



MIGRANT VOICES

Stories of India's Internal
Migrant Workers During
the COVID-19 Pandemic



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Cite as: IHRB, "Migrant Voices: Stories of India's Internal Migrant Workers during the COVID-19 Pandemic" (November 2020), at: <https://www.ihrb.org/focus-areas/migrant-workers/india-internal-migrant-workers-covid-19>

Attribution: This report was prepared by Shubhabrata Roy of BIAS with support from Salil Tripathi at IHRB. BIAS colleagues Mahima Gupta, Sachin Tomar, and Varun Arora conducted the interviews and Bhavya Sachdeva helped in documenting cases. IHRB colleagues Scott Jerbi, Neill Wilkins, Haley St Dennis provided additional comments and support, and Deborah Sagoe designed the report. The advice and feedback of business and human rights expert Dr Harpreet Kaur is gratefully acknowledged.

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Cover image: Migrants who returned from their hometown of Uttar Pradesh wait in line to be tested for the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) during a rapid antigen testing campaign at a railway station, on the outskirts of Mumbai, India, October, 3, 2020. REUTERS/Francis Mascarenhas



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About this report

After the Indian Government declared a nationwide lockdown in March 2020 to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, hundreds of thousands of internal migrants in India decided to leave the cities where they worked to return to their hometowns, using any available means of transport. Many of them decided to walk hundreds of miles. Many died during their journey.

Behavioural Insights Architecture and Strategy Pvt. Ltd. (BIAS), an Indian consulting firm, interviewed more than 200 internal migrant workers who decided to leave. Their narratives explain their rationale for leaving: they had no means for survival in the cities, and so they chose to return to their villages and stay there even though there were fewer economic opportunities. This is a story of human suffering that was avoidable, if the state and the private sector had acted with greater accountability and responsibility.

Following these worker interviews, BIAS sought to identify any patterns in their responses and worked with the Institute for Human Rights and Business (IHRB) to prepare this report compiling their testimonies. (Demographic information of the workers interviewed are provided in the Annex).

The report identifies certain specific patterns from the stories of the internal migrant workers to attempt to paint a picture of the lived experience, and to understand trends at an aggregate level (through meaningful statistics) and at an individual level (through stories), offering perspectives that need to be heard and taken seriously by the Government and the private sector alike.

India's migrant crisis offers lessons on governance gaps for the business and human rights community in other countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, such as China, Thailand, Indonesia, Myanmar, Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria, South Africa, or Brazil, amongst others, who are reliant on workers to leave their villages to work in cities. It has shown the Government's inability to make adequate protection available for migrant workers whose living conditions (such as congested facilities or in urban slums) expose them to infections. It has also shown the failures on the part of many of their employers, large and small, state or private, who do not provide income support, essential services, healthcare, or any relief. It has also shown the inadequacies of infrastructure given the state's weak capacity to protect the workers returning home.¹



India's migrant crisis offers lessons on governance gaps for the business and human rights community in other countries.



¹ RAJAGOPALAN Shruti and TABARROK Alexander 'pandemic Policies in Developing Countries: Recommendations for India' Mercatus Center at George Mason University Policy Brief at <https://www.mercatus.org/publications/COVID-19-policy-brief-series/pandemic-policy-developing-countries-recommendations-india>

CHAPTER 1

Introduction



Migrant workers stand in queue to do registration and thermal scanning, after that they will allowed to travel back to their homes during nationwide lockdown.

Introduction

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Why India?

COVID-19 is an unprecedented crisis. No country can be said to be prepared fully, and even countries that have acquitted themselves relatively well have had recurrences or administrative mishaps. And yet, the Indian story is unique.

By mid-October 2020, at 7.12 million confirmed cases of COVID-19, India had the world's second-largest number of infections, after the United States, at 7.8 million. At 109,000 COVID-related deaths, India ranks third in the world, after the United States (215,000) and Brazil (151,000). While several countries with fewer people have been affected more severely on a per capita basis, India's case is unique and deserves examination for at least three reasons:

- India's first case of COVID-19 infection was known in late January 2020 and its officials were well aware of the pace at which it spread in other countries and the trajectory it would take. They were also aware of the adequacy of India's infrastructure capacity to deal with the epidemic and the stress the system would face. Six weeks later India announced the most stringent lockdown for a country of its size at short notice. People were given a mere four hours before transport links were shut down, businesses, schools, colleges, and other public areas were asked to close.
- Millions of vulnerable, poor Indians who worked away from their homes in India's towns and cities came to an identical conclusion² – that they should not heed state governments' assurances to stay where they worked; that they could not rely on the State for any financial or physical support; and with no trade union rights workers they will have little means to compel employers to support them. They decided to walk back to their villages. One report suggests at least 200 workers died on their journey³, but the actual figure is likely to be higher, since statisticians and economists find India's

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record-keeping of deaths to be inaccurate or unreliable⁴ even under normal circumstances. In the process, they may have exposed themselves to the virus, or exposed others to the virus – spreading the pandemic instead of containing it.

India also has many laws and regulations in place to protect the vulnerable. It is the world's fifth largest economy with a nominal gross domestic product of nearly \$3 trillion and therefore has the resources to deal with a major crisis. And yet, the response of the state and the private sector was inadequate.

Internal movement is common in countries around the world. Most of the world's dynamic cities have a significant portion of their population born elsewhere, comprising people who have moved to the city for work, many of them being recent arrivals. The relationship between the migrant and the city is symbiotic; the worker needs the job and the city needs the worker to perform jobs that its residents are unable or unwilling to perform.

Unlike overseas recruitment, domestic recruitment and internal migration pose different challenges and many areas remain unregulated. Such workers are frequently exploited and have few rights and insufficient access to basic amenities. Weaker trade unions around the world means such workers – who may not speak the local language and who may not be from the same province – often rely on employers for accommodation or allowances. This can cause strain on cities, leading to the formation of large slums where public services are poor or non-existent. Internal migration can also lead to resentment against “outsiders” which can be, and has been, exploited by political organisations.

India's handling of the risks to this workforce offers a stark example of a preventable compounding of the COVID crisis. Cities in other countries which had large numbers of internal migrants did not face a crisis of such proportions. India has the laws, the means, and the infrastructure to do a much better job moving forward, but requires the Indian Government and the private sector to abide by their respective human rights duties and responsibilities. The internal migrant crisis in India shows shortcomings across all three pillars of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights⁵ : the state has failed to **protect** human rights, companies have not shown adequate commitment to **respect** human rights, and there has been insufficient **remedy**.

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India's Response to COVID-19

The first case of COVID-19 in India was identified on January 30, 2020.⁶ On February 4, the National Disaster Management Authority issued its first guideline on travel hygiene and social distancing.⁷ Other warnings were issued by different Government departments, but there was little urgency in Governmental responses throughout February and March.⁸

The first death was recorded in mid-March,⁹ by which time 100 cases were identified. On 20 May, the number of cases had exceeded 100,000, with over 3,000 deaths. By June,¹⁰ India showed the highest increase globally in COVID-19 cases, and on the eve of India's Independence Day (15 Aug), it had more than 2.5 million cases and 48,000 deaths.¹¹ As with other countries, the spread spared no one; leading politicians, bureaucrats, and movie stars were as likely to get infected as the countless poor. India ranks second in overall cases globally and has the dubious honour of topping the chart for the highest number of recorded new cases and, on some days, daily deaths.

Lockdown

On 24 March 2020, the Government of India announced a nation-wide lockdown,¹² giving the nation of 1.3 billion people four hours' notice. The restrictions came into force at midnight local time (00:00 IST) and were enforced for 21 days through 14 April 2020, which was further extended to 3 May 2020. Since then, the lockdown has been extended twice. Leading politicians, Prime Minister Narendra Modi included, began to appear wearing masks and the Government showed photographs of meetings respecting the norms of social distancing. Authorities used humour,¹³ music,¹⁴ interesting headgear,¹⁵ and sometimes brutal force¹⁶ to restrict people's movement.

6 REID David 'India Confirms its First Coronavirus Case' CNBC (30 Jan 2020) at <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/01/30/india-confirms-first-case-of-the-coronavirus.html>

7 NATIONAL DISASTER MANAGEMENT AUTHORITY, Government of India (4 Feb 2020) at <https://ndma.gov.in/images/COVID/04022020.pdf>

8 NAIR Ravi 'For Over a Month, Modi Govt didn't adhere to NDMA Advisory on Covid-19' News Click (19 May 2020) at <https://www.newsclick.in/National-Disaster-Management-Authority-Advisory-COVID-19-Modi-Govt-Ignore>

9 BISWAS Soutik 'The controversy over India's first virus fatality' BBC (22 April 2020) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52343241>

10 HENLEY Jon 'India has highest rise in Covid-19 cases' The Guardian (24 June 2020) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/24/global-report-india-has-highest-rise-in-COVID-19-cases-as-latin-america-toll-passes-100000>

11 WORLDOMETER - CORONAVIRUS - DATA ON INDIA (constantly updated): Latest at <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/india/>

12 Karan Deep Singh, Vindu Goel, Hari Kumar, and Jeffrey Gettleman "India Day 1: World's Largest Coronavirus Lockdown Begins" The New York Times (25 March 2020) at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/25/world/asia/india-lockdown-coronavirus.html>

13 Indian police performing hand-washing dance - 19 March 2020 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKRZTetftPc>

14 PRESS TRUST OF INDIA - 3 April 2020 - Kolkata Police performing on the streets - at <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/kolkata/watch-kolkata-cop-dons-singers-hat-to-cheer-locked-down-people-coronavirus-6345543/>

15 YEUNG Jesse, CNN A police officer is wearing a coronavirus helmet (30 March 2020) at <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/30/asia/coronavirus-helmet-chennai-intl-hnk-scli/index.html>

16 SIRCAR Anisha 'India's Coronavirus Lockdown is bringing out the worst in its police force' Quartz 25 March 2020 at <https://qz.com/india/1826387/indias-coronavirus-lockdown-brings-police-brutality-to-the-fore/>

The sudden closure had an impact that could have been anticipated – the closure of all business activity and services brought commerce to a standstill, making it harder for everyone, but in particular the poor who rely on daily wages, either to access essential goods and services or earn their livelihood. Without any provision of a social safety net, millions of Indians who work in towns and cities far from the villages where their families live, decided to make their way home. With transport stopped, many had to walk.

Millions of Indians work as migrant workers outside of India. Yet India has seen such a mass phenomenon only one other time, during the partition that accompanied its independence in 1947, when more than 10 million people were displaced and up to two million people may have died.¹⁷ Migrant workers within the country form the backbone of India's informal sector, and contribute a significant amount of value to the economy.¹⁸ The Economic Survey (2016-17) put India's interstate¹⁹ migrant population at 60 million,²⁰ with a majority in seasonal and short-term jobs.

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Their plight attracted unprecedented attention from the media, academia, activists, and policy makers. Some media organisations covered the plights of these workers heavily.²¹ Class divides were revealed, with some among the privileged classes complaining why the workers were not staying put despite support and assistance from charities. The exodus revealed deep fissures in Indian society – how cities rely on cheap labour from the countryside; how agrarian distress is forcing people to move to cities to work and live in inhuman conditions; and the response of the state and the upper echelons of society raise profound questions about Indian society.

It is not as if India needs new laws. Its 1979 Inter-state Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act²² is intended to protect workers who work outside

- 17 KOSINSKI LA ELAHI KM Population Redistribution and Development in South Asia (Springer 2012) – at <https://books.google.com/books?id=tGiSBAAQBAJ&pg=PA6#v=onepage&q&f=false>
- 18 Informal economies are hard to estimate, but economists believe more than 50% of India's economy is informal. <https://www.imf.org/-/media/Files/Conferences/2019/7th-statistics-forum/session-ii-murthy.ashx>
- 19 The official term for internal migrants.
- 20 The Economic Survey of 2016-17 estimated the number of interstate and inter-district migrants to be 60 million and 80 million respectively. <https://www.indiabudget.gov.in/budget2017-2018/es2016-17/echapter.pdf> Page 265
- 21 Particularly noteworthy is the reporting of senior journalist Barkha Dutt, much of which available here - <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCrdPiSPVWOrtRsI002BX8iw>. Also see <https://www.shethepeople.tv/home-top-video/how-barkha-dutt-took-COVID-19-coverage-from-studios-to-the-streets-of-india/>, and <https://www.telegraphindia.com/culture/people/barkha-dutt-has-been-on-the-road-for-74-days-and-counting-jaipur-ahmedabad-surat-mumbai-pune-mumbai/cid/1778110>
- 22 INTERSTATE MIGRANT WORKMEN (REGULATION AND CONDITIONS OF SERVICE) ACT, 1979: The act is meant to guarantee 'interstate workers' with the right to equal wages under the Minimum Wage Act (1948); displacement allowance; home journey allowance; in residential accommodation; access to free medical services; termination benefits; and right to seek remedy in case of accidents. Contractors who hire them are meant to furnish proper records; maintain a proper register; issue identification papers to migrant workers; report authorities in case of fatalities; and be liable for punishment for violations. The principal employers are expected to register all employees; appoint representatives to ensure wages are paid properly; bear the costs if the contractor fails to live up to his obligations; and face prosecution in case of violations under the act. And the state government is expected to appoint inspectors to oversee the implementation of the act; register contractors (and revoke licenses of offenders); and establish grievance mechanisms. At https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/13209/1/the_inter-state_migrant_workmen_regulation_of_employment_and_conditions_of_service_act_1979.pdf While there are no reliable estimates of the number of Indians who live and work in cities other than where they were born, a 1991 survey mentions 20 million such workers, a figure which rose to 41 million a decade later. Economists estimate some 80 million Indians live in cities and towns where they weren't born or had grown up in. The sectors where they work include construction, agricultural labour, domestic service, mines, and so on. Their working conditions are often poor, their wages low, their rights not enforced or non-existent, and their treatment poor. The pandemic has underscored the sheer

their home states in India.²³

This report is about migrant workers, the hundreds of millions of workers who do the jobs that the cities have but cannot otherwise be filled by the labour force locally.

It is about the painters whom the wealthier Indians hire, haggling over prices with them and then offering them tea and biscuits while coaxing them to put in an extra coat of paint; it is about the boys at the roadside eateries who should be at school but who have no choice but to work, whom the travelling public pesters for cleaner table-tops; it is about the 'errand' and 'delivery boys' who never have change for the currency note given to them, so low is their wage and so keen they may be to augment their income through unintended tips; it is about the domestic help whom the wealthier and privileged Indian households think of as 'part of the family,' but who are asked not to return to work and given a month's salary and left to their devices; it is about carpenters, brick layers, gardeners, factory workers whom many never encounter; it is about the people who are often invisible despite keeping cities running.


It is to those stories we now turn.

scale of internal migrant workers who are employed formally and informally within the Indian economy.

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CHAPTER 2

Going Back



Migrant workers, who were stranded in the western state of Gujarat due to a lockdown imposed by the government to prevent the spread of coronavirus disease (COVID-19), sit inside a train as they leave for their home state of Uttar Pradesh, in Ahmedabad, India, May 2, 2020. REUTERS/Amit Dave

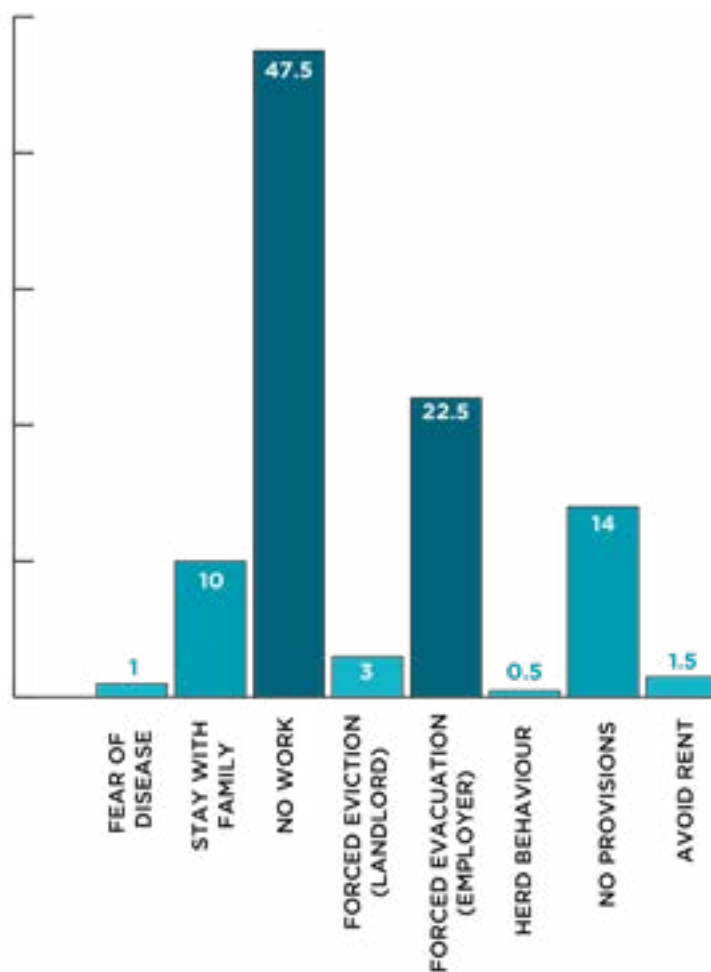
Going Back

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What makes one so desperate to risk life and take the drastic decision to leave secure livelihood for home with the certainty of lower income and uncertainty of work availability? Why did so many internal migrant workers in India decide to leave their work to return home as the COVID-19 pandemic emerged? What made them leave? Did they consider the health risks or were they oblivious of the risks of flouting social distancing rules, and if so what made them so desperate? Why could they not have simply stayed back and relied on further information from government, employers, or other relevant stakeholders?

Reasons for Leaving Workplace

Figure 1: A bar graph depicting reasons for leaving workplace



"Thekedaar ne kaha hume, ki sarkaar sab kaam band kar rahi hai. Jab tak lockdown hai, kaam nahi milega."

"The contractor told us that the government has stopped all kinds of work. Till there is lockdown there will be no work." – Worker

"Malik ne factory se nikal diya, kuch paise diye aur kaha ki ghar chale jao."

"The owner forced us to leave the factory, gave us some money and told us to go home." – Worker

"Sahab toh dukaan band karke chale gaye apne gaon, humara kaam bhi chala gaya. Bina paise ke kaise rehte bade shehar me?"

"The boss shut the shop and left for his village, our work too disappeared. Without money how can we live in a big city?" – Worker

The three most important reasons for leaving workplaces given by the migrant workers interviewed for this report were **lack of work, lack of access to amenities, and forced eviction.**

At the aggregate level, these three reasons remain the most important factors in determining the exodus, regardless of whether the data is analysed by age, location, skill level, or the number of earning members they have to support. However, it is worth examining why these workers did not stay back in spite of government assurances, and where they got the strength, the will, the resolve, to make the arduous journey home. It is to examine those that we turn to the stories.

As indicated in the figure table above, which depicts the prime reasons for leaving the workplace, nearly half of the migrant workers interviewed left cities due to non-availability of work (48%), while one fourth (23%) were asked to leave by the employers and 15% reported lack of ability to procure provisions on account of reduced income and market closures. The data is consistent regardless of whether it is examined by age, location, skill level or number of earning members in the family.

These three reasons demonstrate that the migrant workers were left with little support and had to fend for themselves – it became difficult even for workers with some skills to use their capability to identify opportunities to survive. The responses also raise a larger question about lack of social security for the migrant workers, and the responsibility on the states and businesses. The workers did not have access to key elements of social security including basic necessities such as health care, unemployment insurance, or financial security. It is pertinent to note here that the new Code on Social Security (2020) was ambiguous on special protections to migrant workers, and provisions such as employment injury and provident fund for workers are left to the discretion of the states.

Dying Alone

The majority of the individuals did not mention the fear of contracting COVID-19 as a consideration when they decided to leave the cities where they were living to return home.

On the contrary, only one percent of surveyed workers considered the fear of contracting the illness as a reason to leave. Many expressed that they were not even concerned about contracting COVID-19 on their journey. What they were more scared of was **dying alone**. From their perspective, if they have to die, they would prefer dying close to their family with their loved ones by their side rather than die alone in the big city.

If not privy to a privileged life, certainly wishful for a privileged death.

"Humarain sab saathi log parivar ke saath nikal padhe to hum bhi chal diye, yaha musibat main akele thodi rahete."

"All our neighbors, colleagues and friends were leaving with their families, so we left as well, wouldn't have stayed here alone in the times of difficulty." – Labourer

"Corona toh shehar me bhi ho sakta hai aur gaon me bhi. Gaon me kuch ho gaya toh gharwaale toh saath hoonge he."

"Corona could infect in the big city as much as in the village. At least family will be around if something (infection) were to happen in village." – Carpenter

"Yeh mahamari hai didi, sare desh me faaili hai, hume kuch ho gaya toh toh kum se kum parivaarwaalo ke saath toh marenge."

"Corona is an epidemic, if something happens to us, we will die with/in presence of the family" voiced a tailor." – Tailor

"Shehar me kuch ho gaya aur mar gaye toh dekhne wala bhi koi nahi hai", "Yaha hume school main alag se rakha gaya par hum khush hai ki gharwaale bhi pass me he reh rahe hai."

"If something will happen to us in the city – there's no one to take care of us. We are stationed here in school separately but we are happy that at least we are closer to our families." – Mason

Bread and Dignity

Many state governments in India were prompt in distributing free meals to the affected population. These efforts were supplemented by the initiatives undertaken by non-governmental, charitable and religious organisations to ensure that people did not sleep hungry. Some of the migrant workers shared their experience and views about those experiences.

With livelihoods lost, both panic and hunger started setting in. Many had to go foraging for food. They were grateful for food assistance from the government. However, free food has another consequence – how it impacts an individual's sense of honour and self-worth. Interviews revealed that many workers have a hunger for dignity. Even more startling are the following insights into their meaning of dignity.

Dignity is about earning enough for one's own survival; it is about not wanting to deprive someone else. Many echoed the following sentiment: If one is able-bodied then one's dignity lies in being able to earn one's meal, and the joy of earning a meal through hard work and perspiration defines the maxim for many. It is evident that workers don't want an easy way out – they don't want 'a free lunch.' They want a meal that may be greasy but it is greased with toil, sweat, and self-respect.

It is imperative to note that migrant workers were not critical of the initiatives undertaken by the state governments and other organisations. They looked at the free meals from the lens of whether a meal is earned respectfully. 'I shall take only that which is rightfully mine and I shall earn that right,' was the refrain.

Sense of fairness, self-respect, and compassion are innate human traits. Izzat ki roti (the bread earned with honour) is not just a figure of speech.

"Yeh jo sarkaar khana de rahi hai woh humare liye nahi hai, hum toh kaam karne waale mazdoor hai."

"The food the government is giving is not for us; we are hard-working labourers (we can earn our bread ourselves)." – Plumber

"Yeh khana jo free ka mil raha hai woh unke liye hai jo kaam nahi karte, jinke pass ghar nahi hai, hum toh kama kay khane waale log hai."

"The free food is for those who do not work, those who have no home. We are working people who earn their food." – Rickshaw puller

"Hum apni roti kamake khane waale hai, free ke khane ki line me hum kyu lage?"

"We earn our bread, why should we queue up for free food?" – Carpenter

The Broken Nest

Some workers followed government instructions and decided to stay back. The government had disseminated information about how dangerous coronavirus is and attempted to drill discipline into all citizens with messages on frequent hand washing, use of sanitisers, and social distancing. If the government had also attempted to make relief accessible to everyone, would the workers have agreed to respect the lockdown and stayed home?

Even if the workers complied, it soon became impractical. After the loss of livelihood, the second-most cited reason for the mass departures was forced eviction by their employers. Many who stayed in temporary settlements were dependent on free accommodation by the worksites. They were forced to leave immediately or face consequences. It was chaotic – they had 48 hours to gather their belongings and leave with their families.

The majority of the migrant workers live in squalid conditions in shared rooms, often close to their worksites in temporary shelters or slums. Access to toilets and clean water is scarce in these locations. In other words, social distancing and washing hands routinely with soap and clean water – the two key precautionary measures to prevent COVID-19 contraction – weren't possible for the migrant workers. This increased the vulnerability to the migrant workers in cities. Many of them had built the factories, corporate skyscrapers, and residential apartment complexes, but they did not have an assured roof over their own heads. Leaving the home was not just a physical eviction but an uprooting.

**If the migrant workers decide to return, will they be able to build their own nest?
To stay home one needs a home.**

"Sahab toh dukaan band karke chale gaye apne gaon, humara kaam bhi chala gaya. Bina paise kay kaise rehet badhe shehar main."

"Our boss locked the shop and left for his village; our work too disappeared. Without money how can we live in a big city?" – Tailor

"Taar banane ki factory me kaam karte the hum, lockdown hua, factory band ho gayi aur hume waha se nikal diya. Kaha ki corona aa gaya hai aur kaam band ho raha hai"

"When the lockdown happened, we were asked to leave. We were told Corona has come and work is going to stop." – Factory worker

"Makaan malik ne hume khali karne ko bol diya kamra, ab jaate kaha shehar main, wapas gaon aagaye."

"The landlord asked us to leave. Where would we go in the big city? So we left for our village." – Helper

Sushant

Sushant was born in a family of four in Madaripur, Bihar. His father was a cycle mechanic who could not afford to pay the school fees for either of his two children. He started working at 17 in an Indian company that manufactures, markets, and sells milk and milk products.

At the insistence of a friend from his village, Sushant moved to Ahmedabad in Gujarat to take up the job. He did not really like the hustle and bustle of the city. He said: *"I didn't like it, my heart didn't want to be there...there were compulsions to stay and earn, and gradually I started feeling okay"*. He worked in the operations unit packaging ice-cream at a factory. He made little money but was still able to save, as he lived in shared accommodation with seven other men and they cooked together.

After about three months, Sushant started making friends and enjoyed the city life. Sushant is jovial, loyal, hardworking and he formed close relationships with his equals and his supervisor found him to be trustworthy in the factory. He made friends, but he still missed the social affinity and warmth of his village. He felt lonely and he visited his village often.

Sushant first heard about Coronavirus through friends and the news, and understood it to be a dangerous *"beemari"* (illness) that didn't have any cure. He also learned that it was more prevalent among city dwellers. *"It looked very dangerous in the news,"* he said. He started receiving phone calls from his family in early March 2020, beseeching him to return before he might get sick. Among those who called him often, asking him to return, was his girlfriend. It had been three months since they had last met, and he said that she had heard that *"if people are stuck in cities they won't be able to come back to villages later"*. Sushant noticed that all his friends and the people he knew were leaving the city. He felt he belonged to the village. He felt lonely; he packed his bags and left for the village on a bus.

He remembers: *"What if I would have contracted the virus – who would have taken care of me, taken me to doctor or given medicines?...There is no one who is ours in the city, we live here alone to earn."* On his way home, the only thought he had was the fear of being sick or dying alone. He added: *"All our people had left or were leaving....even if I die in our village – it will be among my own people, they will know what to do with my body...who is there in city to worry or care about us? No one"*, he said.

He considers himself fortunate to have left in time to catch the bus and not get quarantined. He now spends his time with his girlfriend, while being able to provide emotional support to his family. He is unsure if he wants to return to the city for work in future; but for now, he is happy among his loved ones, and with the love of his life.

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Even if I die in our village – it will be among my own people, they will know what to do with my body...who is there in the city to worry or care about us? No one.

Sushant (22)

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Babita

Babita is the youngest of 10 siblings, with five older brothers and four sisters. Her father died five years ago, and she considers her oldest brother as the family's patriarch, like her father.

She grew up in a village close to Unnao in Uttar Pradesh. Her father completed his school education, and worked at the telephone exchange in Unnao. He valued education and made sure that all his children studied as much as possible; Babita completed a bachelor's degree in Arts. Her husband studied up to high school and worked



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Being stuck alone in a city is scary. I wouldn't want me or my kids to feel the same again, where we have no one who is ours.

Babita (39)

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as a labourer in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, while Babita sewed clothes for neighbours and friends. Babita moved to Patna, the capital of Bihar, the state to Uttar Pradesh's east, after she got married. She has two sons. She never liked the city but continued to live in the metropolis because of higher earning potential. *“I never liked the language spoken in the city, or the culture, but we learnt to change our habits and adapted to the city's lifestyle... and then the kids came along... it is better for their education, the schools are better in the city. Our children will become what we could not... I want my son to be like Narendra Modi”* she said, referring to India's prime minister.

While she adjusted to life in the big city, it was hard. She found the city dwellers self-centred: *“Even if someone dies in the family, the neighbours won't even come to express remorse. It is just so lonely in the city and you are on your own, all the time.”*

The COVID-19 pandemic made her question if it made sense to live in a large city, away from her family. Her husband lost his job, and she wasn't able to get new orders due to COVID-19. She remembers: *"We went there ...[city]... for work, and now there was no work, there was the horror about corona – not fear.... It is even scary to touch someone.... So we thought it is better to go back to our own village, and be among our own people"*. Complicating her life in the city was the fact that Babita did not have any documents to prove that she lived in Patna and from her past experiences she thought she wouldn't be able to get any support from any of the government schemes either.

The ordeal didn't end there however, the journey back home was difficult. She walked with two young sons for four days, and like many other migrant workers, stayed hungry for much of the journey. Babita witnessed migrant workers carrying their belongings as they walked along roads with their possessions. At the end of the first day she had blisters on her feet but giving up was not an option.

Babita says that the migrant workers who she walked with were in no hurry to return to the cities. Some of them told her they were not thinking of going back at all.

She is grateful that she was not confined to a quarantine and could stay with her family. But she decided to restrict herself from everyone for the first few weeks of her return.

Being back feels good, but Babita feels miserable not to be able to work. She adds: *"I longed to live in the city. I moved to Delhi in order to help my husband as we were in dire need of money and I wanted to look after my children. The pandemic has made our lives miserable. My children are always at home now, which makes it impossible for me to go to work. Being stuck alone in a city is scary. I wouldn't want me or my kids to feel the same again, where we have no one who is ours."*

Prem Kumar

Prem Kumar was born in Bhadohi, a district in Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state. Until recently it was part of Varanasi, the parliamentary constituency of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Prem grew up in a joint/extended family, which had small farmland where his uncle worked.

The family sustained on the yield of rice and wheat that they grew. His father worked in a cotton textile mill in Mumbai. Prem moved to Mumbai in 1982 to stay with his father. He was six at the time. His elder sister and mother stayed in the village with his uncle's family, a common pattern among migrant workers in many countries.



By the time Prem was in high school, his father had retired and returned to Bhadohi. Prem continued studying in the village school but couldn't complete his senior secondary (12th grade). After his father retired, Prem said, *"There was no income in the family...I left for work in Mumbai"*. Through his father's reference, Prem looked for jobs in the cloth business and sold t-shirts on a roadside market but realised he didn't have it in him. After looking around for work for about two weeks, he found a job at a gas agency and continued working there for nearly eight years until recently, when he had to return to Bhadohi because of the lockdown. Prem booked gas cylinders for the gas agency and was able to earn Indian Rupees 17,000 a month (\$230/month), a little more than a third of India's per capita income by purchasing power parity (\$7,680/per annum).

Prem liked living and working in a city because he felt cities brought more respect to individuals for *"people are better educated and therefore can have better job opportunities...respectful culture and lifestyle"*. When Prem came back to work in the early 1990s, he stayed in Mankhurd, Mumbai, with his wife and three children (his fourth child, eldest son stayed in the village supporting farmlands).

In early March 2020, he heard about Coronavirus through news, and messages he received on the social media (primarily WhatsApp) and from friends. He recalled: *"The disease was spreading, everyone was saying the markets and offices will close, movement will be restricted, and neither buses nor trains will*

be operational” and decided to return to his village. *“It was a mad rush in the train...I came with my children without reserving tickets”,* said Prem. His wife sometimes visited Mumbai to visit her children and Prem. He continued: *“There were too many people like us, moving back to their villages, uncertain about the situation in Mumbai...it (the virus) was spreading too fast in the city...and somehow we managed to get into the train and arrived safely”.* Initially, his employer had asked him to stay back, but he later advised him to leave for the village and return when the situation would get better.

Prem was not keen to stay back in Mumbai despite assurances by the government and food distributed by various organisations. He said: *“This food is being distributed for very poor people who cannot afford to earn enough to eat and survive....we are working class – we can manage our expenses, our food on our own...moving to the city for me wasn’t just about availability of food, I went to Mumbai to earn money, to be able to give a good life to my children and to save for our future...if it was just about food – we could have stayed in the village as food was available in the village too. With offices closed and no income – all these facilities would have been difficult to manage in the city, in a village we don’t have high expenses”,* said Prem.

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This food is being distributed for very poor people who cannot afford to earn enough to eat and survive....we are working class – we can manage our expenses, our food on our own...

Prem Kumar (46)

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Prem stressed that he earned what he spent and was proud of it. He repeatedly said: *“Hum kamaa ke khaane waale log hain”,* (*We are workers who earn and feed ourselves.*) That pride was affected; the lockdown has deprived them of work and wages.

Prem considers himself fortunate to have come back to the village just in time, a day before the national lockdown was announced. The family’s basic needs are taken care of, the ancestral home provides them shelter, while farm yield is able to provide food, in particular cereals. But there are other expenses that Prem is worried about. *“Soap and toothpaste are needed for maintaining basic hygiene, spices to cook food, clothes and shoes to live a normal life...these needs have to be bought; who is going to pay for that?”,* asked Prem.

He also compares his life in the city, where he had a job and wore a uniform, where his children were able to go to school and access better education. He loved the city’s vibe and culture. The schools have been closed since then and children aren’t able to study. Prem compares the school in two locations, *“Schools are small here in the village, kids shout abuses at each other, there is lack of discipline...in Mumbai there is discipline, children go wearing uniform and the culture is better for the children. Even a primary school has a 2-3 storey building”,* he said.

He feels that Coronavirus and its impact on communities and businesses is going to stay for a long time, and the world is gearing towards a change. *“There are a lot of changes in how one deals with people. The world is going to stay the same unless a vaccine is developed for COVID-19. People will maintain physical distance from each other, they will hesitate in meeting (one another) ... people won’t meet often and if they do, they will be worried, thinking of the status of the other person, and consider whether to meet or not”.* He is protecting himself using a mask and sanitizing hands often.

He is contemplating whether to go back to Mumbai or explore another job available in Gujarat, an industrialised state in western India, although he would earn less if he were to work in Gujarat. But the work in Gujarat requires less interaction with people and the accommodation will be provided by the employers, and therefore he may be able to save more. He said: *"I don't have to stay with too many people in Gujarat and the company that will employ me will provide accommodation too."* His previous employers called him and asked him to return to work, but he said, *"my family discouraged going back to Mumbai given the high number of cases and the fast spread in the city"*.

Ayush

Ayush was born in Ambedkar Nagar, a locality in Ramnagar village in Uttar Pradesh, where he lived with his wife and a 5-year old son.

His father worked as a labourer, and Ayush recalls, *"There wasn't enough money in the family to continue with our education, so I had to drop out and start working."* He gave up studying after grade 5 and came to Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh to work in a glass-making factory as a child labourer. His father brought him to Varanasi and left only after ensuring his safety and security. Ayush worked under a contractor and worked an average of 12 hours per day, earning about Rs 6,000 a month (about \$80).



Ayush initially stayed with a friend of his father, but after getting married in 2014, he rented a room which had a fan and a tubelight. He decided to bring his wife to the city so that she could support him in earning: *"I thought she will also be able to work and make some money"*. They lived in the room in a four-storeyed tower block with a single window. They were located few miles away from the factory where he worked. *"My son loves the windowpane"* he said.

But COVID-19 changed their plans. The factory closed due to the national lockdown. Initially, he thought the lockdown would be eased after about a week or so, but then the situation worsened and his employer suggested they leave for his village. The employers also promised to call him back once the situation improved.

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We walked for at least a day and a half... the trains, buses, all means of transportation were stopped... we never thought this will happen.. it was an awful situation and we somehow reached home alive.

Ayush (36)

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"Initially we thought the lockdown will end in 10 days or so. The factory also got closed. There was no work or income, but we had to continue paying the rent... How would we have survived with no income? We were thinking of returning to the village when the employer told us to go back to the village and assured us that he will call us back when the situation improved".

The fear of staying alone without family support forced Ayush to return: *"There's no one who is ours in the city, who will take care (of us) if we get infected. In the village, at least, our people will be there to take care and just be there for us."*

The contractor arranged a private vehicle for some of the labourers employed by him. Six of them returned home in a privately-contracted vehicle. They were given Rs 3,000 each (\$40) before they departed. Ayush left for his village on 29 March. But the shared vehicle dropped him several kilometers away from his destination and he had to walk for a day and a half with his wife and 5-year old child. The only saving grace was the food they had packed before leaving the house.

Ayush recalls: *"We walked for at least a day and a half... the trains, buses, all means of transportation were stopped... we never thought this will happen.. it was an awful situation and we somehow reached home alive... there is no point in going back to our village (but)... perhaps it is better to stay in the village if we can get some employment".*

Ayush and his family were not quarantined when they reached their village, but at a later stage the villagers raised concerns and forced the village head to convince Ayush and family to get tested for COVID-19. The family tested negative and was asked to download the Aarogya Setu app, a contact tracing, syndromic mapping and self-assessment application developed by the Indian government.

While Ayush doesn't want to go back to the city, he is also worried about earning enough to sustain his family, as he also has to support his parents and his child from what he and his wife earn. It is unlikely that he will earn what he did in the city, and his wife has limited opportunity to find work in the village. He said: *"I was able to make some money by working extra hours and my wife earned some money by working... but in our village it is even more difficult for women to find work and make any money (compared to the city)".* Additionally, he is worried about his son's education, as he is unable to continue with online education in the village. He said, *"I had thought of sending my son to a school in the city so that he can study and become something and get a better life."*

Chapter 3

Joy of Quarantine: Near, Yet Far



A person with face mask walking on road near police jeep during lock down in india, due to covid or corona.

Joy of Quarantine: Near, Yet Far

3

After many days of endless travelling and suffering where food, rest and shelter were scarce, their journey came to an end. They reached their home states, their districts, their villages. Were they happy? Or did they rue their decisions? How are they surviving? What about food, health and education?

Four in five workers surveyed claimed that they were happy with their decision to leave the cities, as they regarded the village environment and being with their families as positive outcomes. In interviews, workers referred to the village as their 'own.'

"Ab yaha gaon me sahab, humare log hai, hume pata hai kuch hoga toh sab saath me sambhal lenge. Shehar me koi apna nahi hai, sab wahakaam se matlab rakhte hai. Akele toh itna samay nahi reh sakte the na waha."

In the village, sir, the people are ours. We know that if something happens, others will look after us. Nobody is ours in the city; everyone is there for their own work. One can't live here alone for long."

– A Worker

Home yet not home: Many had to be quarantined once they had reached their villages. They were kept at makeshift quarantine facilities near their places. Were their spirits broken? This is their story.

"Hum aaye toh hume school me rakh diya, yaha bahut log hai toh sab saath me reh rahe hai, koi dikkat nahi hai."

"When we came we were taken to a school. There are a lot of people, we stay together, there's no problem." – Construction worker

"School mein khana mil jata hai, sone ki jagah mil jaati hai, door door rehke apas me baat-cheet kar lete hai, samay nikal jaata hai."

"At the school we are getting food, place to sleep, we are able to talk to other people, time passes." – Helper

"Gharwaale bhi issi gaon me hai toh who ghar ka khaana bhi le aate hai banakar."

"Our family is in the same village and they are able to bring us homemade food." – Mason

The narratives about the experience of being quarantined were positive. The role of the family, friends, and community cannot be understated, even in the context of adhering to quarantine rules. No one complained about being lonely or being deprived. Being close to their loved ones provided them with the warmth and strength to endure and abide by the 14 day quarantine. The fact that they were among their own people, in their own native place, brought joy. A deeper reading of their responses reveals lessons: physical distancing but social proximity might be a more pragmatic way of looking at social distancing. Often the notion 'social distancing' is of solitary confinement, a self-imposed exile where people are not only physically cut off but emotionally isolated from their loved ones. Our interviews suggest that if people can have real or virtual access to their loved ones, then they are more likely to follow all rules. **No one wants to harm their own.**

Sanjay

Sanjay, 27, was born in Bihar in eastern India, but moved to the northwestern state of Rajasthan to work as a blacksmith, a skill that he had learnt from his father. The job didn't pay him well. A year later, he learned about opportunities in the clothing sector, and went on to join a factory that coloured sarees.

Sanjay heard about the virus outbreak on television and from co-workers, and he decided to return to his village so that, as he put it, "At least I would have got time to spend with my children." He tried in vain to get transport, and finally managed to hop onto the free bus service provided by the government, unaware of the regulation governing interstate transport facility. (A bus can drop off passengers only at the border of the city or the village; the passengers have to make their own way home from that point).

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I was happy to see my family everyday... imagine if I had remained stuck in the city... at least here I was able to see them, meet them.....

Sanjay (27)

The bus dropped him and his companions at the state border, near a police station in a village of Bihar, where he was made to provide his details and give information about where he had been and where he intended to go. A doctor came and tested him along with others, and being negative he was asked to board another bus that took him to his village. That bus stopped at a school at the outskirts of his village. The village head came there and explained the situation and assured Sanjay and fellow villagers that the quarantine will protect them from contracting infection, as well as safeguard their families.

Sanjay was relieved to be close to his own village. The school had a few rooms, and each room housed 10 people, but no beds. In total, there were about 200 people with 4 shared bathrooms. The bedding was made available by his family and many survived on the food provided by their families. The village head explained to the residents of the quarantine facility about the lack of resources to accommodate more than 200 people at such a short notice. He had received little information or assistance from the government. Sanjay doesn't regret the quarantine period. He was able to see his wife, their two children, and parents every day, as much he missed touching them and playing with his children.

"I was happy to see my family everyday... imagine if I had remained stuck in the city... at the least here I was able to see them, meet them... my kids used to come there, I felt like touching them, to play with them... I wanted to pay my respect to my parents by touching their feet... none of this was possible, but there was a joy in seeing them alive, happy and safe... that is more important," he recalled. Sanjay is now back in Rajasthan and has resumed his work. While he was happy to see the family, the extended lockdown worried him as he had no income. So at the first opportunity he decided to return to work. The contractor who had helped him get his job scheduled transport and accommodation and other workers so that they could leave for Rajasthan.

Ashish

Ashish was born in Madharipur in Bihar, in an intergenerational family, known as 'joint family' in India. He was born in a socially disadvantaged group collectively known in India as "Other Backward Castes", which grants them a few special privileges, including quotas for education and jobs.

His father worked as a driver, while his mother managed household chores and took care of Ashish and his two brothers, now 19 and 15. One of his uncles worked in a cloth factory in Sonipat, Haryana. Once Ashish completed senior secondary at school, his uncle took him to Sonipat and introduced him to possible and potential employers. Ashish worked there for three years and stayed with his uncle and aunt. The hot weather in Haryana did not suit him and he found it difficult to make friends. His old friends from Madharipur encouraged him to look for employment opportunities in Ahmedabad, the biggest city in the western Indian state. Many of his friends worked at a dairy.

Ashish moved to Ahmedabad, hoping to make friends and to live on his own terms. He shared a rented apartment with six other people from his own village, and worked with them at an ice cream factory.

On 28 March, six days after India ordered its first nationwide lockdown, Ashish left Ahmedabad, because his factory had closed. He received no relief money, accommodation, or food. There was no work and the curfew restricted any movement, so he decided to come back to the village because he wanted "to stay among (my) own people".

He recalls the five days spent after lockdown with extreme disappointment: "It was the worst time ever, we couldn't move out of the house at all – not even to bring food and basic groceries...we had a small room shared among six people...it was difficult to spend the entire day in a room that size with six people...if it was a day or two one can survive, how could we have survived for 21 days, and without any clarity about the future?" The six friends decided to leave together and took a bus that dropped them about 10 kms away from the village. They ended up walking without food and water in the scorching heat.

Once they reached Madaripur, the village head asked them to get tested for COVID-19. He was quarantined in a school near his village. The mention of quarantine brought smile to Ashish's face when he was interviewed, as he reminiscence the time spent in the school: "That was a good time, many boys were from the same village and nearby places and...[I]...made friends too...there was a routine, we would gather in the evening and chat for hours and shared our stories of our life...I used to like that." While Ashish enjoyed his time with other boys from the area, he looked forward to receiving

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Of course, I felt bad (in quarantine), but I could see them even if I could not meet them properly... but then I received home-made food and I was at least able to see them regularly....it is not the same as talking over the phone.

Ashish (22)

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food from the family members as it provided an opportunity to see and meet his family members. While he missed being with the family, especially when he was so close to them, he realised the need to stay quarantined for family's health and safety. *"Of course, I felt bad, but I could see them even if I could not meet them properly....but then I received home-made food and I was at least able to see them regularly....it is not the same as talking over the phone"*, said Ashish.

Ashish completed the 14-day quarantine period and left for his home. He isn't willing to go back to Ahmedabad considering the risk and lack of employment opportunities, and believes, *"the situation will continue for at least another year, and I will reassess after few months if...[he]...can, and wants to go back to the city in search of employment."*

Chapter 4

The Consequences of Pausing Education



A staff member walks inside an empty classroom of a school after Kerala state government ordered the closure of schools across the state, amid coronavirus fears, in Kochi, India March 12, 2020. REUTERS/Sivaram V

The Consequences of Pausing Education

4

As is to be expected, for all groups of labourers surveyed, their main priority was food over the immediate future. Some 60% of the surveyed workers said that they are surviving on existing stocks of food at home.

One said: *"Abhi toh ghar me jo khane ka samaan rakha hua hai use hi kaam chala rahe hai (as of now we were dependent on the food that was stored from earlier times)".* A smaller number, about 21%, mentioned that they had managed to get access to food stocks provided by the state or central government/other organisations. Said another: *"Sarkaar de rahi hai atta aur chawal, wahi se le aate hai apna ration card dikha kar (government is providing flour and rice, we bring food from there showing our card)".* These two sources of food are the most important for all workers, regardless of skill level or places of origin. Some also mentioned taking up temporary farm labour where part of the wages were to be paid in farm produce.

Many workers regularly sent money for their children's or siblings' education. On being asked about the state of education in their villages, and the mechanisms to cope during the COVID-19 pandemic, education didn't even appear among the priorities, and in many interviews it was not even mentioned. When asked to elaborate, this is what they had to say about the academic loss: They call it a collective loss. They do not regret it, nor do they see it as a compromise considering that all students are lagging in education. It reassures them that their children are not lagging behind others, and hence they are not at a disadvantageous position.

"Schools toh yaha sare band hai, toh bacche ghar main he hai toh padai nahi ho rahi. Dekho jab lockdown khulega, toh jayenge bacche school."

"All schools are closed. Children are at home and not able to study. When the lockdown will end they will go to school." – Housewife

"Yaha toh saarehe schools bandh hai, koi bhi nahi padh raha. Jab school khulenge toh sab saath main he padhenge."

"When the lockdown happened, we were asked All schools have shut here, nobody is studying. When schools will reopen, the children will study together." – Construction worker

"Sabhi ke bacche ghar baithe hai, koi bhi ghar me nahi padh raha. Lockdown ke baad he padhai shuru hogi."

"All the children are sitting at home, nobody is studying. They will study when the lockdown is lifted." – Tailor

While private schools in cities have adopted various ways to provide education, there are few initiatives developed by state-run schools. They do not see any negative impact in terms of future prospects, and nor do they realise how urban parents and schools are ensuring students' education through online/digital classrooms, in order to avoid any academic loss. This will perpetuate educational inequality.

Lack of urgency coupled with infrastructural constraints will hurt the future of many children. Are they too destined to be migrant workers?

Rohit

Rohit was born in Uttar Pradesh. He has two daughters, aged 7 years and 18 months. Rohit worked in a sewing machine factory in Bihar. He moved back to his village on 28 March 2020. While Rohit misses the comforts of the city, he values the peace and the ability to spend time with family.

Rohit wants to provide for his daughters' future. He decided to send his daughter to a private English medium school in Bihar because, he said, "only if children are educated, they will be able to make a better living and life for themselves". However, with his move to his village due to COVID-19, he has had to pause his plans. He cannot assist his daughter with online classes as he doesn't have the means – neither a computer nor a smartphone – to continue with the classes. Nor can he or his wife cope with the demands of online education.

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Our children will also end up as us, as labourers, as maids in low paying jobs, because even if we want and make effort – we cannot afford computer...[online]... education

Rohit (31)

He explains: *"We are not educated, we couldn't study, but we want our daughters to complete their education and gain respectable employment... but what can we do, we do not know how to manage and operate these things on our phones. We do not even have a computer, nor can we buy one... and even if we had... who knows how to use them?"*

Rohit feels he and his daughters aren't alone in this situation. Like him, many other workers have moved back to villages and don't have the means or the ability to continue their children's education. *"In effect, everyone will suffer this year," he says. He wished that the government or the schools had made an effort to provide the means to facilitate education for all the children and "not just the children of rich and educated people" as he puts it, "who can afford a number of smartphones and computer; all children in the family should be able to study. Perhaps teachers could have continued somehow through WhatsApp calls."* he says.

Rohit believes that this will increase the inequalities among the younger generation as *"those who could afford the means and resources to study online will get ahead of the children who couldn't... our children will also end up as us, as labourers, as maids in low paying jobs, because even if we want and make effort – we cannot afford computer...[online]...education."* he says.

Vandana

Vandana had got married early, after she completed her middle school at 14, when her father received a marriage proposal for her and they did not want to turn it down, and so she had to discontinue her education.

Her husband worked as a mechanic in a car repair shop in her village, Nalanda, in Bihar. Aspiring for a better life, they moved to the state's capital, Patna. She said: *"The children were to start school, and we discussed the challenges of staying in the village. Children's education is the most important thing.... Our village has poor educational facilities... We thought we hadn't been able to study, but at least our children must... there was not much work in the village... so we decided to go to Patna"*.



Her husband secured a job as a driver in a primary school while their relatives offered them a place to stay for the first few months. Once settled, Vandana started looking for work because, as she explained: *"the move to the city came with increased expenses, and it is difficult to sustain with just one income"*. Vandana received an offer to work as a cleaner at a hospital, but her husband was apprehensive and encouraged her to find work at an office. Working at a hospital would expose her to disease and infections, he felt.

She got a job at a Non-Government Organisation (NGO), where she worked as support staff. She liked her office and felt she was part of a family, working there for over five years until she left the city due to COVID-19.

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Our children's safety is the foremost priority, but I don't want education to stop because that would sabotage their future and intellectual growth

Vandana Devi (32)

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They were not keen to leave the city, but Vandana's office had closed and so had the school where her husband worked. None of the employers gave them any notice or information on when they might reopen. Their neighbours and friends had begun to leave for their respective villages.

Vandana and her husband left in a bus with their two children. The buses were arranged by the government to facilitate the return of migrant workers to their villages. Their bus was packed beyond its limit, and made frequent stops that lasted longer than usual. She said: *"distancing was a joke."* They somehow spent a few weeks in the village but the lack of income and facilities forced them to return to the city as soon the nationwide lockdown was lifted.

Additionally, she said, *"our children missed school, online classes as well as coaching classes in the village"*. Vandana felt inadequate and unable to support her children with online education. She has now appointed a home tutor to support her children with education to act as guardian. She says, *"We then know that the child will not fall behind in the class and stay up to date"*. At the same time, she empathises with all other children and parents and feels, *"if the children are prepared well and supported, they will fare well at school ... and since everyone is in the same boat, my children will not feel left out and lose out, being all alone"*.

Vandana has been in touch with other parents and teachers, and hopes that the schools reopen as soon as there is confirmation about the safety of children. She says, *"Our children's safety is the foremost priority, but I don't want education to stop because that would sabotage their future and intellectual growth."*

Chapter 5

The Journey Back: Will They Return?



Women maintain social distance as they stand in front of a bank during nationwide lockdown in wake of coronavirus in India.

The Journey Back: Will They Return?

5

Few individuals among those interviewed said that they had any savings, “Kahan se paise bachate, jitna kamate hai kharch ho jata hai”. (How can we save anything? Whatever we earn gets spent).

About 69% said that they had never saved in the past and were sure that saving would not be possible in the future, “*Bachat toh abhi mushkil hi hai madam, abhi kaam karenge lockdown kay baad, jinse udhaar liya hai unka dena padega, saara kharche nikalne padhenge toh bachat toh mushkil he lagti hai*” (Savings are difficult, madam. We will work after the lockdown is lifted and we will have to repay those from whom we’ve borrowed money. When we have to make ends meet, savings are difficult).” Though the government is providing staple grains and oil, goods such as vegetables, milk, hygiene items and medications need to be purchased from household budgets.

A few of our survey participants stated that they were living on borrowed money from their family or peer networks, “*Gaon me yaha log hai kuch jo humari madad kar dete hai unse paise liya hua hai, kaam chala rahe hai unn paiso se*” (Some people in our village are helping us and we’ve taken money from them, and making do with the loans).” A similar small number stated that they were being sustained by government aid funds.

What will happen when the lockdown ends? What will happen when their food stocks dwindle? What will happen when the interest on money borrowed multiplies and creditors start demanding repayment? What will happen when the big cities and the middle-men start luring them back to work? Will they get tempted?

The Brave Heart

Once bitten but not twice shy.

Close to three-quarters of those surveyed (April end), said that they would return to their worksites once they could do so and expressed optimism about finding work again from their erstwhile employers, “*Hum aadha kaam chhodh kay wapas aaye the apne gaon. Jab jaayenge toh malik humse he karayega na bacha hua kaam, aur kisse karayega?*”, (We have left our work incomplete. The employer will get the work finished by us only, who else will he get to finish the work except us?) said one worker.

In qualitative probing, even workers who had received no verbal reassurance from employers about being re-employed felt optimistic about getting new jobs: *"Bade shehar main toh kaam mil he jaayega, kuch na kuch toh kar he lenge* (We will find some work in the big city, we will do something or the other)." said a factory worker.

"Paise toh kamane hai na, aise kab tak baithe rahenge, kaam karne wapas toh jana he padhega."

"We have to earn money. Till when will we keep sitting? We will have to go back to work." – Carpenter

"Humare aas paas toh corona kisi ko nahi hua hai, toh hume kaise hoga."

"Nobody is infected with COVID near us, then how would I get it?" – Mason

"Corona se darr nahi lagta didi, yeh lockdown khulne ke baad firse ho gaya toh fir kaam se chale jayenge, iss baar ghar aa gaye, fir pata nahi kahi wahina reh jaye."

"I'm not worried of the disease, sister, once the lockdown is lifted then I will return to work. We are home now we don't want to get left behind in the city if lockdown is put in place again." – Mason

On one hand they are **optimistic** about finding work again, but at the same time they are aware of their *majboori* (helplessness).

They are not afraid of the journey back, nor afraid of not finding work, and certainly not worried about coronavirus. What they fear is a repetition of the lockdown experience. What happens if they return and the cycle gets repeated? For many of the surveyed workers, the pandemic is not the disease, but the lockdowns, sudden lockdowns, sudden extension of lockdowns – have caused greater concern.

Ujjawal

Ujjawal, 30, was born in Ganganandapur, in West Bengal, the state in eastern India bordering Bangladesh. His first job was as an assistant to a carpenter when he was 18. Ujjawal's father did not earn enough to support a family of five; his mother worked at home. Encouraged and supported by a neighbour, Ujjawal went to Bangalore, the capital of the southern state of Karnataka, but he could not adjust to the life in the city.

He came back to his village and worked on other people's farms for about five years. As his family started discussing his plans about marriage, he asked himself: *"who will give a girl to a farmer, that too one who didn't own much land?"* And so he started looking for what he called 'a respectable job' that could ensure predictable, regular, sustainable income.

Ujjawal found work at a mobile phone shop, about 100 kms away from his village, close to the international airport in Kolkata. He had to work hard, but earned Rs 7500 (\$100) per month. He got married within the first three months of the job and was living happily with his wife and a daughter in Kolkata since then. His wife took up small jobs to sew and embroider women's clothes and earned about Rs 4000 (\$53) a month. Together, they earned enough to make ends meet.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a storm in Ujjawal's life – the shop where he worked closed due to national lockdown and his wife couldn't earn any money. His employer suggested that he should go back to his village and stay with his family until the situation improves but he sees no such signs now. His family is surviving on the food provided by the government. He says: *"The government is giving us this thick rice and pulses; that's all we eat now...we aren't able to provide milk or Horlicks to my daughter... we don't eat our staple food, fish, anymore, there's no money to buy anything. We cannot afford to buy any clothes or live the life we were used to."*

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Life here is tough... first there is no work here... secondly, even if I work all the time, there is hardly any income. We either risk our lives or lose our lives while we wait for things to improve.

Ujjawal (30)

Ujjawal has been working on a farm owned by a landlord but life is hard. He is desperate to go back and hopes to return to Kolkata as soon as public transport is operational. His previous employers have closed their shop, and he hasn't yet received a positive response from other jobs he had applied for. *"Life here is tough... first there is no work here... secondly, even if I work all the time, there is hardly any income. We either risk our lives or lose our lives while we wait for things to improve,"* he says.

Shailesh

Shailesh was born in 1992 in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh. He studied up to grade 12 but could not continue his studies because of family responsibilities.

As he describes it: *"I have three sisters, all were of marriageable age at that time...three were married the same year.... I had to come out to work."* He tried getting a job with the government. He also wanted to join the Indian army and even applied but he did not meet the minimum physical requirement - he wasn't tall enough.



Disappointed, he explored work in the private sector in and near his village – but couldn't get any. *"Alas, I felt emotionally broken, but didn't have the time to regret,"* he said. His cousin worked at a shop selling clothing at a mall in Delhi. He invited Shailesh to work with him. Shailesh moved to Delhi to work at a leading Indian department store, about two years ago, where he assisted in the clothing section. He had no written contract or agreement.

Shailesh liked Delhi and its lifestyle. He said: *"There are big shops, an air conditioner in the workplace and no physical labour; the office hours are fixed leaving a life to live."* Life in the city came with its own problems. He said: *"The city is very crowded, pollution is high...village has clean air and it is just peaceful"*. But a job in Delhi provided enough money to support his family and to save for the future.

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I was emotionally broken but I didn't have time for regret.

Shailesh Kumar (28)

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Shailesh's wife and his two kids – a son and a daughter – lived with his parents in the village, and he visited them often. Things had started falling in place for Shailesh when COVID-19 pandemic struck.

Shailesh left with the other workers when the national lockdown was announced. Malls and shops were to be closed with no notice and there was no confirmed news about re-opening. His employer recommended him that he leave, and return when the situation improves. But by the time he made the decision to leave with his cousin and other friends, no transport was available.

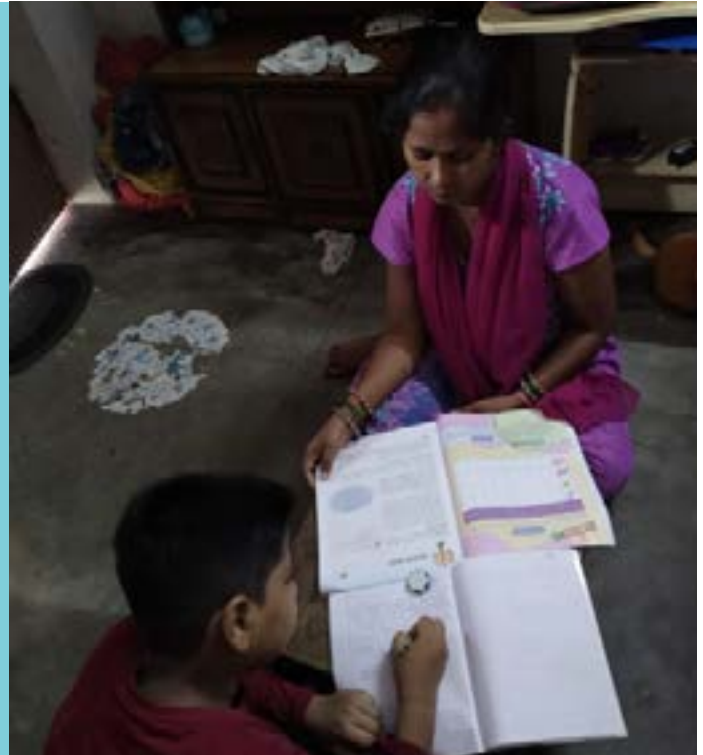
He tried to hire taxis, but did not succeed. Alarmed by the chaos in the country, he started walking from Delhi to Kanpur, a walk of about 495 kilometers. He walked for six days, took a ride on the way wherever available, slept on roads when tired, and ate only when someone offered him food.

He arrived exhausted but smiled when he saw his family. He took a shower first: *"We have to be careful for the family, wash hands, take a shower multiple times, use a mask and we should not socialise in crowded places, that's how life is now"*, he said. He has been staying in the village since then, but wants to return to Delhi. He is hopeful about jobs because *"India has reduced dependency on China for products...new factories will be opened."*

Pooja

Pooja, 30, was born in Bakauli, near Kanpur, in Uttar Pradesh. She lived in the village with her parents, an elder sister, and two younger brothers.

Pooja studied up to middle school (8th grade) but couldn't continue her education, because, as she said, *"There was no money available in the family to support children's education."* Her father was the sole bread-winner for the family of six, and he worked as a labourer in other people's farms. Pooja started learning to stitch, but she couldn't make much progress because her family couldn't afford to buy a sewing machine.



Pooja's marriage was arranged by her parents when she was 19 with a man from Nerwal, a village about 15 kilometers away from her parents' house. At 21, she became a mother and moved to Delhi with her husband, who then worked as a labourer in a shoe making factory. The conditions were deplorable with long working hours, frequent wage deduction, and the factory gates were often locked so that workers could not go out to take breaks on their own. Her husband often worked overtime to make ends meet.

In Delhi, Pooja worked in a garment factory. She adjusted well in the city. Noting the socio-cultural changes, she said: *"Villagers are conservative in their thoughts. They don't like it when their daughters and daughters-in-law move out to earn a living... women are seen as home-makers and not as bread-winners or as equal to men"*, she said. She worked in the packing division and spent about nine hours every day packing the ready-to-wear vests, while her husband ironed vests in the same factory. Together they made a little less than Rs 10,000 (\$133) each month, and spent on rent for their room and their son's education.

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Villagers are conservative in their thoughts. They don't like it when their daughters and daughters-in-law move out to earn a living...women are seen as home-makers and not as bread-winners or as equal to men.

Pooja (30)

Pooja and her husband Ravinder Lal waited for a few days after the national lockdown was declared, as they thought the situation would improve, and they would be able to continue working in the factory. However, the situation worsened and most of

the families in their neighborhood had begun leaving for their villages and the factory continued to remain closed without any information.

"While government and others were distributing rations due to the lockdown, the distribution system isn't effective. The ration cards are area-specific and fair price shops are inaccessible – compelling us to rush back to hometowns and villages," she said.

Frantic calls from family members, loss of income, food shortage, and constant reminders from the ones leaving from the neighbourhood led Pooja and her husband to decide finally to leave. But no transportation was available by the time they decided to travel back to Bakauli. Pooja and her husband started walking on foot with their nine-year-old son. The moment they reached the highway, Pooja realised they weren't alone. There were many others like Pooja's family, walking on foot, without food and water, and desperate to reach their destinations. The three walked for three days to cover a distance of over 100 kilometers and used most of their savings to pay for making their son travel on a scooter or a cart when available on the way. A distance usually covered in 8 hours by a train took them three days. Walking together provided her safety and kept her motivated to continue walking. Pooja said, *"maintaining social distancing was not possible...[we]...walked together in large groups but close to each other...we all had just one thing in mind...we would rather die, even if it is from the virus in our own village, surrounded by family and loved ones, than starve because of no work in the city".*

Pooja's family has been surviving on the food distributed by the government, and had taken a loan. They have spent all their savings. She bought basic groceries on loan from a grocery store and hopes to pay back what she owes soon. Just a few days before she was interviewed, her husband got a job at a petrol pump. They earn less than half of their pre-COVID household income. She plans to start stitching in the village, but remains uncertain if she will get any work, considering the many others in the village who are in the same situation and may not have money to spend on new clothes. She is also exploring the possibility of starting her own shop/business in the village and has managed to get a partner to invest. She feels depressed by the monotonous life in the village and misses her life and liberty she enjoyed in the city. However, she says, *"life is simple in the village. You wake up, do your household chores, eat and sleep, but it still feels better – I don't feel alone here, as we are surrounded by family members and relatives".*

Pooja is monitoring the situation and hopes to go back to the city so that they can be financially independent and so that she can enjoy her city life again, but until then she has decided to try her new venture – stitching. She is confident of surviving COVID-19 and believes her will and ability to work hard will help. She is disappointed by the government, as she says, *"giving food is a short-term measure, it is not so necessary; we can get that even in our village. What we need is education. Job, health of our children, and some money – that's what we need for support. That way nobody will fall behind and everyone will get what they need. Who will support us after all of this is over?"*

Ramdas

Ramdas was born in Kalyani, about 7 kms away from his village Madanpur, in Nadia district, West Bengal, the state in eastern India bordering Bangladesh.

Ramdas was 20 when his father met with an accident and injured his knee. He continued going to a government hospital, but didn't get better. Ramdas's father lost his job and he had to step in to share the financial burden of the family. He wanted to continue studying but the family could not afford education for more than one child. He sacrificed so that his younger sister could complete school.



Ramdas started working as a helper with a carpenter in the village, but the family wasn't happy about his decision. They urged him to leave carpentry and engage in a job that they believed had better status. He got another job, loading and unloading cereal at a shop in his village. Then for some time he helped out at the carpenter's workshop while also loading and unloading goods at the shop nearby. He also started tutoring younger kids in the village and worked as ground staff at an office in the evenings.

However, he couldn't earn enough to support the family financially and decided to return to be a carpenter/helper. By that time, he had learnt and honed his skills and was upgraded from being a helper to being a *mistry*, the skilled head of the contractual party. He started working with a contractor who supplied carpenters to various states in India. Ramdas's first assignment was in Odisha in eastern India where he spent three months making doors and windows for a house. He was able to save money and returned to his village and was able to spend to get his father's treatment at a private hospital. His father recovered and started working as a security guard. His father's accident and plight convinced Ramdas to spend on medical insurance, and he bought a policy for his family and himself. Ramdas travelled extensively while working with the contractor. He often went to Odisha, the state neighbouring his own, West Bengal, because there was a huge demand for Bengali carpenters.

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We cannot make enough money here... [in village]. We haven't been able to save and lead a comfortable life we had got used to. When the lockdown is lifted and trains become operational, I will go back.

Ram Das (41)

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"The carpenters from Odisha don't have finesse as the ones in Kolkata have," he said. Ramdas saved most of his income as carpenters are paid the costs towards transportation and food if their assignment lasts more than three months. Besides, they get shared accommodation at the site of work or in a hotel. Ramdas's future looked better.

In January 2020, Ramdas left for one such assignment in Odisha, where he shared a room with five other colleagues. They constructed wooden doors and windows for a mobile phone shop in Bapuji Nagar, one of the largest markets in Bhubaneswar, Odisha. He was aware of the spread of coronavirus since February but continued working in the beginning. He later decided to leave the city in consultation with other colleagues. His contractor too agreed and encouraged them to leave the town even though the work wasn't complete. Ramdas came to his village on 18th March. He has found it hard to get new work and his savings have been spent within the first two months. He said: *"We had to take loans to buy groceries and basic necessities"*. He has recently found some work as a daily wage worker doing whatever job he could get in the village, but he is hardly able to cover his family's expenses, including food, medicines for his grandparents, school fees for his son.

Ramdas remains in touch with his ex-colleagues regularly. Almost everyone is desperately waiting for the situation to improve. They reassure each other and wish each other for their health and safety and keep hoping to take up assignments outside their villages once there is a return to normalcy. *"I will go back,"* he says.

It is important to note that 25 percent of those surveyed said





Part 6

Age of Uncertainty

Indian woman and child waiting to be scanned, after that they will allowed to travel back to their homes, during nationwide lockdown.

Age of Uncertainty

6

they wouldn't return to the cities (reported in mid-June 2020) at least in the near future. One reason seems to be that they were advised by the employer or the family to not return for 4-6 months at least. They were advised to wait and watch. They were told that chances of finding work were few. The second reason for not going back was the apprehension that lockdowns would resume after they returned.

For the time being, they have identified alternative livelihood sources in the village. Many of the

"Hum wapas shehar toh abhi nahi jayenge kyunki wahakaam nahi mila toh kya karenge?"

"We won't go back to the city because if we don't get work, what will we do?"
– Factory Worker

"Humari baat hui thi sahab se, unhone bola hai ki abhi aane ki zaroorat nahi hai kyunki kaam nahi hai. Jab kaam shuru hoga toh woh phone karke hume bula lenge."

"I had spoken to the boss, he said there is no need to come back because there is no work. When work will resume he will call us."
– Construction Worker

workers said that they were in the process of negotiating or had negotiated daily wage rates to work as farm labour. A few indicated that they were taking short term leases on farms and fisheries, or working in business in the rural sector, selling vegetables and other commodities.

This means a large section of India's labour force would become invisible. They may come back some day, but the possibility is not certain. It is likely that the traumatic experience may mean they will choose not to return.

What are the implications for India as a society? Is it only a matter of statistics – a large

"Ek baar lockdown khulne ke baad hum intezaar karenge corona ka shaant hone ka. Kyunki agar shehar jaakar waapas lockdown ho gaya, toh hume firse pareshaani uthani padhegi."

"Once the lockdown is lifted we will wait for Corona to get tamed. IF we return to the city and if the lockdown resumes we will suffer." – Factory Worker

"Hum ekdum se toh nahi jaayenge kyunki pata chala Delhi chale gaye aur firse yeh lockdown ho gaya, hum toh fass jaayenge."

"We won't suddenly go back because if we go all the way to Delhi and lockdown happens again we will get stuck." – Worker

"Jiske pass khet hai unse abhi humne udhaar le liya hai toh uska aadha upaj hum maalik ko de denge, baki khud apne liye rakhenge."

"We have taken...[loan]...from those who own land, so we will give half the yield to the owner and keep half for ourself...[in lieu of wage]" – Auto Driver

"Yaha gaon main abhi kheti ka kaam chal raha hai, hum doosre kaykhet me katayi ka kaam kar lete hai toh kuch paise waha se ban jate hai."

"There are agricultural jobs in the village. We are cutting crops of farmers and earning some money." – Worker

number of workers whose names remain unknown and faces are invisible? And what of something more vital – a sense of dignity, dreams, and diversity in its workforce?

With more than half its workforce being in the informal sector, India can neither choose to ignore the statistics nor their stories.

Lalaji

With a bachelor's degree in arts, the quest for liberty of mind, and a desire for dignity, Lalaji left his village, Barot, in the eastern state of Bihar, for Mumbai in 2008 looking for employment.

However, he couldn't find any job and ended up joining his uncle who lived in Mumbai and worked as a driver of auto rickshaws, the three-wheeler passenger carrier used for public transport in many parts of the world. He learnt driving from his uncle and started driving on a loaned auto rickshaw. Lalaji was able to save Rs 500 (a little less than \$7) on an average each day after deducting all expenses and he felt a sense of worth and relief. He continued driving and was able to send some money back to his extended family in his village, estimated at Rs 3,000 (about \$40) per month, content with his ability to support his wife, two children, his parents, brother, and his wife's family while leading a life that offered him comfort.

He returned to his native village once or twice a month and that trip replenished his busy city life with joy and motivation to work harder. His business grew and Lalaji was able to earn enough to save and finally bought his own auto rickshaw – which resulted in increased savings and an asset. Lalaji had married in 2010, and he finally decided to bring Poonam Devi, his wife, to Mumbai in January 2020, thinking that his life was finally getting settled and she too could find some work and together they could make a better life and fulfill their dreams.

However, COVID-19 pandemic changed the situation completely. Lalaji barely made any money in the first quarter of the year. His wife couldn't get a job either, as potential employers hesitated hiring a new domestic help or cook or do other related jobs. It was becoming difficult to manage household expenses in Mumbai, as he had to pay loan installments for his auto rickshaw each month. He felt like a failure. Various other tenants from their locality left for their villages, and Lalaji's family was one of the last to leave. Lalaji's struggle to survive Mumbai during the pandemic suffered a major setback with rising prices of essential commodities and his savings dwindled. With a heavy heart and with the spectre of the contagious disease, Lalaji decided to return to his village. He took the last operational train before the nationwide lockdown on 21 March 2020.

Lalaji and his family are in Barot, currently surviving on the food distributed by the Bihar Government's rationing agency and he has no means of income for the family. Additional restrictions have been placed in the village as two houses near his home have been declared COVID-19 positive, reducing opportunities for employment. In the meantime, Lalaji's grandfather and grandmother died since Lalaji returned, due to old age and related illnesses. Additional expenses for their last rites added to the already precarious situation of Lalaji.

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Home is where the heart is, but how can you feed a family with just happiness in your heart? Food and work are equally important for us to survive.

Lalaji (31)

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He is considering going back to Mumbai for work, but remains scared of the situation as the *"number of cases are rising very quickly in Mumbai"*. He feels all his hard work and efforts of the last year have been in vain, as he is unable to make any money from the newly bought auto rickshaw and has no other means of income. His rickshaw remains parked at an autorickshaw stand in Mumbai. He had plans to get enrolled as a driver for a ride-sharing service such as Uber in Mumbai and buy a four-wheeler, but now feels hopeless. *"I have nothing left with me now. I had got married and brought my wife to the city, thinking I will have a good life. But nothing like that happened. I had also thought of giving her a good life, I had seen a dream and had expectations from a city like Mumbai, but hadn't thought that the situation will become so bad....everything I have worked towards is finished, and I won't be able to talk about it."*

Mumbai is the city that never sleeps, but it slept during the lockdown months. The city of gold no longer glitters. His dream collapsed and his sense of guilt over not being able to provide for his family took its toll. As he spoke, he broke down: *"Home is where the heart is, but how can you feed a family with just happiness in your heart?"* *"Food and work are equally important for us to survive"* prompted Poonam Devi, with tears welling up. Lalaji and his family decided to stay back in their village with no concrete plans for their future.

Lalaji felt that the government should offer greater assistance, as it has to Indians working overseas being brought back on Mission Vande Bharat – a state-supported repatriation mission for Indians stranded abroad. Lalaji and his family were left stranded at the railway station with no means or support to travel to their home.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

7

A healthcare worker collects a swab sample from a man amidst the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), at a railway station, in New Delhi, India October 9, 2020. REUTERS/Anushree Fadnavis



Conclusion

7

People leave their homes to live and work in far-off places for a range of reasons. Seeking better opportunities to match their talent is one. Some flee persecution, natural disaster, or armed conflict. And many more leave their homes to make their lives, and the lives of their loved ones, better and more secure. Seeking a better life is a human right.

Migrant workers, whether they cross international borders or travel within their countries, have faced grave injustice for the longest time. They are paid less, work longer hours, and are often compelled to do work that the local communities do not wish to do, because it is degrading, dangerous, or difficult.

The stories that have emerged from around the world in recent months connected to the COVID-19 pandemic have been heart-wrenching. The stories from India especially, because the crisis facing internal migrants was not unexpected and steps could have been taken to mitigate harm. Newspaper accounts spoke of a young girl cycling half-way across the country²⁴ to reach home; a man walked more than a thousand kilometres;²⁵ a child attempted to wake up his mother²⁶ at a train station, not knowing she was dead; a 60-year-old man walked three days, collapsed²⁷ and died of hunger; sixteen migrant workers were mowed down²⁸ while they slept on rail tracks during the lockdown, when unexpectedly a train thundered through; workers died²⁹ when a truck carrying them overturned.

Another study conducted by BIAS is tracking migrant workers' willingness to return to the cities to resume work. In the beginning, there was optimism among migrant workers to be able to return to cities and to continue their employment which explains why in

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Even though they have chosen to return to their villages, they are conscious of the fact that their standard of living would decline as a result and their children would have diminished opportunities.
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24 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/28/learning/lesson-of-the-day-lionhearted-girl-bikes-dad-across-india-inspiring-a-nation.html>

25 <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/30/asia/india-migrant-journey-intl-hnk/index.html>

26 <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/video-boy-dead-mother-india-migrant-crisis-coronavirus-lockdown/>

27 <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/coronavirus-lockdown-after-3-days-of-journey-home-60-year-old-migrant-dies-of-hunger-in-up-2230291>

28 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-india/indian-train-kills-16-workers-laid-off-in-coronavirus-lockdown-idUSKBN22KODK>

29 <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/truck-carrying-migrant-workers-overtorns-in-uttar-pradesh-s-mahoba-3-dead-several-injured-1679396-2020-05-18>

late April and early May close to three-quarters of those surveyed said they wanted to return. However, in June, with the cases of COVID-19 rising, the fear of returning increased and only 30% wanted to come back. Today, many have come back while others are still continuing with uncertainties and a few have decided to never return.

India has the laws and the Indian state has the obligation to protect those whose vulnerabilities were enhanced during the pandemic. That this tragedy occurred is inexcusable and an indictment of the society, of those in a position to make a difference: of how the Government did not fully anticipate the effects and did not prepare for contingencies; of how many companies abdicated their responsibility by offering workers limited support; and of how many contractors or companies in supply chains as well as private employers abandoned their staff, domestic or working in small establishments. It represents a collective failure.

Many workers who were let go received only minimal support, and not every worker got even that. In many instances, they had to leave their homes, leaving them to fend for themselves in cities where they had little support infrastructure to rely on. Indian non-profit organisations and private philanthropy came together and rose to the occasion as best they could – but it does not absolve the state, business, and those with responsibility, for their shortcomings.

As the stories show, the workers made the rational choice of leaving because the alternative, including possible death, was more miserable. They preferred the risk of starvation in the company of their families, rather than dying alone in an alien city. Even though they have chosen to return to their villages, they are conscious of the fact that their standard of living would decline as a result and their children would have diminished opportunities. While three-quarters of those surveyed said they would return to the cities to their former jobs, those jobs are not guaranteed, and other workers may replace them.

The market for informal labour is largely unregulated and not unionised. As the economy acquires a level of normalcy, poorer people more desperate for work will also be seeking jobs, increasing competition for low-paid jobs in the cities. In a populous country like India with its income inequalities and regional disparities, the crisis can worsen.

Businesses, already suffering under the recession made worse by the pandemic, would have an incentive to keep costs low, and they may hire those new workers, rather than absorb those who had worked earlier, especially if demand does not pick up.

The net effect will be exacerbation of existing inequalities and heightened vulnerabilities for domestic migrant workers; and such a scenario may not be restricted to India, but may repeat itself in other developing countries.

There have been and can be immediate responses to stimulate the economy. Direct cash transfers and other stimulus packages can reduce immediate economic distress, but the impacts are likely to be long-lasting – poor nutrition, lack of equal educational opportunities for children, and decline in overall well-being of workers, their families and children for years to come. Lack of work and unpaid wages will push the workers into a cycle of debt which will expose them to being subjected to the risk of forced labour, or compel their children to work in low paying, unsafe jobs.

While migrant workers make up 80%³⁰ of India's informal workforce, they are amongst the most vulnerable. Other countries, in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, face similar crises, although perhaps not on such a scale. Developed countries too have similar stories, but civil society organisations are able to work more effectively there because of greater access to resources and laws that protect their ability to operate and do not restrict them. Besides, some countries have robust social safety nets, which mitigates harm. Developing countries do not have those features, nor resources of similar abundance.

In each such scenario, migrant workers are largely hired through contractors and they often lack formal contracts, benefits, paid leave, and are paid in cash. They are not represented by trade unions and have limited opportunities for collective bargaining. Laws exist on paper to protect them (as in India) but implementation and enforcement of such laws are weak. Workers move from one city to another on short-term or seasonal jobs and remain statistically invisible. Often lacking documentation such as a permanent address that can establish their domicile status in the city where they work, they do not have voting rights in the cities where they have moved, and therefore they often lack political voice.

Respecting the dignity of the workers, understanding their needs, developing solutions to ensure continued support for income and access to basic necessities including food, shelter, education, health, and insurance for the workers and their dependents, require empathy and an understanding of the core human rights principle of equality of access and treatment of individuals.

The COVID-19 crisis and its impacts on internal migrant workers in India requires collective solutions. The stories told are about India, but they offer a larger lesson to many countries around the world where people working in locations away from their home find themselves stranded and without access to safety nets or fundamental rights.

True, protecting the right to health is important, but so are all other rights, and suspension of some liberties to safeguard health can only be time-bound, proportionate, and follow the due process of law. The state has an obligation to protect rights. Business – as an employer, service provider, and sometimes as an intermediary recruiting these workers – has the responsibility to respect rights and comply with laws. Systemic failures, as seen in India, must not be repeated, and effective grievance mechanisms to remedy abuses are essential. The Indian example shows that laws to protect the workers often exist but implementation remains inadequate.

³⁰ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/27/india-COVID-19-lockdown-puts-poor-risk>

Workers who are employed at locations away from their home should have access to the right to collective bargaining, form unions if they wish, be able to access rights-based benefits wherever they are, maintain access to social safety nets, get access to emergency assistance where necessary, and their families should get access to basic healthcare and education even if they are under quarantine.

Too many such workers fall outside the purview of existing labour laws because they work in the informal economy, and legal protection should be extended to them. One way to codify these practices and underline business responsibility would be by formalising contracts so that they are legally enforceable, with clearly marked responsibilities for sub-contractors, employers, and companies in the supply chain.

A pandemic such as COVID-19 is unique. While developing a cure or a vaccine to tackle the virus is complicated science, developing a humane response to the crisis is simple. The expectations for how governments and businesses should respond are clear; many of them already exist under the law.

Respecting the dignity of the workers, understanding their needs, developing solutions to ensure continued support for income and access to basic necessities including food, shelter, education, health, and insurance for the workers and their dependents, require empathy and an understanding of the core human rights principle of equality of access and treatment of individuals.

As India's founding father Mohandas Gandhi wrote in one of his last notes before his assassination in 1948:

I will give you a talisman.

Whenever you are in doubt apply the following test.

Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man

[woman] whom you may have seen,

and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him [her].

Will he [she] gain anything by it?

Will it restore him [her] to a control over his [her] own life and destiny?

Then you will find your doubts and your self melt away.³¹

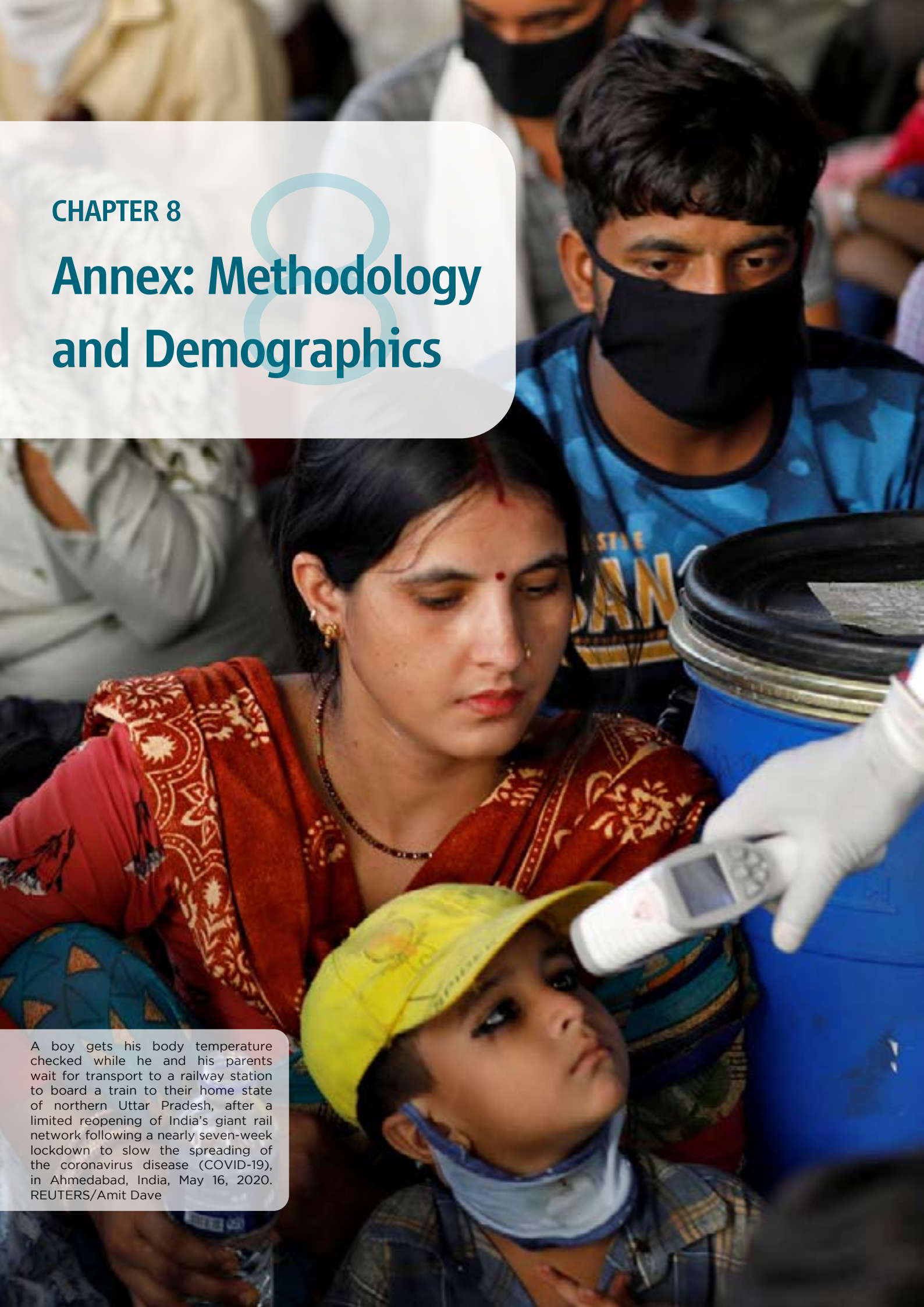


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CHAPTER 8

Annex: Methodology and Demographics



A boy gets his body temperature checked while he and his parents wait for transport to a railway station to board a train to their home state of northern Uttar Pradesh, after a limited reopening of India's giant rail network following a nearly seven-week lockdown to slow the spreading of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), in Ahmedabad, India, May 16, 2020. REUTERS/Amit Dave

Annex: Methodology and Demographics

8

A. The Research Process

BIAS associates asked more than 200 men and women (over ten weeks beginning 25 March 2020, conducting multiple conversations) the following questions:

- What made you leave large towns?
 - Did you not fear COVID-19 while deciding to return?
 - Having reached home, are you happy with your decision to return?
1. What are you doing now for your livelihood, and how are you surviving?
 2. Will you return to the large towns to resume previous work when the lockdown is lifted?

BIAS conducted a longitudinal study³² using mixed methodology with workers from three large states – Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and West Bengal - who went back to their homes (called 'native place' in India)

The Process

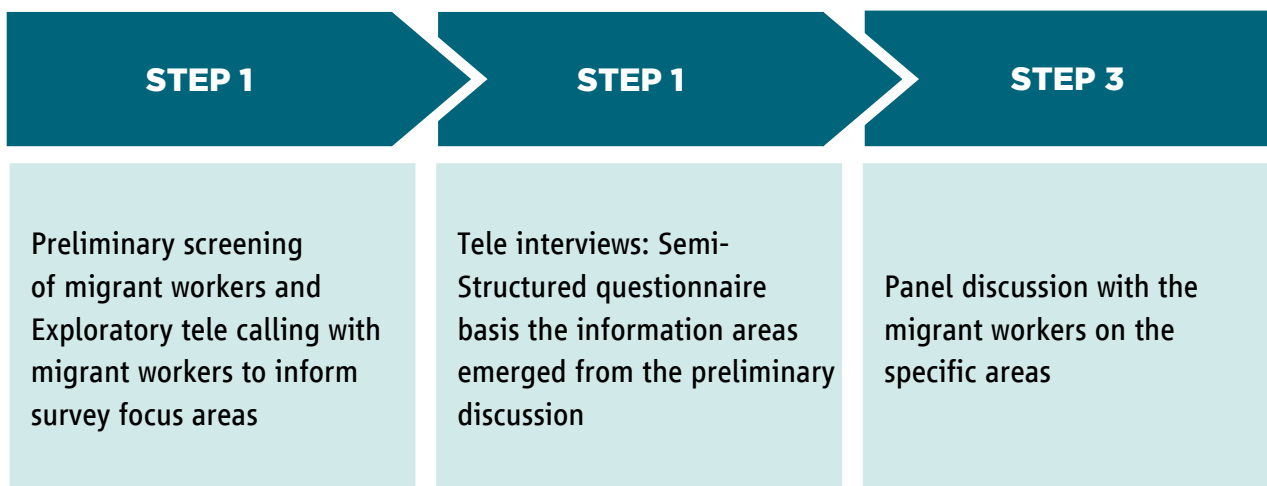


Figure 2: Showing the research processes followed

³² A longitudinal study is a research design that involves repeated observations of the same variables (e.g., people) over short or long periods of time.

B. Demographics

Type of Worker

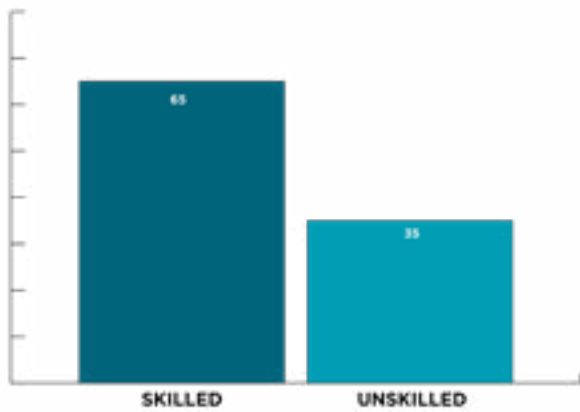


Figure 3: Depicting type of migrant workers

Place of Work

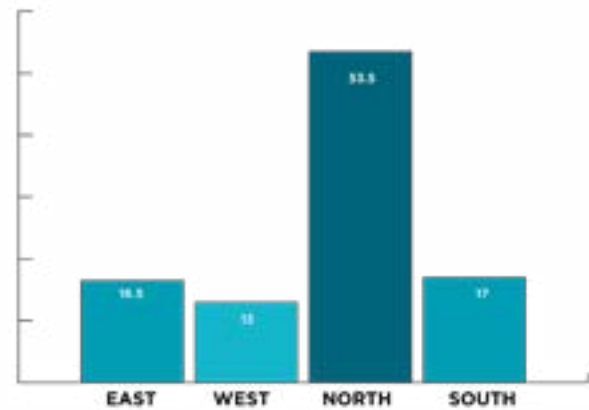


Figure 4: Depicting geographical work-places

Native Place

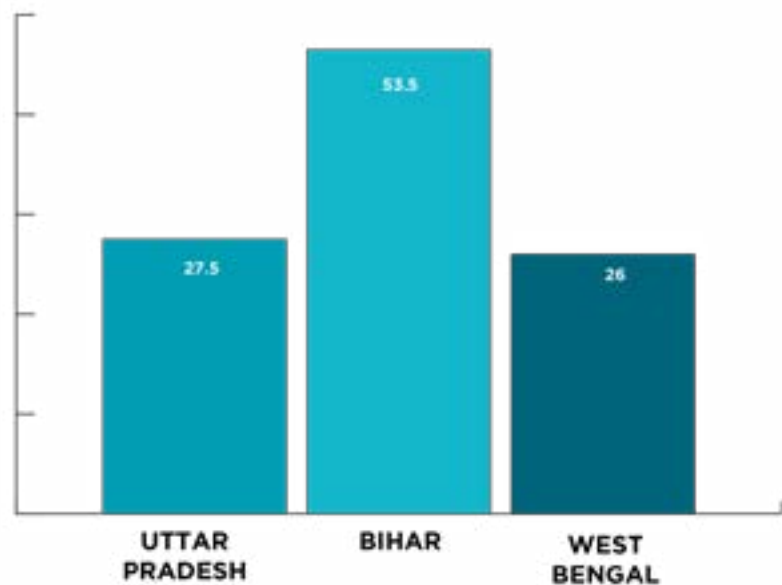
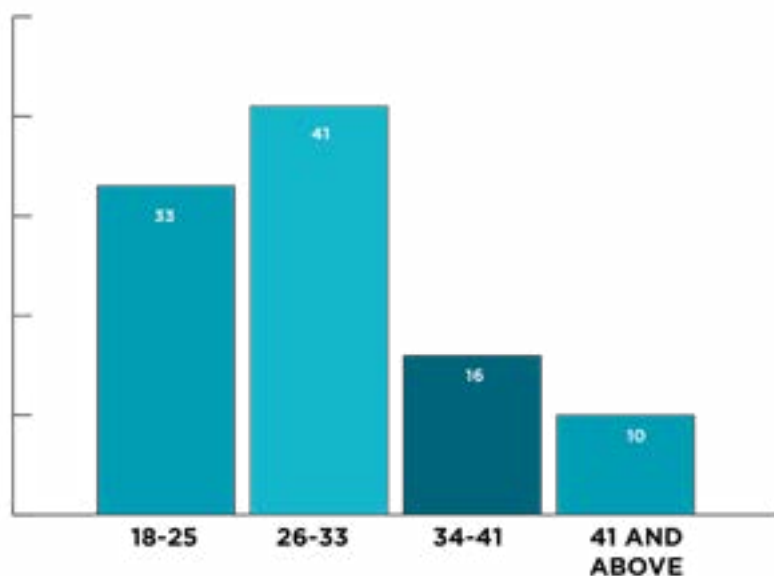


Figure 5: Depicting native places of the migrant workers

Age of workers

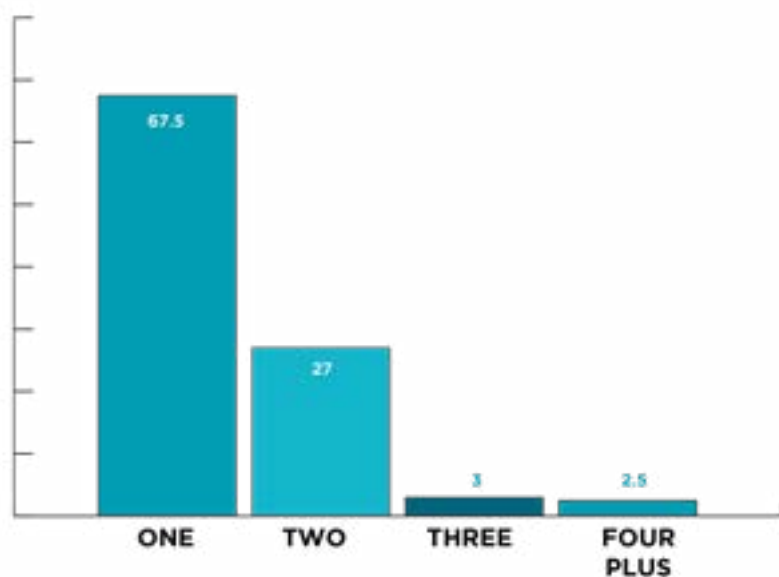
Figure 6: Depicting age(s) of the migrant workers



The sample contains workers within a substantial age band. They came from villages in three states - Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal. The modal number of earning members in the workers' households is one, meaning the largest number of households have one working member, which is close to the national average.

Number of earning members

Figure 7: Depicting earning members in a family





After the Indian Government declared a nationwide lockdown in March 2020 to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, hundreds of thousands of internal migrants in India decided to leave the cities where they worked to return to their hometowns, using any available means of transport. Many of them decided to walk hundreds of miles. Many died during their journey.

India's migrant crisis offers lessons on governance gaps for the business and human rights community in other countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, such as China, Thailand, Indonesia, Myanmar, Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria, South Africa, or Brazil, amongst others, who are reliant on workers to leave their villages to work in cities. It shows the Government's inability to make necessary protection available for migrant workers whose living conditions (such as in congested facilities or in urban slums) expose them to infections. It also shows the inadequacies of weak infrastructure, overrun by the stresses of a major lockdown. It shows the failures on the part of many of the workers' employers - large and small, state and private - who did not provide income support, essential services, healthcare, or other relief.

