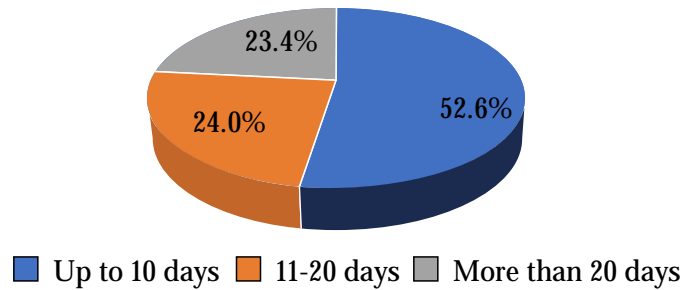
### 1.2. PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

Migrant workers who participated in the research belonged to various segments of unorganised sector. A majority of them (55%) were unskilled labourers whereas 109 (18%) were skilled workers. The general occupational profile of migrants revealed that all of them belonged to unorganised sector and enjoyed very little social protection. The number of migrant workers who ran petty trades was just 16 who accounted for 2% of respondents. There were 52 (8%) migrants who reported working in other sectors like mining, transportation.

Table 1: Sector of Work

No.	Response	Number	Percentage
1	Unskilled labour (in construction, agriculture, porter, etc.)	340	55%
2	Skilled (electrician, plumber, mason, carpenter etc.)	109	17%
3	Domestic work (working at homes as cook, maid, babysitter etc.)	51	8%
4	Assisting business & trades (working in shops, manufacturing etc.)	56	9%
5	Own petty trades (vegetable vending, painting, tea stalls, etc.)	16	3%
6	Others	52	8%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>624</b>	<b>100%</b>

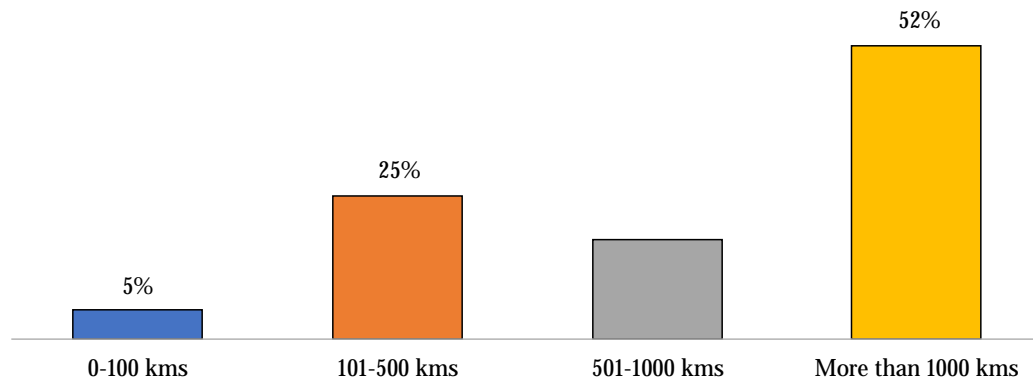
Graph 1: Days after Reaching Native Village



Migrant workers have been beset with numerous challenges ever since they lost their jobs and were forced to return to their native villages. As many as 146 migrant workers (23.4%) reported that they had returned to their villages more than 20 days back whereas 150 migrant workers (24.0%) said they had reached the village 11-20 days back. The remaining 328 respondents (52.6%) informed that they returned to their

homes less than 10 days ago. This assumes significance because a large number of migrants have been in their native villages for several days without any means of income or livelihoods. Given the scant and brittle asset base of migrant workers and their families in their native villages, such long periods without work can exacerbate the food and livelihood crisis.

Graph 2: Distance to Workplace



The research found that most of the migrants had travelled long distances in search of work. Migrants who had travelled out of their villages in search work in the 100-km radius were a tiny 5% of the total number of migrants reached out by the study whereas the share of migrants who had travelled more than 1000 kilometres in search of work was 52%. The long-distance migration indicates the difficulties that migrants must have faced during their return journey. It was found that many of them had travelled more than 2000 kilometres to states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Punjab and Karnataka and cities like Mumbai, Pune, Delhi and Bengaluru. The share of migrants who had travelled 501-1000 km was 18% which is a clear indication that they had crossed over to other states in search of wage labour. Short distance migration was found to be relatively low with 25% migrants reporting that their place of work was in the range of 101-500 kilometres.

The pandemic and the subsequent loss of livelihoods can push the segment of unorganised workers deeper into penury especially because they have historically enjoyed either minimal or no safety cushions in terms of access to health services, cash-transfer and social protection with little protection from discriminations and exploitation. About 400 million people working in the informal economy in India are at risk of falling deeper into poverty due to the coronavirus crisis which is having "catastrophic consequences"<sup>1</sup>. Given the fact that more than 85%<sup>2</sup> of the country's workforce toil in the informal economy the task of securing the life of migrant workers, or internal migrants, is anything but an intimidating and onerous challenge.

<sup>1</sup><https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/indicators/about-400-million-workers-in-india-may-sink-into-poverty-un-report/articleshow/75041922.cms?from=mdr>

<sup>2</sup>Informal Employment Trends in the Indian Economy: Persistent informality but growing positive development. International Labour Organisation (2019), Geneva.

# 02

## A Woeful and Costly Return

Hundreds of thousands of migrants had to flee their workplaces, some of them walking thousands of kilometers carrying all their belonging as headloads

The lock-down had triggered an unprecedented exodus of migrants when work and livelihoods disappeared from the pandemic-hit urban centres. Bereft of jobs, money and food, millions of migrants were staring at scary uncertainty and a certain prospect of starvation. To make things even worse, the lock-down brought the public transportation system to a screeching halt and made it impossible for migrants to cross state borders on their way to native places. Hundreds of thousands of migrants had to flee their workplaces, some of them walking thousands of kilometers carrying all their belonging as headloads. Several states had eased restrictions in a phased manner on the movement of passenger vehicles which allowed migrants to travel back to their native places in public and private vehicles.

The return journey, however, was not free from risk for migrant workers. Hundreds of them died in tragic accidents on their way back homes. Many who were walking

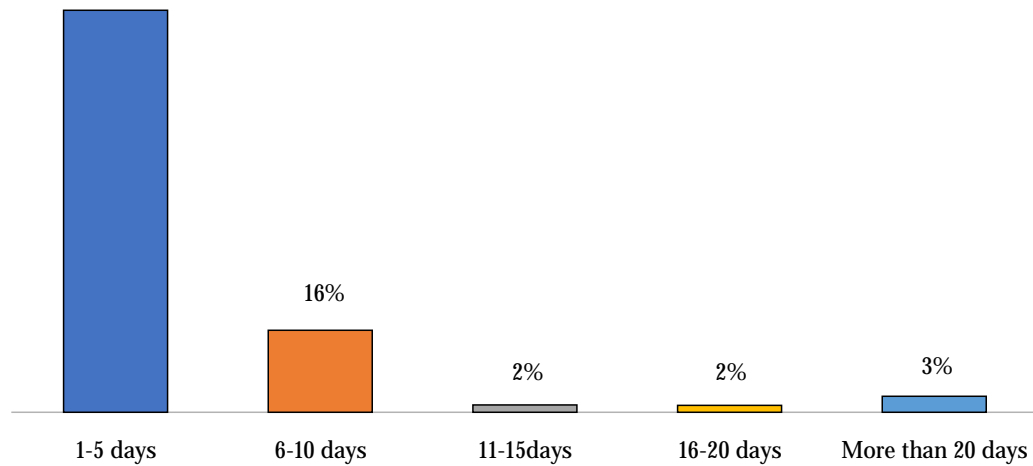
long distances to their homes died due to scorching heat and acute dehydration. Accidents on roads and railway lines too claimed several more lives. Thousands of migrants were stranded under flyovers, bridges, railway station compounds, at government-set-up transit points and along the highways with no energy and food to continue the long walk to their homes.

### 2.1. Harrowing Return Journey

The long journey of migrant workers was far more than painful. With little cash and provisions, they had to traverse long distances to reach their native places, that too when the summer was in its brute peak. As discussed in the first chapter, 69.6% of migrants were working in places that are more than 500 kilometers away from their native places and 51.8% were working in places more than 1000 kilometers away, which meant that the migrants had to travel long distances to return home.



Graph 3: Duration of Return Journey



As the Graph 3 shows, 482 (77%) of the total 624 migrants reported that their return journey took 1-5 days while 101 (16%) informed that they reached their native places in 6-10 days. As many as 11 (2%) said that they had travelled 16-20 days to reach their homes and for 20 (3%) respondents the

return journey took more than 20 days. This reveals that the return journey was painfully long for 142 migrants who constituted 23% of total respondents who had to spend many more days than usual for returning to their homes.

## CASE STUDY

# Fighting Starvation and Frustration

The pandemic and the lockdowns foiled Saqidul's efforts to rebuild her family's crumbling economic condition. The twenty-seven-year old mother of four had been struggling to pay off the huge loan that she had taken from a moneylender to undergo a surgery. The meagre income of her husband, who worked as a loader at a scrap dealership, was too little for the family, hence Saqidul started working as a maidservant at multiple houses in Mumbai. The couple, hailing from Barabanki district in Uttar Pradesh, had moved to Mumbai in the hope of earning a decent income for raising their four children away from poverty.

Saqidul and her husband lost their jobs immediately after the lockdown was announced. With their purse fast becoming empty and no sight of the lifting of the lockdown, Saqidul and her husband decided to return to their native village in Uttar Pradesh. They took loans from friends to pay Rs. 5000 for the 1400 km-long journey in a truck which was crowded with more than 40 migrants and their families. The journey was a horrific experience for the family because of the extreme heat, hunger and lack of sleep. They had no proper food throughout the four days' journey and all that the parents could get for their children was some biscuits during the journey.

More misery awaited the family at native village. Villagers did not allow the exhausted migrant family to enter the village for the fear of infection and alerted the police. Police quarantined Saqidul and her family for fourteen days in the local school

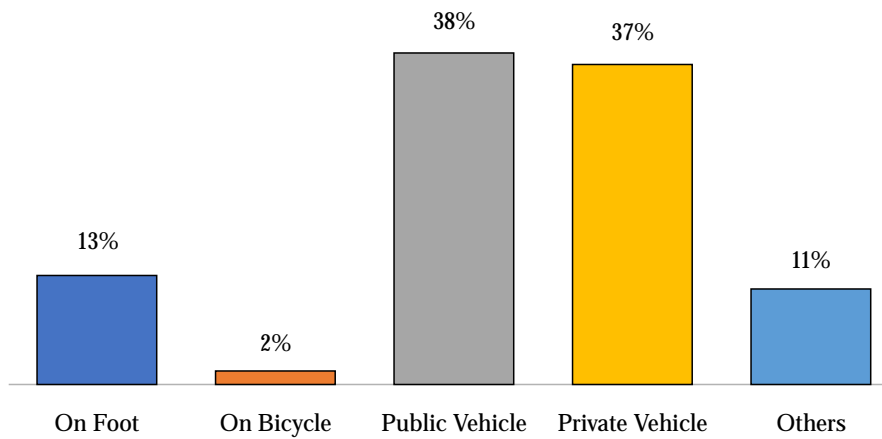


*Saqidul with her family at her home in native village*

which was badly equipped. The family had to again go hungry and sleepless for fourteen days.

Hardships followed the family when they reached to their village home. They had no food and money. Since Saqidul's family did not have a ration card, which meant that they could not any food grain from the Public Distribution System. Now the family survives on a share of food supply that Saqidul's in laws get from the PDS. With no work in sight, the liabilities of Saqidul's family are mounting. Moneylender has started harassing because she has defaulted the loan repayment. She is undeterred by the harrowing experience of return journey and determined to return to Mumbai. Saqidul and her husband Shahbaz are eagerly awaiting the end of lockdown for taking the first train to Mumbai to work. They have no other choice; they have four children to raise and a big loan to repay.

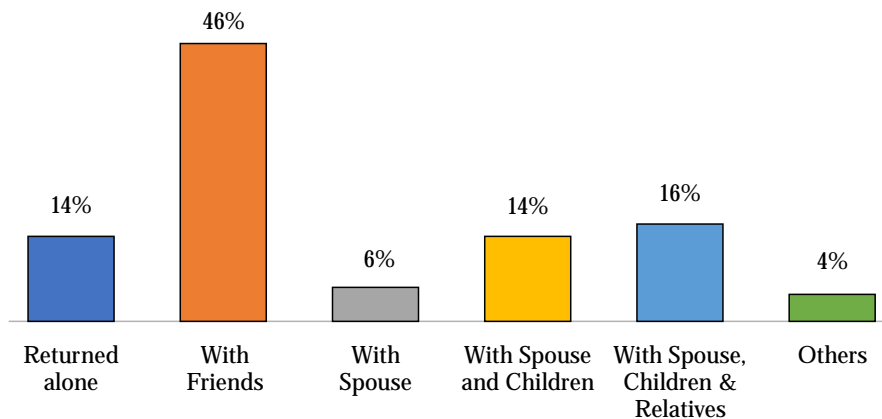
Graph 4: Mode of Return Journey



Migrant workers desperate to reach home had taken different modes of travel. As the Graph 4 shows, 79 (13%) migrants said that they had to return on foot to their home villages because other means of transportation were not available. A considerable share of migrants numbering 237 (38%) said that they could travel in public vehicles, mainly state-run buses and

trains, and 230 (37%) informed that they travelled by private vehicles (buses, trucks, vans, cars, pick-ups etc.) on their way back home. There were 68 (11%) migrants who travelled on multiple modes of transport which included private and public transport vehicles and on foot.

Graph 5: Company During Journey

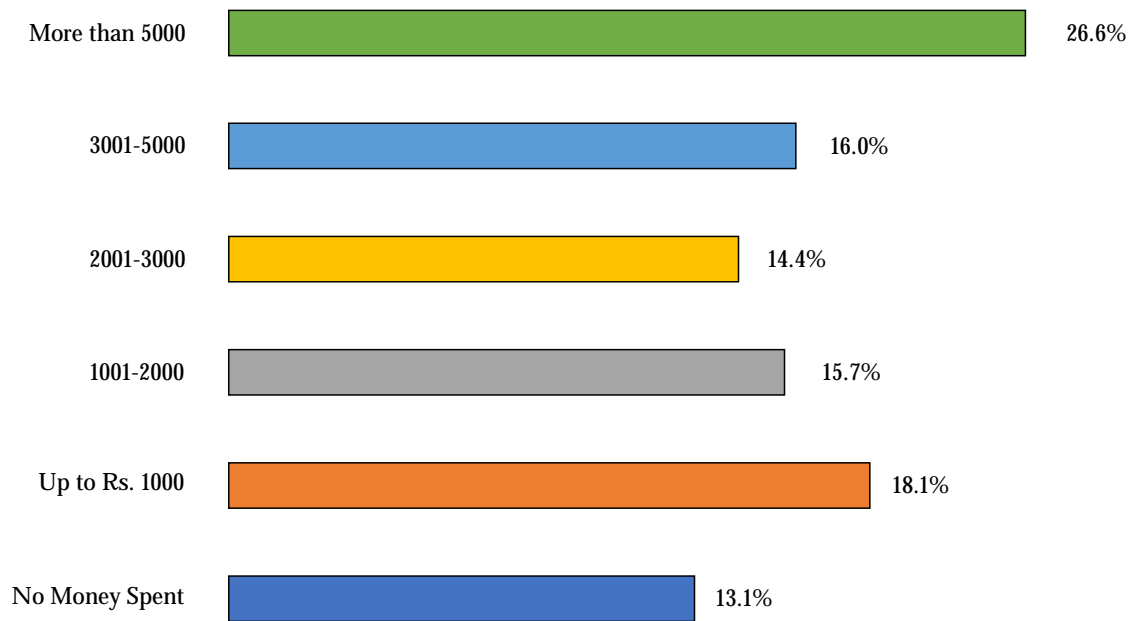


In most cases, migrant workers who had to travel long distances back to their native villages were not travelling alone. Only 84 (13%) respondents reported that they had travelled alone. All others either travelled with their friends (288, 46%), or with spouse (36, 6%) or with family comprising spouse and children (87, 14%). Considerable number of migrants (101, 16%) said that they had returned with their extended family consisting of spouse, children and relatives. A small number of migrants (28, 4%) informed that they had travelled with others like employers, neighbors and others.

The lock-down had led to an unprecedented restriction on vehicle movement, including passenger vehicles. Interstate transport links were snapped with state governments sealing borders to contain the virus infection. Masses of migrants had converged at many points along the state borders across

India for crossing over to their native places. In the initial phase of the lock-down, state governments had not allowed inter-state passenger movements which compounded the woes of migrants. Thousands had to start a long walk, braving excruciating heat, back to their homes hundreds of, if not a few thousand, kilometers away. Gradually, state governments eased restrictions and allowed movement of vehicles. This enabled private and government agencies to ferry migrants to their native places. Since government-run buses were either insufficient or absent, migrants had to take the help of private transporters for reaching their villages, thus incurring huge expenses. Several cases were reported in which private bus and truck operators had fleeced migrants by charging exorbitant rates for reaching them to their native places. There were also cases when migrants were transported in sub-human conditions in tankers and concrete mixing trucks.

Graph 6: Expenditure on Return Travel



The study revealed that 22.6% (82) respondents had to spend more than Rs. 5,000 for their return journey which is a huge amount for any migrant worker who normally earns wages in the range of Rs. 500-800 per day. Similarly, 16.0% (100) migrants reported that they had spent in the range of Rs. 3001-5000 on their travel and 14.4% migrants said that they spent in

the range of Rs. 2001-3000 on their return journey. As many as 98 (15.7%) migrants informed that their expenditure on return journey was in the range of Rs. 1001-2000 and 18.1% said that their expense was less than Rs. 1000. Some migrants, especially who walked or cycled back, numbering 82 (13.1%) reported that they did not spend any money on their return journey.

## CASE STUDY

# Life Overturned and Hopes Shattered

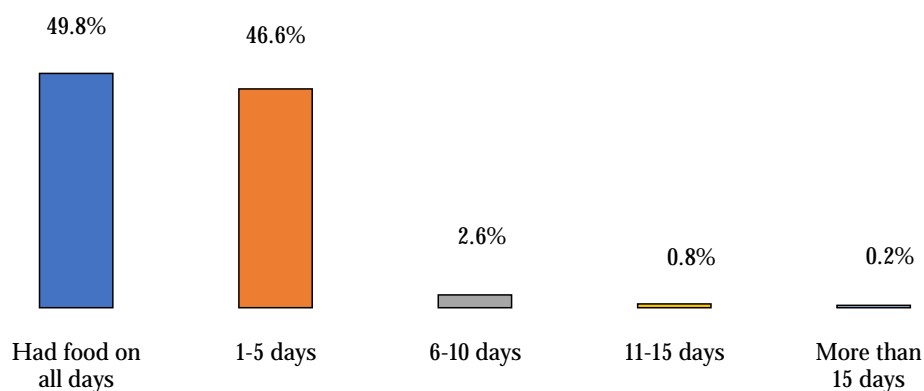


*Rajvijay family at their native village*

Rajvijay and his wife Meena Devi have been earning just enough to keep themselves alive and meet the huge expenditure on the treatment of the eldest of their three sons. While Rajvijay worked as a welder, Meena did odd domestic works to earn a living in Ludhiana, Punjab.

The lockdown gobbled up the work of both Rajvijay and Meena. Their meagre savings were all gone within a few days after the lockdown in meeting the huge bills on the treatment of their eldest son who suffers from brain fever and meningitis. Seeing no other means to live, Rajvijay hired a pushcart and started selling vegetables. But the income from vegetable vending was just not enough to support the family. He then decided to return to his native village in Maharajganj in Uttar Pradesh which is 1200 km away. He had no money for hiring a vehicle for the family to return to native village. He managed to register himself for travel support from government that arranged vehicles to ferry stranded migrants. After several days' travel in multiple vehicles and suffering hunger throughout the journey, Rajvijay along with his family returned to his native village. With no means of livelihood in sight, uncertainty stares menacingly at him. He needs to find means to buy medicines for his son and feed his family. Ever since their return, he and his family have been surviving on the food grain received from the Public Distribution System and his parents

Graph 7: Going Hungry During Return



The long journey back home was dreadful for migrants because they had to not only defy the scorching heat of the peak summer but hunger as well. Newspapers have been splashed with chilling scenes of masses of migrants trudging along highways occasionally taking refuge under trees or buildings. With all roadside eateries shut and limited possibilities of cooking food on the sides of highways, migrants had to rely on the provisions they carried with them, the food that was offered to them by generous communities or government-run food distribution points. In many cases, migrants had to go hungry during their long journey. As seen in Graph 3 on the duration of return journey, migrants had to spend several days in travel with some of them taking more than a month to return to their homes which they used to cover in a 2-3 days before the pandemic. The study revealed that 46.6% (291) of migrants did not have even one meal in a day. Similarly, 16 (2.6%) migrant workers reported that they did not have enough to eat for 6-10 of the days of journey and

5 respondents (0.8%) informed that they could not have food at least once a day for 11-15 days. One migrant worker said that s/he could not eat at least one meal for more than 15 days.

The study also probed the support, both financial and food, which migrant workers had received during the return journey. Nearly half of migrants numbering 294 (47.1%) reported that they had received neither monetary nor food support during their return journey. Thirty-five (5.6%) migrant workers said that they had received some monetary support from government and 169 (27.1%) migrant workers said they had received food from stalls/joints set up by government. Migrants reported to have benefited from the humanitarian response of civil society organisations and the generous communities along the roads/highways with 126 (20.2%) of them informing that they had received food and/or monetary support from communities or NGOs which had opened refreshment and food counters along the road.

Table 2: Support Received During Journey

No.	Type of support received	Response	Percentage
1	Received NO support from anyone	294	47%
2	Received monetary support from government	35	6%
3	Received food support from government	169	27%
4	Received food/money support from public/NGOs	126	20%
	Total	624	100%

## 2.2. Experience of Harassment

Migrant workers on their way back to their native places are normally exposed to several vulnerabilities because they are desperate to reach home and they seldom enjoy social protection during the journey. The study revealed that a small number of migrants were harassed during their journey. As many as 18.8% migrant workers reported that police had harassed them while they were on their way back and 13.1% informed that police had harassed them after they had reached their native places. Transporters had harassed 10.6% of home-

bound migrants during the journey and 7.7% migrants informed that they were harassed by vehicle operators even after they had reached their native villages. Government officials, excluding police, had harassed 9.0% migrant workers while they were travelling, and had harassed 14.9% of migrants after they had reached their native places. Significantly, there were some 'others' who had harassed the migrant workers both during their journey and after their return to villages. The 'others' included employers, moneylenders and neighbors.



Table 3: Harassment of Migrant Workers

	Response	By Police	By Vehicle operators	By Govt officials	By Others
During the journey	Yes	19%	11%	9%	12%
	No	81%	89%	91%	88%
After reaching village	Yes	13%	8%	15%	16%
	No	87%	92%	85%	84%

Returnee migrants were not always accepted back by communities, as the study reveals. There were several cases where village communities had denied entry to them. Given the widespread dread of the virus and the probability of the returnees carrying the infection, one should not be surprised

at the disinclination of village communities to allow entry to returnee migrants. Communities along the road had also hesitated to support migrant workers, and in some cases, had asked the migrant workers to leave the village limits immediately.

Table 4: Villagers Disallowing Entry to Migrant Workers

	Response	Number	Percentage
During the journey	Yes	97	16%
	No	527	85%
After reaching village	Yes	175	28%
	No	449	72%

Returnee migrants were not always accepted back by communities, as the study reveals. There were several cases where village communities had denied entry to them. Given the widespread dread of the virus and the probability of the returnees carrying the infection, one should not be surprised

at the disinclination of village communities to allow entry to returnee migrants. Communities along the road had also hesitated to support migrant workers, and in some cases, had asked the migrant workers to leave the village limits immediately.





*A researcher interviewing a migrant at an isolation facility in Odisha*

In most cases, the migrant workers had to stay in isolation/quarantine places for a period ranging from 7 to 14 days after their return. It was found that local administrations have been very alert whenever migrants had returned to villages. Administration had identified and transferred the returnees to facilities adjacent to villages like Anganwadi center, panchayat building, schools, and community halls. Several migrants, during discussions with the research team, expressed satisfaction about the facilities and the arrangements made in the village by the administration for their stay.

The homecoming, this time, for the migrant workers was a different story altogether. The agonizing journey, which had started when hopes had faded in their workplaces, eventually culminated in their native villages not before exposing the returnee migrants to extreme conditions and inexplicable trauma. But most of them now heave a sigh of relief because they managed to make it to their villages even though their livelihoods are in tatters. For many of them, who do not wish to go back to their workplaces, life will have to be restarted afresh.

# 03

## Livelihoods in a Shambles

India's informal sector, which accounts for over 80% of the total workers, has been the hardest hit and their vulnerabilities have been compounded



The Covid-19 crisis had a debilitating effect on the livelihood systems of the poor, especially migrant workers. The lock-down on economic activities resulted into painful loss of jobs of unprecedented nature and scale. It also created unprecedented economic crisis across the country and acute misery for migrant workers. India's informal sector, which accounts for over 80% of the total workers, has been the hardest hit and their vulnerabilities have been compounded. Indian economy was in a slow-down even before the pandemic with high degree of unemployment. The pandemic worsened the economic shock for a huge population which has been grappling with low incomes and unemployment.

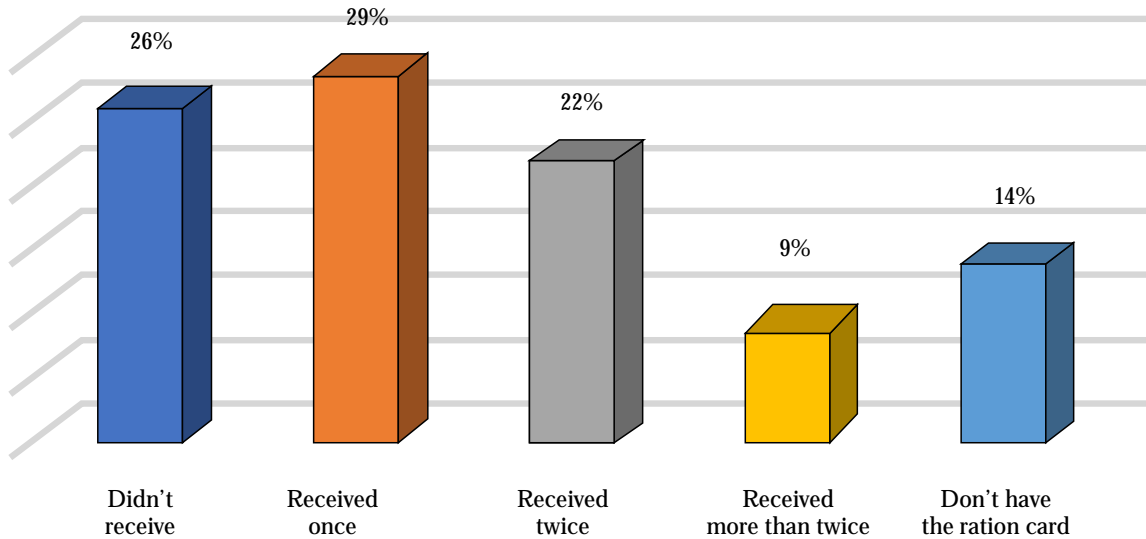
The pandemic and the subsequent lock-down may lead to permanent loss of livelihoods for a large number of

migrant workers because there is no certainty that they will get back their old jobs when the series of lock-down ends. Of course, some migrant workers will go back to the places where they came from and will be lucky to get the jobs back. But, it will take them a few more months to return to work; until then, they will remain unemployed with little income. The International Labour Organization (ILO) predicted that about 400 million workers would be poverty-stricken due to the pandemic and the lockdown<sup>3</sup>. Most migrant workers are daily wage earners working in manufacturing, construction, domestic work and petty vending sectors. Since they belong to unorganised sector, they have to meet, on their own, the needs of healthcare, housing, sanitation and nutrition with little support from government.

<sup>3</sup><https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/indicators/about-400-million-workers-in-india-may-sink-into-poverty-un-report/articleshow/75041922.cms?from=mdr>

### 3.1. Food Availability and Hunger

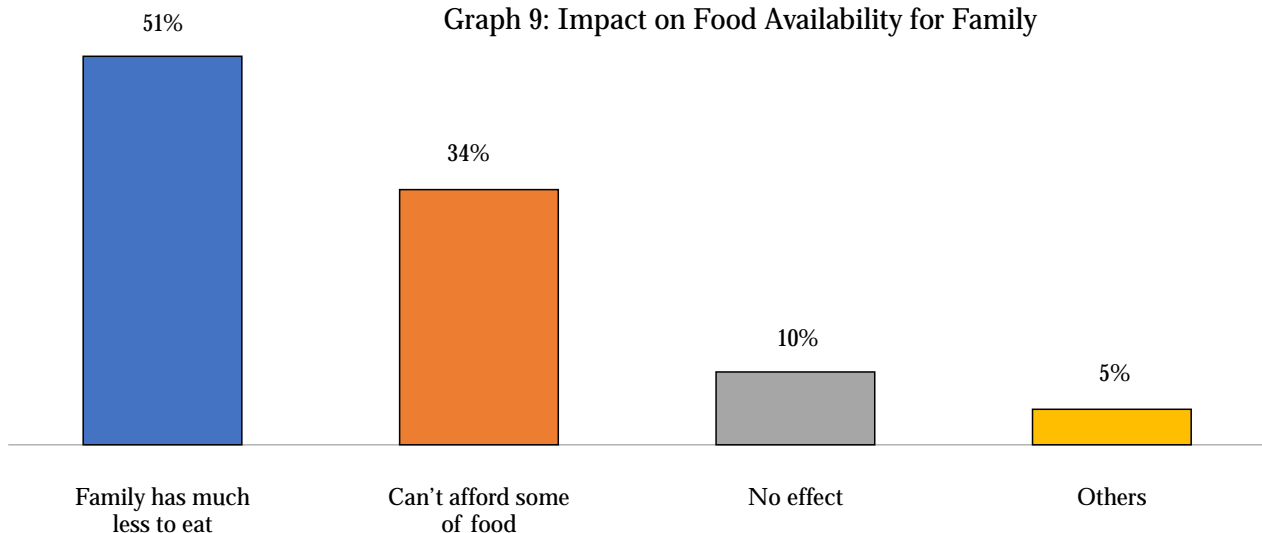
Graph 8: Food Supply from PDS



Migrant workers, ever since the lock-down, have been staring at severe food shortages. Their rural homes may have stock of food that may last a few weeks more; but the workers who returned to native places with families will need food support. The Public Distribution System (PDS), locally known as ration shop or control, is one of the food security arrangements that government implements across the country. The government has made several laudable and timely efforts to ensure that these food material distribution points work well and provide necessary food support to the workers who have returned to

villages in big numbers. Of the 624 workers who participated in the research, 26% workers who hold a valid ration card, which determines the eligibility, subsidy and quota of food provisions, reported that they had received no support from PDS shops whereas 14% migrants informed that they don't have a ration-card. This means that 40% migrants have had no access to food distribution system of the government and have this far not received food support of the government through PDS.

Graph 9: Impact on Food Availability for Family

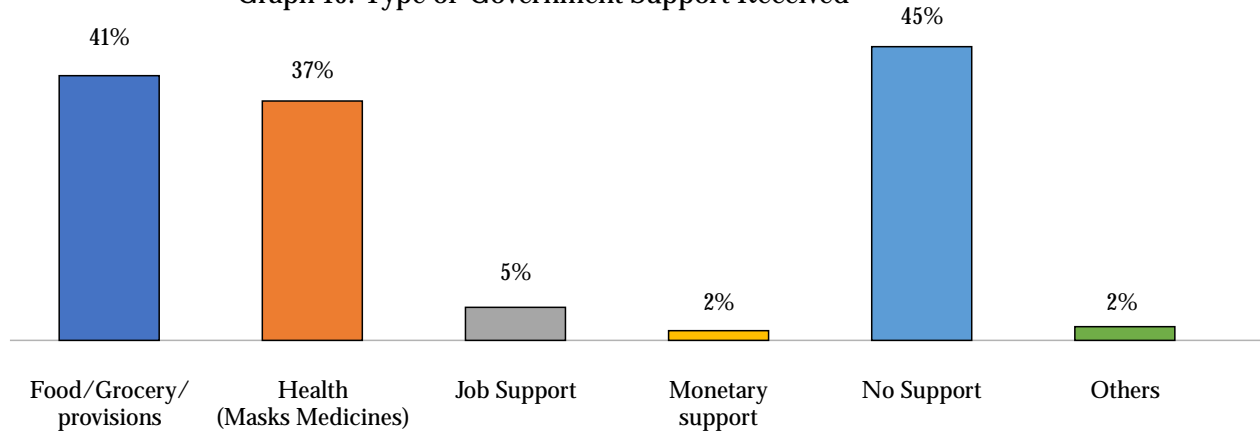


With the loss of work and livelihoods, the asset base of migrant workers has witnessed a sudden and steep erosion which is expected to negatively impact the overall food availability of families. Poor households, categorized into slabs, indeed get food entitlements under PDS; however, the supply from PDS is generally inadequate for most families. Even if a family receives subsidized food supply from PDS, such quota will have to be complemented with purchased food which requires money. Now that the sources of money have

dried up for migrant workers and the food supply from PDS is inadequate, a scary prospect of acute shortage of food hovers over migrants' families. The study revealed that 51% migrants have much less to eat ever since the pandemic has driven them back to their native places. Another 34% migrants reported that they can no longer afford to purchase some of the food which they used to have before the onset of the pandemic. Only 10% of migrants reported that the food availability of their families has remained constant.

### 3.2. Livelihood Security and Education

Graph 10: Type of Government Support Received



The research attempted to study the support that migrant workers had received from government agencies after their return to native place. A good number of them reported that they had received multiple support from the administration. But 45% of workers reported that they have received no support from the administration. However, government agencies were active in providing relief to migrant workers which is evident from the response of 41% of workers who said that they had received food or grocery items from the administration. A good number of migrants (37%) informed that they had received health support which included masks,

medicines, and sanitizers after their return to villages. The most pressing need of migrants is work as revealed by Graph 17 in Chapter 4. That only 5% of workers had received job support from the government points to the wide gap between the need of migrants and the availability of work. Similarly, very few migrant workers, just 2%, have received monetary support from government. A few migrant workers, accounting for 2%, informed that they had received other types of support from government which included treatment and accommodation.

#### CASE STUDY

## Dodged the Virus, But Not the Crisis

Jaiprakash Ram used to eke out a living working as a laborer in his village in Buxar district of Bihar. After his father's demise in 2017, the responsibility of supporting the family of six fell on his shoulders. The Dalit family with little landholding and no regular income was in dire straits and Jaiprakash moved to Faridabad, which is some 1000 km away, to work as a construction laborer. His family survived on the small remittances that Jaiprakash unfailingly sent to them once in two months. Jaiprakash and his family thus managed to make both ends meet and keep the fire burning.

Then came the lock-down and the life of Jaiprakash and his family went for a toss.

Jaiprakash lost his work immediately after the announcement of lockdown. He stayed for a few weeks in Faridabad vainly hoping that normalcy would return soon. By the time he decided to return, all his savings were spent in meeting daily needs and paying rent. His mother took a loan of Rs. 2,000 from a micro-finance agency and sent to Jaiprakash. He packed his paltry belongings and started the long, arduous journey back home.

Jaiprakash had to walk for a few days since all means of inter-state transport were stopped. He travelled in several trucks and

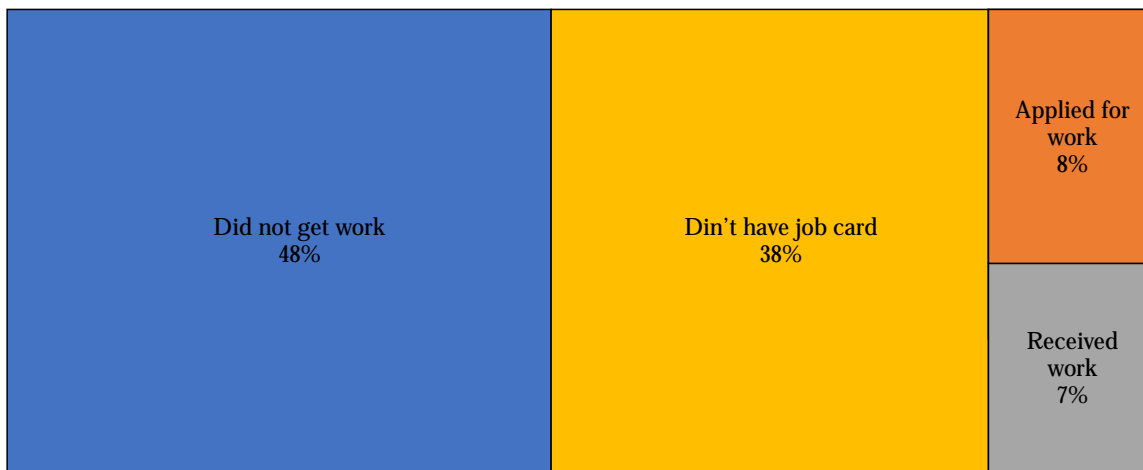


Jaiprakash narrating his pitiable plight to a researcher

somehow reached his village, with empty pocket. After staying in the quarantine center for fourteen days he moved to his family which had slipped into deep crisis. His family was on the verge of starvation and the micro-finance agent was continuously harassing for the recovery of loan that his mother had taken for helping him return home.

To make things worse, Jaiprakash found no work anywhere near his village and his family received no support from the government either. He has no faith in people's representatives who according to him, "jeet jane ke baad koi garib ke liye kaam nhi karta" (no one works for the poor after winning elections). Jaiprakash knows that he will need to do something immediately for saving his family from starvation. His only hope of survival hinges on the remote possibility that the government will provide work to him, that too immediately.

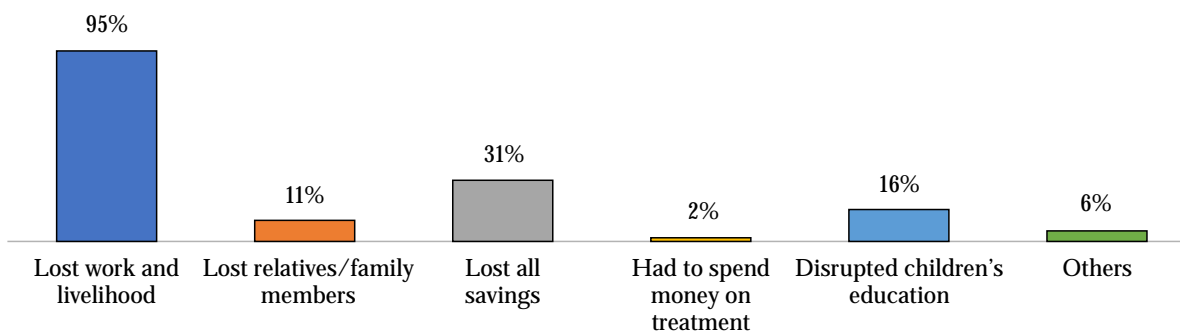
Graph 11: MGNREGA Benefits



MGNREGA gained considerable attention of policy makers, civil society and governments because of the great potential of this flagship programme to reach relief, in the form of wage labour, to the unemployed workforce. MGNREGA provides for quick opening of works and transfer of wages to the bank accounts of job card holders. If executed well, MGNREGA can become an effective solution to the widespread distress of migrant workers who have returned home with little savings and are unemployed ever since.

The research revealed that 48% migrant workers have not received wage labour despite possessing valid job cards whereas 38% migrants reported that they don't possess job cards which means that they would not have received work under MGNREGA and in all likelihood will not get work until they manage to obtain a job card. A mere 7% migrants informed that they have received work under MGNREGA while 8% informed that they have submitted application seeking work under MGNREGA but have not received work yet.

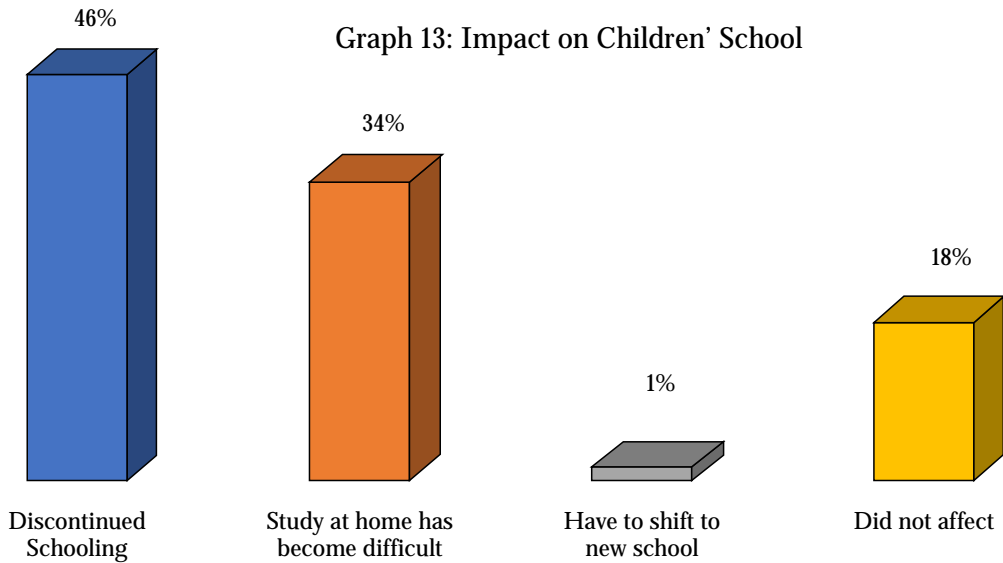
Graph 12: Major Loss due to Pandemic



The pandemic crisis has hit everyone hard without exception. While the most visible impact was the loss of work, there were several other losses that the pandemic had inflicted on migrant workers. The study revealed that 95% of migrant workers had suffered loss of work and livelihood. Thirty-one per cent migrant workers reported that they had lost all savings and 2% informed that they had to spend huge amounts on the treatment of family and self. Eleven per cent migrants

reported that there was a death in their family because of Covid-19 infection. Disruption of education of children was reported as the biggest loss by 16% of migrants whereas 6% informed that they had other unspecified losses due to the pandemic. The findings hold critical importance because nearly all migrant workers reported loss of work and livelihood as the most severe consequence of the pandemic on their life.

Graph 13: Impact on Children' School



The massive exodus of migrant workers and their families from the place of work to their native villages is bound to have serious adverse impact on the education of children. The study found that 360 of the 624 migrants were parents of school-going children and they had to return to villages with their families. In the process, the parents had to withdraw their children from schools. A sizeable number of migrant workers have no plans to return to the places where they worked even if the lockdown is lifted and infection risks subside. This implies that children will be out of school, probably for a long period. Thus, the impact of the pandemic-induced lockdown is going to be substantial on the schooling of children with 46% migrant workers reporting that they had to discontinue the schooling of their children and 34% migrant workers

informing that children's education at home has become very difficult. A small percent of migrant workers (1%) informed that they are planning to shift their children to new schools. Only 18% of migrant workers said that Covid-19 pandemic had not affected the schooling of their children.

The outbreak of the pandemic and the subsequent lock-down have a telling effect on the livelihoods, food availability and children's education of migrant workers. Cumulatively, these impacts can aggravate the distress of migrant workers. The mindboggling employment crisis, unless remedial measures are implemented, will lead to several associated crises for millions of migrant workers who have lost their livelihoods.

# 04

## A Future Perfectly Tensed



The reverse migration of workers is widely feared to lead to increase in poverty, inequity, exploitation and discrimination.

The national lockdown that was announced on 24 March 2020 for containing the spread of the virulent virus effectively downed shutters on the livelihoods of millions of internal migrants who had to flee back to their native places. The exodus of migrants from cities and other places of work to their native places was triggered by the mounting despair over loss of work and livelihoods and fear of infection. The only hope that most migrants had clutched on to while returning to their native places with paltry belongings was that they will not die of hunger if they manage to reach home. They have now returned to the same place where they had not found adequate or reliable means of living. This implies that they have taken a plunge into an uncertainty. Most migrants have no clue what they will do in their villages or how they will meet the expenses. The unprecedented pandemic has caused an unprecedented influx of migrant workers into the rural India which offers very little employment opportunities. Hence, the reverse migration of workers is widely feared to lead to increase in poverty, inequity, exploitation and discrimination.

As Graph 5 on company during return journey evidences, 372 (59%) migrant workers were working alone in cities and other places, with their families still in villages. Their families in villages are staring at difficult times with the sudden

stop of remittances and the return of migrant workers. Rural poverty, in many cases, was kept away by incomes that were earned away from villages by migrant laborers. Now that such incomes have disappeared, poverty is expected to assume several painful forms. Absence of a dependable cash balance and social security means that the loss of livelihoods will have cascading effect in the form of hunger, malnutrition, indebtedness, crime, etc. The return of workers in big numbers to rural areas is also expected to further strain the already-burdened rural economies.

The migrant workers and their families need to urgently find the means of subsistence in the short run. Many migrants will find it difficult to meet even this existential need. Migrant workers and their families are facing daunting challenges since they are facing a situation riddled with risks. Rural economy has taken a beating and employment opportunities have dried up in villages too. It will take several months, if not years, for the few industries and businesses that exist in rural areas to spring back to normalcy.

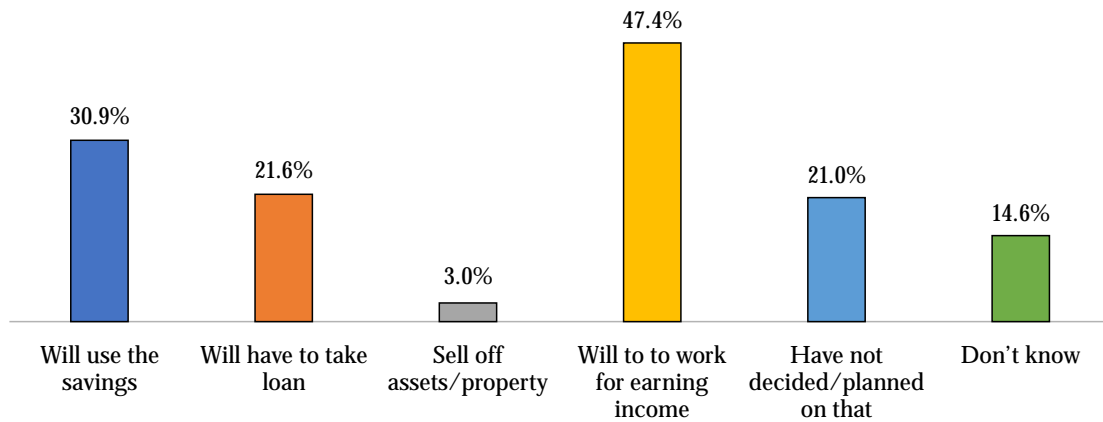
### 4.1. Scary Uncertainties

The research, therefore, attempted to understand the apprehensions, fears and insecurity feelings of migrant workers. Until recently they had some reliable means of livelihood which

helped them take care of the expenses of the family. Now that those livelihoods exist no more, they will have to look for other alternatives for meeting the needs of their families. The

below-given illustration presents migrant workers' plans to meet the needs of the family in the next two months.

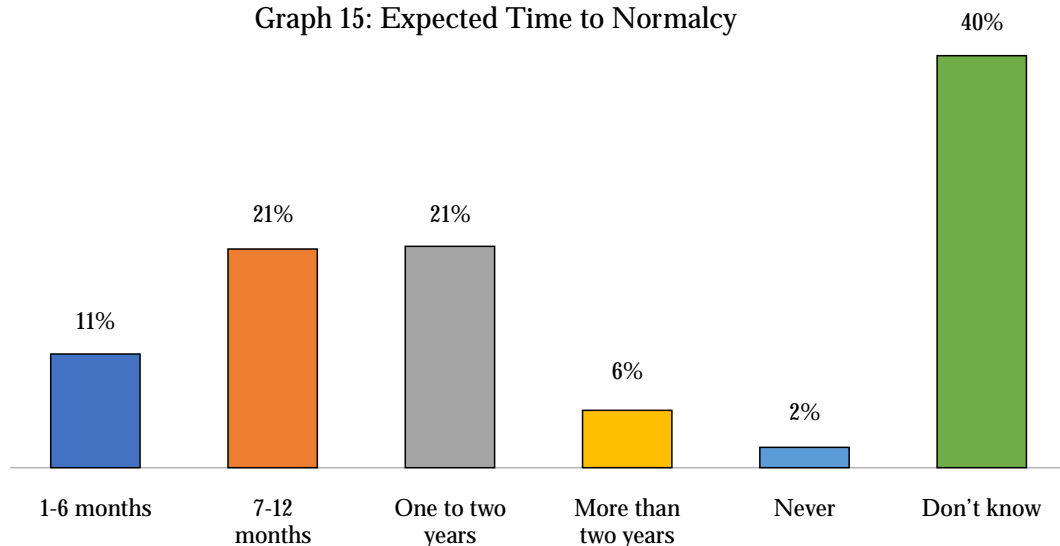
Graph 14: Plans to Meet the Needs of Family in the Next 2 Months



As many as 296 (47.4%) migrant workers stated that they will need to return to work for sustaining themselves and to support their families; 30.9% (193) said they would use their savings to meet expenses. The responses of migrant workers reveals that the workers have started feeling the pinch as 21.6% of them reported that they planned to take loans in

the next two months and another 3% workers informing that they would sell of property/valuables for meeting the needs of the family. Confusion and uncertainty are starkly visible with 21% respondents reporting that they are yet to decide on their plan of action and 14.6% stating that they are clueless as to how they can meet the needs of the family.

Graph 15: Expected Time to Normalcy



Hope gives confidence and strength. Uncertainties and insecurities drain people's will to fight and fill people with pessimism and fatalism. If the finding of the below-given inquiry is anything to go by, the pandemic has seriously dented the morale of migrant workers. A big proportion of the workers (40%) reported that they do not know when their lives will become normal and 2% of workers said that life will no longer be normal. As many as 132 (21%) workers

reported that they expect the crisis to blow over in 7-12 months and another 21% workers said it would take one to two years for their lives to become normal again. Thirty-five (6%) migrant workers informed that it will take more than two years to build their lives and livelihoods back. Though there is optimism among workers about the future, anxiety among them is obvious and evident.

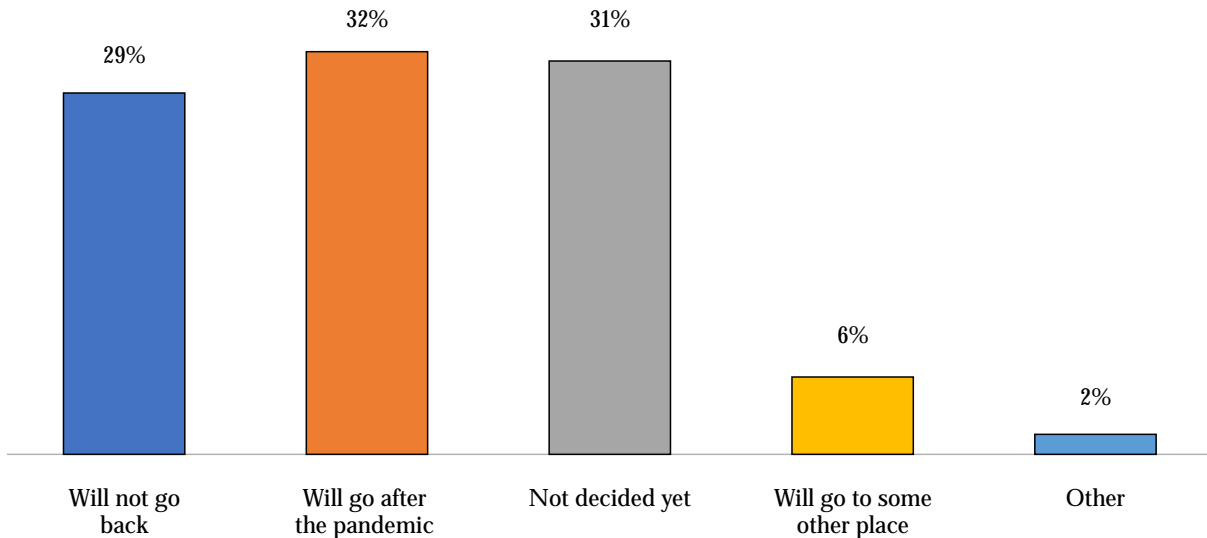


## 4.2 Plans of Resuming Work

Feeble asset base of migrant workers will not allow them the luxury of staying at home without work for long. The migrants will need work, that too immediately. Pandemic and the grueling return journey were ordeals for them, and the

crisis has robbed them of livelihoods and a good share of their savings. They have been undergoing an indescribable crisis with bitter memories of the place they returned from.

Graph 16: Plans to Return to Work



The study reveals that 29% migrants do not want to go back to the places from where they returned. This means that they will have to search for livelihoods in the village itself or in the vicinity. However, 32% of the workers informed that they will go back once the pandemic threat is blown over whereas

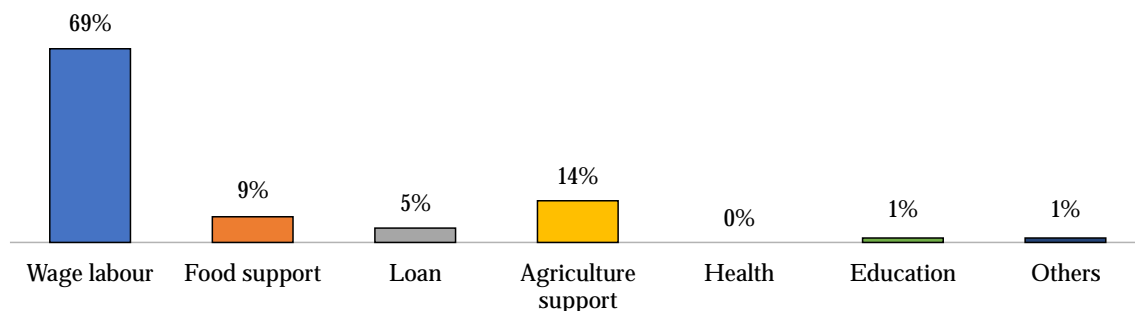
6% of them reported that they will migrate but not to the place from where they returned. Thirty-one percent of the respondents informed that they have not yet decided where to go for work.

## 4.3 Expected Support

With the loss of livelihoods, the asset base of migrants has experienced a steep downswing. For restarting life, most migrant workers expect immediate support from

government. The study attempted to identify the mode of support that migrants expect from the government in the next six months for restarting their life.

Graph 17: Urgent Support Needed in 6 Months



Understandably, having lost their jobs resulting in large scale unemployment, 69% of the migrant workers expected the government to provide them with employment/wage labor so that they can stay afloat. Another nine per cent migrant workers said that they needed urgent food support because

they were facing acute food shortages. As many as 90 (14%) migrant workers said they would like to get government support for agriculture operations and for starting agriculture-based livelihoods while 30 (5%) migrants sought loan support for starting non-farm livelihood activities.

## Traumatized and Disheartened

It was a horrid journey back home for Wakil Kumar who had to start work at an early age for supporting his family. The twenty-one-year-old Dalit youth had left his village in Madhepura district of Bihar to work at construction sites in Secunderabad, Telangana, some 1800 km away. The lockdown shredded his hopes of earning a decent income to support himself and his family. Once the twenty-one-year-old found himself short of means to buy food, he decided to return to his native place. Wakil paid Rs. 1800 to a truck to take him from Secunderabad to Nagpur in Maharashtra. He had exhausted all his money by the time he reached Nagpur. Wakil Kumar pleaded with some people who took him to Chhattisgarh. With no money left, he had to skip several meals and when he ate, it was because of the generosity of people who distributed free food on highways.

Some good people helped him to reach Patna from Chhattisgarh and he changed many vans before reaching Patna. Food distribution by generous communities along the highway kept him alive. He was not lucky to find a free ride to his native village in Madhepura which is nearly 300 kilometers away from Patna. He walked a few days under the sweltering sun and reached home, keeping himself alive with the free food distributed by NGOs and communities along the road. Wakil Kumar is exhausted, and his dreams are shattered. He



says his future is bleak with no work available anywhere near his village. His family says Wakil has been experiencing bouts of depression ever since he returned home.

Though the migrant workers demonstrated optimism and a general positivity, true to their reputation of being a community with high degree of resilience, signs of frustration were visible while they narrated their stories to the researchers. One of the most striking findings of the research was the severity of the 'reverse migration' with 29% of migrant workers reporting that they would not go for migrant labour which is both a possibility and a challenge. Reverse migration on one hand increases the number of

employable hands in villages; but on the other hand, it strains the saturated rural economy. Supply of labour in rural areas exceeds the need. The imbalance of labour availability and need of rural societies has been responsible for low wages, unemployment and migration. Unless alternative livelihood systems are identified, created and strengthened, the possibility of workers' concentration in rural areas will soon become a distressing liability.

# 05

## Recommendations

Unless unprecedented measures are taken to conquer the virus and reverse the harms inflicted by it, a humanitarian disaster is certain to unfold, especially for the hapless migrant workers who find themselves out of work.

Millions of migrant workers have been severely impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, with their lives turned upside down, leaving them barely able to survive. The pandemic has devastated all major sectors of the economy that offered work to migrant workers. Successive lockdowns have crippled industries and trades thus leading to largescale loss of work and distressed exodus of migrants. Migrant workers are fighting stiff battles on two fronts – protecting themselves and families from the tentacles of the virus and finding a dependable means of livelihood for keeping the home fires burning. The pandemic has so far been a formidable challenge for the nation and for families. Distress among the working community has been rising alarmingly with the increasing rate of unemployment. Unless unprecedented measures are taken to conquer the virus and reverse the harms inflicted by it, a humanitarian disaster is certain to unfold, especially for the hapless migrant workers who find themselves out of work. As the findings of the research reveal, migrant workers are in deep misery and the specter of livelihood and food crisis is ominously staring at them. Migrant workers' community requires assistance, in the short run, in the below-given sectors to stay afloat and to stitch together a tomorrow that is free of hunger and debilitating insecurities.

### A. Food Support

- Parcels of food provisions should be distributed to migrant workers, especially those migrant workers who have returned to villages with families.
- The functioning of Public Distribution System (PDS) should be improved in such a way that more food supplies are made available for all deserving families. Essential provisions like food grain, edible oil and pulses should be made available, with the same subsidy arrangement, in PDS shops but in greater quantity.
- PDS shops should release the quota of food provisions to migrant workers on a credit basis for the next six months. The workers should be given at least six months' time to pay for the food materials that they have purchased from PDS shops.
- Food aid to migrant workers should be integrated with the Mid-Day Meal programme of schools. Cooked food should be made available for migrant workers' families for at least six months. For this, panchayat level identification of migrant families should be done on a priority basis and local panchayats should be given the responsibility of completing the mapping of migrants who have returned to villages.
- Government should distribute

food coupons to families with vulnerability (Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, families with persons with special needs, widows, single mothers, the destitute, landless families, BPL families and others) which could be redeemed at PDS shops or at designated provision stores.

- One Nation One Ration Card scheme should be started in all PDS shops with effect from June 2020 so that migrant workers can lift their quota of ration from anywhere in India.
- Reduce the distance between points of procurement and distribution. Connect procurement points directly with PDS shops for quicker transfer of materials and distribution to deserving families.

#### B. Livelihoods & Work

- Works under MGNREGA should be opened immediately and wage payments should be released to the workers within five days.
- MGNREGA work should be made available for all vulnerable families for at least 150 days. At least two persons from families with high vulnerability should be given work.

#### C. Eligibility Documentation

- Process of issuing eligibility documents, like ration card, job card, migrant worker identity card etc., should be fast-tracked.
- Simplification of migrant workers' registration process and establishing help desk at panchayat level in those areas with high migrant worker population.

#### D. Finance Support

- Based on the eligibility, determined by the categorizations of PDS, at least Rs. 5,000 should be transferred to the bank accounts of migrant workers as interim relief.
- At least Rs. 5,000 should be transferred, as emergency relief, to all households which have very high vulnerability (BPL families, widows, returnee migrants, families with persons with special needs).
- Cash assistance to vulnerable communities should be paid at the doorstep.
- Families of covid-19 virus infected persons, belonging to vulnerable categories, should be given Rs. 5000 as interim relief.
- Announce a 6-month moratorium on loan installments of migrant workers.
- All taxes should be suspended in rural areas, especially tribal areas, for at least one year.

#### E. Other Support

- Electricity bill payment should be suspended for at least six months.
- Launch enrollment campaign in all villages for identifying out-of-school children and to re-enroll them in schools.
- Migrant workers should be linked with a national level welfare system, similar to Kisan Credit Card, and link benefits of these schemes with registered migrants.

# Walking with Migrants



The recommendations and suggestion if efficiently implemented in time can create an enabling and protective environment for migrant workers lives and livelihoods.

Every unprecedented situation, Covid-19 pandemic is no exception, calls for courageous and dynamic responses. The sudden country-wide lockdown proved to be a nightmare for millions of migrants in India, leaving behind deep scars of untold miseries on their memory lanes and shaking the conscience of the nation. It may take several years for the majority of our migrant sisters and brothers to build back their lives and livelihoods because they are strapped of resources to meet even the basic requirements. This Rapid Research conducted by Caritas India on the 'Distress of Returnee Migrant Workers' during the lockdown was a professional attempt to capture the depth of harrowing experiences and the complexities of issues that migrant communities faced during the lockdown and after their return to native villages.

The study has highlighted the agonies of migrants who lost their livelihoods and made several startling revelations on the distress of migrant workers. These research findings serve as pointers for concrete actions by policy makers, Civil Society Organizations, development professionals, donor partners and all people of goodwill who are concerned about sorry plight of millions of our sisters and brothers belonging to migrant communities of north, east and the north eastern states of India.

Caritas India is committed to support the migrant community with Livelihood support systems, engaging and enabling them to advocate and develop rural policies for accessing their rights and entitlements, support better education for their children and create better interface and coordination between the government machineries of origin and destination states for their social and economic welfare.

The recommendations and suggestion if efficiently implemented in time can create an enabling and protective environment for migrant workers lives and livelihoods. Caritas India is deeply committed to create socio-economic empowerment and an enabling environment for all the people including the large number of migrant workers.

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