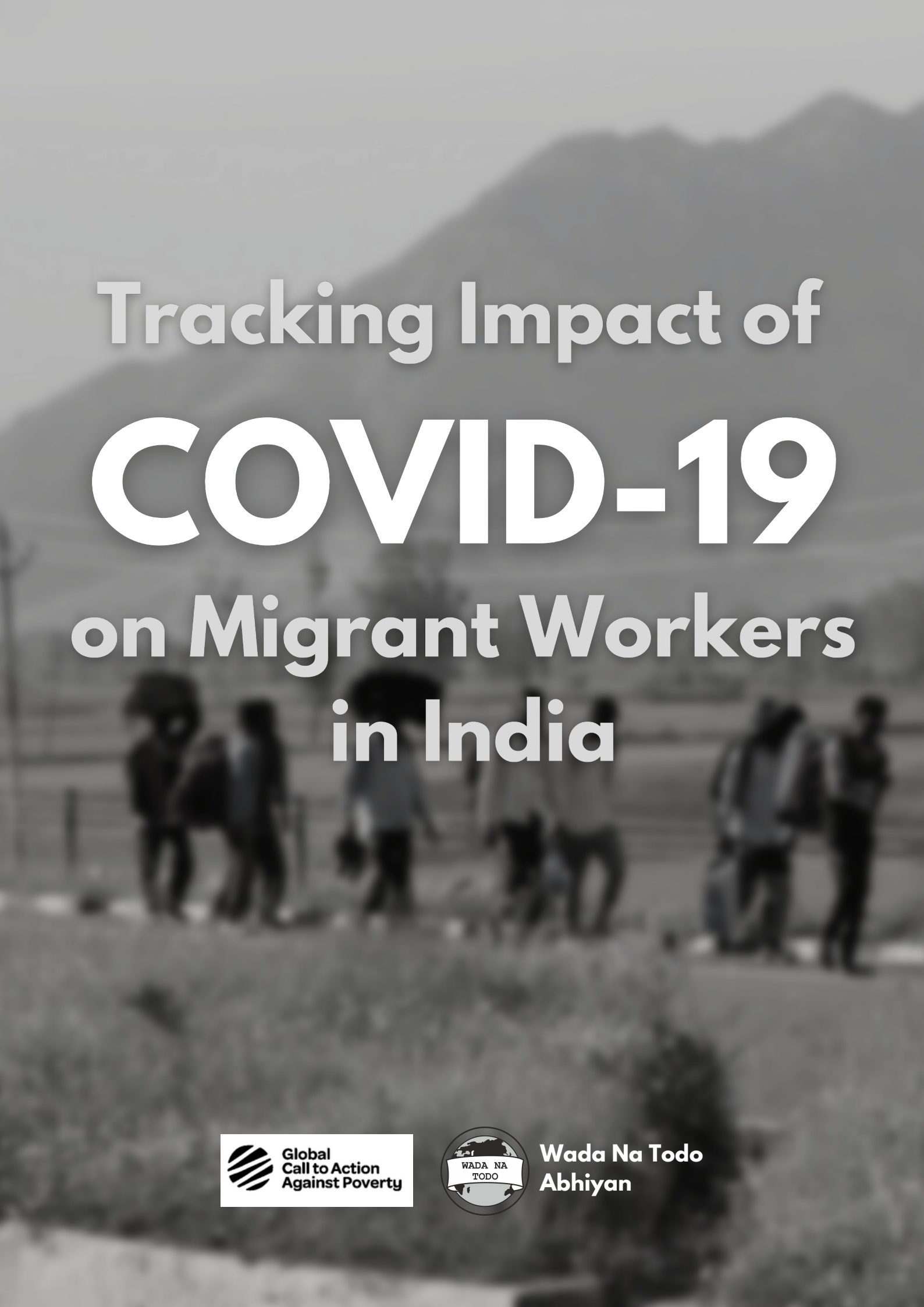


Tracking Impact of COVID-19 on Migrant Workers in India

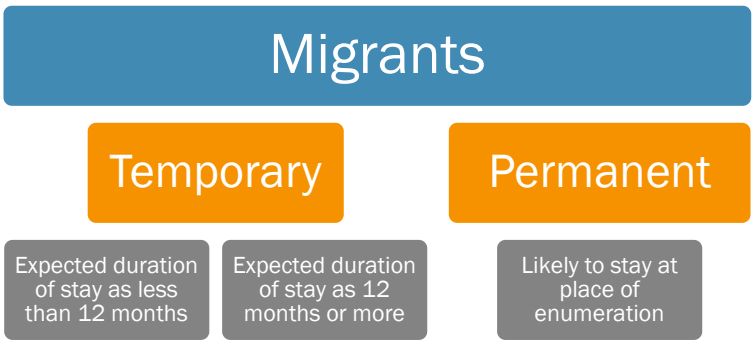
Global Call to Action Against Poverty

Wada Na Todo Abhiyan

1. INTRODUCTION

As per the Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India[1], a person enumerated at a different place than their birth is considered a migrant. According to Census 2011, India has 454 million migrants. However, this number is greatly underestimated as the Census is not designed to measure short-term migration, thus accounting for only a fraction of the actual number of migrants in India.[2] Another important source of data on migration are the surveys conducted by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO). The NSS 64th round report (July 2007-June 2008)[3] on migration in India revealed that nearly 29% of persons in India are migrants.

The nature of movement of migrants determines the type of migration: permanent or temporary. Permanent migrants are those that are likely to stay at the place of enumeration and do not plan to move out. On the other hand, temporary migrants are those who intend to move again, either back to the usual place of residence or any other place. Temporary migrants are further categorized into two groups- those with expected duration of stay as less than 12 months and those with expected duration of stay as 12 months or more.



The NSSO 2007-08 report reveals that temporary migration in India is seven times larger than permanent migration, with estimates of temporary labour migration varying from 15 million to 100 million migrant workers. Among the poorest, Scheduled Caste (SC), and Scheduled Tribe (ST) households, temporary migration is up to 16 times the volume of permanent migration.[4]

As compared to permanent migrants, temporary migrants find it difficult to establish their identity and citizenship in the destination areas. Compounding this is the fact that their entitlements and claims even in their areas of origin are much weaker – with lack of access to the Public Distribution System (PDS) and social protection. The intersectionality of vulnerabilities (class, caste, gender, ethnic or linguistic identity, absence of political voice) render temporary migrants as one of the most socially and politically marginalized groups in India.[5]

2. COVID-19 AND AGGRAVATED VULNERABILITIES

Close to 90% of India's workforce is engaged in the informal sector, which employs most of the migrant workers in the country. Contributing to 10% of India's GDP, migrant workers serve as the backbone of economic sectors like construction, textile, domestic work, mining and quarrying, agriculture.[6] The sudden nationwide lockdown announced in March 2020 resulted in the closure of these informal sector industries, triggering a mass exodus of migrant workers undertaking a long and arduous journey home.

The lockdown resulted in millions of distressed migrant workers being stranded without jobs, savings, shelter, food, transport or any organised social and economic support. Given their residence primarily in slums or worksites, they were disproportionately at risk of infection due to lack of access to water and sanitation facilities (WASH) and cramped living spaces with no scope for physical distancing and other COVID-appropriate behaviours.

---

[1] Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India- Migration. https://censusindia.gov.in/Census_And_You/migrations.aspx
[2] Azim Premji University (2021) State of Working India 2021: One year of Covid-19, Centre for Sustainable Employment, Azim Premji University.
[3] Migration in India, 2007-2008. NSS 64th Round, National Sample Survey Office, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation.
[4] Roadmap for developing a policy framework for the inclusion of internal migrant workers in India, International Labour Organization, December 2020. Road-map-for-the-Inclusion-of-Internal-Migrant-Workers-in-India-ILO-AB-CMID-December-2020.pdf
[5] Azim Premji University (2021) State of Working India 2021: One year of Covid-19, Centre for Sustainable Employment, Azim Premji University.
[6] Roadmap for developing a policy framework for the inclusion of internal migrant workers in India, International Labour Organization, December 2020.

While state governments were directed to provide ration and shelter to migrant workers stranded in the cities, given their historical exclusion from government provisions, these benefits were unable to effectively reach migrants. Many were asked by their landlords to vacate the premises as they were unable to pay the rent. Huge crowds thronged to bus and railway stations in order to get home, compromising on their safety. In the absence of transport facilities, migrant workers and their families were compelled to make the journey on foot across hundreds of kilometres.[7] The homeward exodus of around 11.4 million migrants[8] (an under-reported figure as it only includes those who used public transport) under extreme duress resulted in **at least 971 non-COVID deaths due to road accidents, exhaustion, dehydration and hunger**.[9]

Protesting migrant workers, desperate to go home, faced instances of violence and lathi charge from the police due to violation of lockdown rules. Many such incidents were reported across the country, including in Andhra Pradesh[10], Maharashtra[11] and Gujarat[12]. During transit as well, many migrant workers were stopped, harassed and beaten up. One gruesome ordeal was when around 120 returning migrants (including women and children) from Bengaluru were stopped at the Vapi taluka at the border of Gujarat, beaten up, forcibly packed into two closed container trucks and taken to Maharashtra instead of their destination state.[13]

In several states, workers who had reached the state borders were not allowed to cross over. Many source areas further reported villagers erecting barricades to prevent entry of outsiders for fear of infection. Thus, many migrants who managed to reach their villages were not allowed to enter, and faced discrimination and stigma.[14]

The deadly second wave of the pandemic in 2021, which overwhelmed the healthcare system and resulted in massive loss of life, has dealt a huge blow to migrants still recovering from the socio-economic impact of the first wave of COVID-19. With rising infections and state-specific lockdowns, panicked crowds of migrants were seen at bus and railway stations, desperate to get back home. With the roll-out of few relief measures in 2021 and paltry budgetary allocations, the distressing narratives of migrants and their tedious homeward journey seems to be forgotten.

2.1 GOVERNMENT PROMISES/INITIATIVES AND CHALLENGES:

COVID-19 and the subsequent nationwide lockdown has had a multi-fold adverse impact on migrants, substantially affecting their livelihood and pushing them into acute poverty, malnutrition and debt.

In order to mitigate the impact of the pandemic, relief packages were announced by the government from March 2020 (detailed in the sections below). Further, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Labour gave some key recommendations to the Lok Sabha in July 2020, which included implementation of an inter-state migrant welfare fund, creation of a national database for unorganised workers and establishment of a Social Security Fund to minimize the economic distress caused by the pandemic. As of March 2021, the Union Labour Ministry is in the process of creating a national database of unorganized workers to provide social security and welfare schemes.

Some measures were also announced in the Union Budget 2021-22 to address the enduring problems of migrants included portability of ration cards and a tax holiday for affordable rental housing projects commonly used by

---

[7] *Ibid*
[8] Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India. Lok Sabha Unstarred Question Number 1056, February 8, 2021. http://164.100.24.220/loksabhaquestions/annex/175/AU1056.pdf
[9] *A year after Covid-19 lockdown, India still doesn't have reliable data or policy on migrant workers*, Scroll.in, March 26, 2021. https://scroll.in/article/990527/a-year-after-covid-19-lockdown-india-still-doesnt-have-reliable-data-or-policy-on-migrant-workers
[10] *Covid-19: Migrant workers protest across India, demand to be sent back home*, Business Standard, May 5, 2020. https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/migrant-crisis-deepens-protests-erupt-demanding-to-be-sent-back-home-120050500158_1.html
[11] *Police lathi charge protesting migrants, arrange trains to send them home*, The Hindu, June 11, 2020. https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/mumbai/police-lathi-charge-protesting-migrants-arrange-trains-to-send-them-home/article31578138.ece
[12] *Migrants clash with police in Surat, over 100 detained*, The Indian Express, May 9, 2020. https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/ahmedabad/migrants-clash-with-police-in-surat-over-100-detained-6401883/
[13] *Migrant Workers Beaten, Stuffed into Container Trucks by Police at Gujarat-Maharashtra Border*, The Wire, April 2, 2020. https://thewire.in/rights/rajasthan-labourers-police-gujarat-border
[14] Roadmap for developing a policy framework for the inclusion of internal migrant workers in India, International Labour Organization, December 2020.

migrants. The government further extended some existing protections to migrant workers, including access to social security, minimum wage and coverage under the Employees' State Insurance Corporation (ESIC).

In light of the plethora of promises made by the governments at the Centre and States to alleviate the impact of COVID-19, a recent judgement by the Delhi High Court (Najma v Govt. of NCT of Delhi) becomes particularly significant. On July 22, 2021, the High Court ruled that a promise, assurance or representation given by a Chief Minister of a State amounts to an enforceable promise and has to be implemented.[15] This judgement has noteworthy implications in ensuring the accountability of elected representatives to hold them true to the promises and assurances made to the people.

2.1.1 FOOD SECURITY

The Union Government launched the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, which announced a spending plan of Rs. 1.7 lakh crore consisting of cash transfers and other measures to ensure food security for the poor. As an immediate relief for migrants who are not state ration card beneficiaries nor covered under the National Food Security Act (NFSA), the Government announced provision of five kilograms of grains per person and one kilogram of chana per family per month for two months, which was further extended till November 2020. Further, in order to ensure national portability of the ration card, the government announced a nationwide implementation of the One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC) scheme.

However, many migrants were unable to benefit from the food security schemes due to lack of legal identity documents, such as Aadhaar card or ration card. Even among those who had ration cards, access to these schemes was limited since ration cards were area-specific and the ONORC scheme has not been fully implemented across all states.

Under the Atmanirbhar Bharat scheme (launched in May 2020) dry ration was to be provided to 2.8 crore (28 million) migrants and others without ration cards. However, despite the surge of the second wave of the pandemic, the Food Ministry has not revived the Atmanirbhar Bharat scheme in 2021 to provide dry ration to those without ration cards.

Recognizing the financial and other hardships faced by migrant workers due to their limited access and claim to welfare resources by the state, a Supreme Court (SC) judgement on June 29, 2021 directed States to distribute dry ration and run community kitchens for migrant workers, and the Union Government to provide the required grains to implement this. It directed all states to ensure that none of the migrant workers go hungry due to absence of ration cards, and ordered them to fully implement the ONORC scheme by July 31, 2021. Further, the Court also gave July 31, 2021 as a deadline to the Centre to complete the work of the National Database for Unorganised Workers (NDUW) portal to register and identify migrant workers and unorganised labourers to ensure their rights, welfare and food security. The registration of workers is to be completed by December 31, 2021.[16]

2.1.2 EMPLOYMENT

In June 2020, the government announced the Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyan- a rural public works scheme- to employ returning migrants in some states.[17] The average daily wages under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) were also increased from Rs. 182 to Rs. 202. Further, a twenty-lakh crore financial package was launched specifically to create employment opportunities for migrant workers, workers in the unorganized sector, strengthen the MSME sector and promote the rural economy.[18] The Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship also announced a skill training programme for 3 lakh (300,000) migrant workers from 116 districts across Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand. The

---

[15] *Promise by Chief Minister in press conference enforceable: Delhi High Court orders Kejriwal govt to pay rents for poor tenants*, Bar and Bench, July 22, 2021. https://www-barandbench-com.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/www.barandbench.com/amp/story/news/litigation/promise-given-by-chief-minister-in-press-conference-enforceable-delhi-high-court-orders-kejriwal-govt-to-pay-rent-for-poor-tenants

[16] *Ensure that no migrant worker goes hungry, Supreme Court instructs government*, The Hindu, June 30, 2021. https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/ensure-that-no-migrant-worker-goes-hungry-supreme-court-instructs-government/article35030657.ece

[17] Press Information Bureau (PIB) Press Release, dated June 20, 2020. https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1632861

[18] Press Information Bureau (PIB) Press Release, dated September 16, 2020. https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1654819

key objective was to equip migrant workers with demand-driven skills under the existing Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana.[19]

However, MGNREGA remained the primary source of employment support. Additionally, the scheme was unable to adequately accommodate the surge in the demand for work, resulting in inordinate delays in providing employment to many people.[20] Further, as per the Union Budget for 2021-22, the budget estimate for 2021-22 saw a 35% reduction in the allocation for MGNREGA as compared to the revised estimates for 2020-21.

2.1.3 HOUSING AND TRANSPORTATION

The government announced a scheme under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) to convert government-funded housing in cities into affordable rental housing complexes to address the housing concerns of migrant workers.[21] Additionally, a government-issued order instructed landlords to not demand rent, and employers to pay wages without deduction during the lockdown. However, these orders were hardly heeded by anyone, leaving migrant workers homeless, stranded and desperate to get home.

Despite the mass exodus of migrants in the first wave of the pandemic, it was only in the last week of May 2020 that state governments finally permitted to operate buses and trains for stranded migrants. With high fares being charged, many migrants were unable to afford the cost of travelling back home.[22] The application process for the Shramik transportation was tedious, with lack of information available for workers on how to acquire tickets and passes. Misinformation and lack of support resulted in many migrants being stranded at railway stations and bus stops for days.

2.1.4 BOCW CESS FUND

Given the high proportion of migrant workers in the construction sector, the Ministry of Labour and Employment directed all State and UT governments to provide financial assistance to construction workers from the Building and Other Construction Workers' Cess Fund (BOCW). As per data shared by the government in September 2020, a total of Rs. 5000 crores (Rs. 50,000 million) has been directly transferred to the bank accounts of around 2 crore (20 million) migrant workers by various states.[23]

However, a majority of them are neither registered under the BOCW nor other welfare funds and thus do not get the entitled benefits. Further, the amount transferred only works out to a paltry Rs. 2500 per worker. Additional challenges faced by migrants to access relief measures included lack of proof of being stranded, limited awareness about relief packages, inability to furnish legal identity cards for applications, limited access to direct benefit transfers due to lack of Jan Dhan accounts as well as challenges in linking bank accounts with Aadhar.[24]

2.1.5 LACK OF DATA

In September 2020, the Union Government stated that it maintained no data on the deaths of migrant workers during their homeward exodus, nor did it have any data on lockdown-related job losses among migrant workers.[25] The last migration survey by the NSS was conducted in 2007-08, while the latest data on migrants comes from the Census of 2011- both sources of information from at least a decade ago and extremely dated. The lack of enumeration and recognition of migrant workers at the local, state and national level results in an absence of

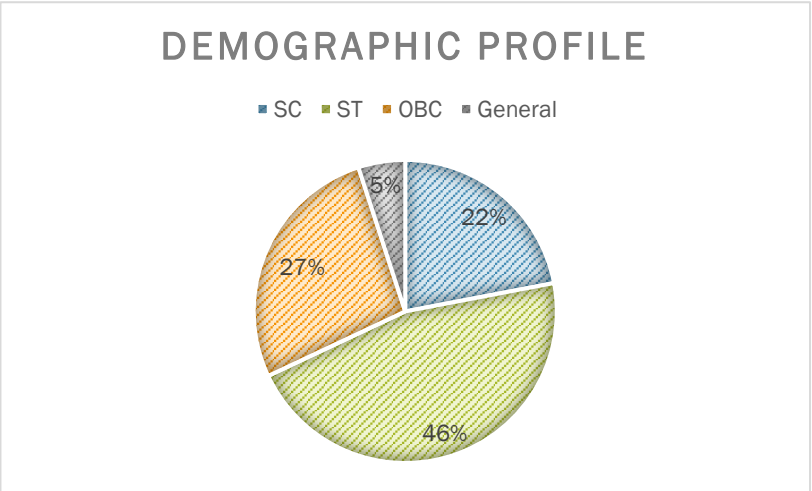
---

[19] Azim Premji University (2021) State of Working India 2021: One year of Covid-19, Centre for Sustainable Employment, Azim Premji University.
[20] *3.5 million new enrolments under MGNREGA, as 'distressed' workers return to villages*, Hindustan Times, May 22, 2020. https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/3-5-million-new-enrolments-under-mgnrega-as-distressed-workers-return-to-villages/story-aDJHYz0vz1tSeLIeIhVT7I.html
[21] Affordable Rental Housing Complexes (ARHCs) for Urban Migrants/ Poor, Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, Government of India. http://arhc.mohua.gov.in/
[22] *SC orders free travel, food for migrant* workers, Livemint, May 28, 2021. https://www.livemint.com/news/india/sc-orders-free-travel-food-for-migrant-workers-11590664587657.html
[23] Press Information Bureau (PIB) Press Release, dated September 16, 2020. https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1654819
[24] Roadmap for developing a policy framework for the inclusion of internal migrant workers in India, International Labour Organization, December 2020.
[25] Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India. Lok Sabha Unstarred Question Number 174, September 14, 2020. http://164.100.24.220/loksabhaquestions/annex/174/AU174.pdf

information on their aggravated vulnerabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic, and hence policies and schemes not adequately aligned to address their specific needs and challenges.

3. STATUS OF MIGRANT WORKERS IN JHARKHAND

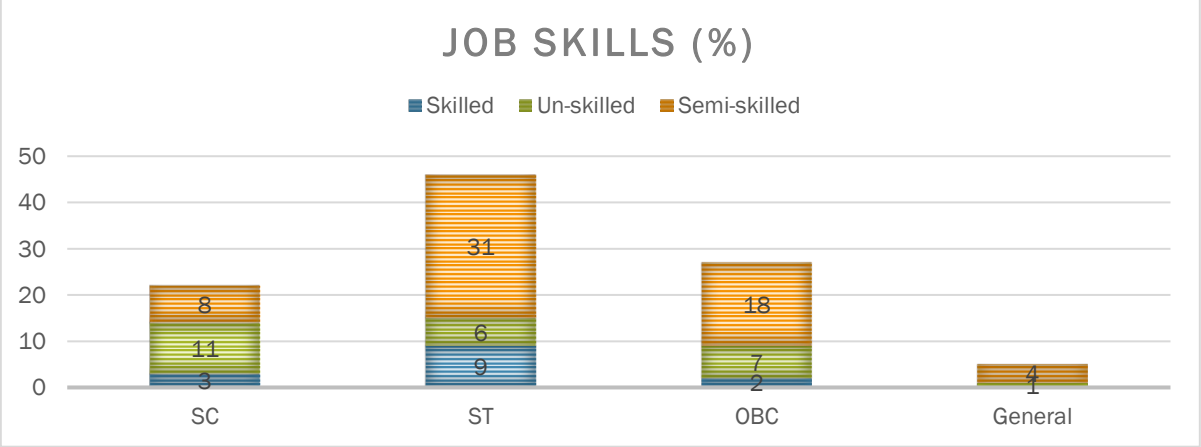
In order to assess the economic impact of COVID-19 on returning migrant workers in Jharkhand- a state with high outmigration- and understand the current status of employment and migration, data was collected from over 15,000 respondents across 13 districts. From that data, a random sampling of 300 respondents from 10 districts was done. The demographic profile of the random sampling is as follows:



The key findings from the study are given in the sections below.

3.1 SKILLS AND LIVELIHOOD

While a preliminary skill mapping by the government of Jharkhand highlighted that over 70% of returnee migrants were skilled[26], our findings revealed a different picture.



Across the communities, more than 60% of respondents were reportedly unskilled workers. Wide variations were observed across the communities, with the prevalence of unskilled labour highest among the general category workers, followed by members of the Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBC). However, it is important to note that despite the comparatively higher skill levels recorded among people belonging to the ST and SC communities, the level of temporary migration among them remains high (a trend not similarly observed among workers belonging to the general category)- a fact that could be attributed to the lack of adequate work opportunities available for these communities in their home states- compelling them to undertake migration as a way of escaping discriminatory labour market practices in their villages or towns.

The high prevalence of unskilled labour remains despite the central government push for skill development of vulnerable communities such as SCs, STs and OBCs through its flagship programme- Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana since 2015.

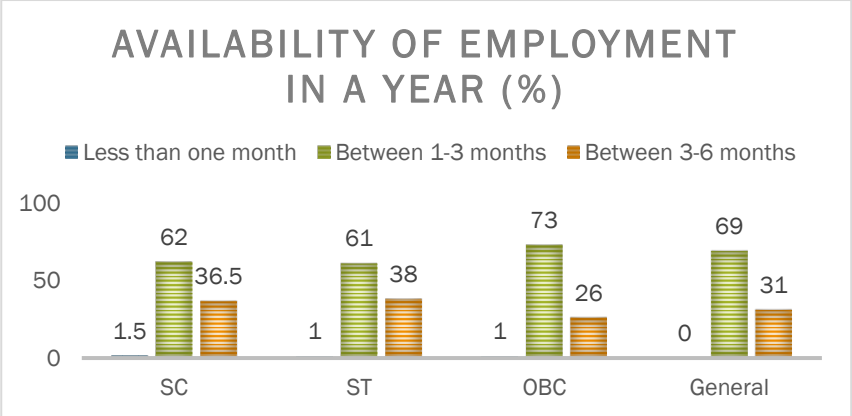
Given the lack of monetizable skills among the surveyed migrants, the means of livelihood available to them are also limited. The most common source of livelihood among the respondents was wage labour, with 34% reporting it as their primary source of income. Given the agrarian crisis in India, with a reduction in person-days of available

[26] *Jharkhand's first round of mapping shows 70% of migrant workers are skilled*, Hindustan Times, June 10, 2020. https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/jharkhand-s-first-round-of-mapping-shows-70-of-migrant-workers-are-skilled/story-t2IXHB0cOBwTZh4m3XLf2N.html

farm work, 21% of respondents reported being engaged in agriculture and supplementing their income through wage labour.

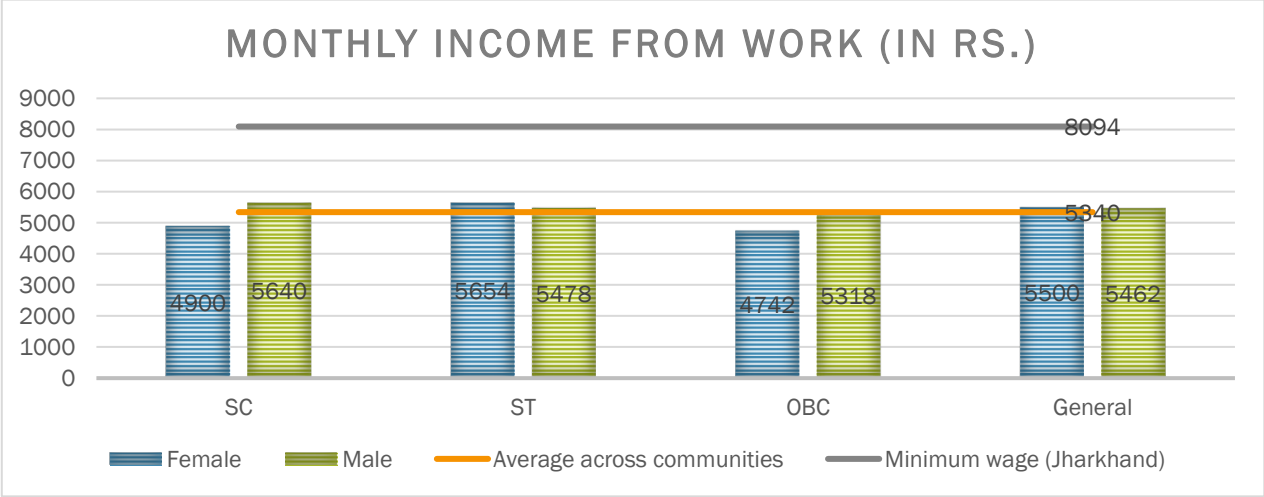
Wage labour was one of the most adversely impacted sectors during and post-lockdown. With a severe crisis of employment opportunities in labour markets and an increased demand for work, workers have experienced an acute fall in employment and a reduced bargaining power resulting in lower wages.

3.2 INCOME AND EMPLOYMENT



Given the prevalence of informal workers among the surveyed migrants, and the labour crisis caused by the pandemic, all respondents reported poor availability of employment post-pandemic. Across communities, an average of only 72 days of paid work was reported in a year, i.e., not even 3 months, despite various employment guarantee schemes in place.

Considering that a majority of the respondents are employed as wage labourers, the low work availability in the past year would have had a major impact on their earnings and capacity to save.



The dire economic status of the surveyed migrants is further reflected in their earnings from work. The respondents, employed as casual workers, are paid on a piece-rate basis and fall outside the ambit of minimum wage laws. With an average monthly income of Rs. 5340, they fall well below the poverty line in India. Even the minimum wage for unskilled labour in Jharkhand (at Rs. 8094 per month[27]) is significantly higher than the income reported by the surveyed migrants. Compounding the low monthly income is the dismal availability of employment (with an average of 2.4 months in a year), predisposing migrant workers to poverty and debt.

As is evident from the graph, wide variations were reported across communities and especially across genders. Migrant women face severe gender-based challenges and continue to be in more disadvantaged situations than men in terms of access to employment and disproportionate representation in lower paying occupations. They are often not paid at par with their male co-workers (the average female monthly income across the communities was around Rs. 5200 as opposed to that of men at almost Rs. 5500 per month). A December 2020 report by the International Labour Organization (ILO)[28] highlighted the prevalence of perverse payment practices in labour

[27] Source: Department of Labour and Employment, Government of Jharkhand.
[28] Roadmap for developing a policy framework for the inclusion of internal migrant workers in India, International Labour Organization, December 2020.

markets such as *jodi*-based payments where husbands or male relatives are paid the price of only 1.5 labour units when they are employed as a couple.

One must further take into account the intersectionality of vulnerabilities. While women across communities were at a disadvantage as compared to the men of the same community, women belonging to the SC and OBC communities reported the least incomes, signifying how social inequalities get replicated in the labour markets.

3.3 TRENDS IN MIGRATION

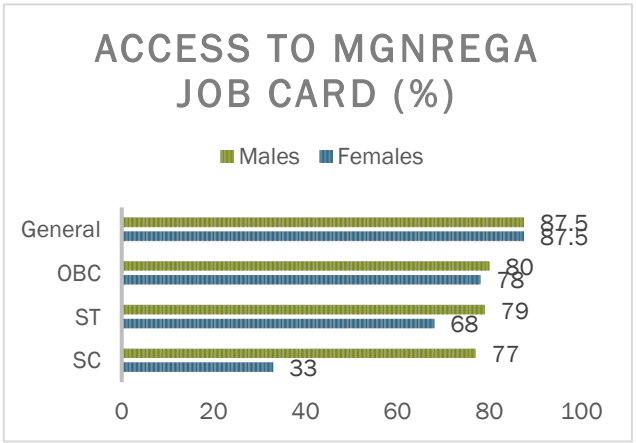
The current economic models of growth, with their focus on urban areas, have resulted in spatial inequalities in development. The resultant decline in employment opportunities and low wages in rural areas lead to high levels of migration to cities. The same trend was observed among the surveyed migrants, with **34% quoting higher wages as the primary reason for migration** and 26% stating ease of jobs along with higher wages as the main reason for migration. Over 40% of the respondents reported migrating to cities outside the state.

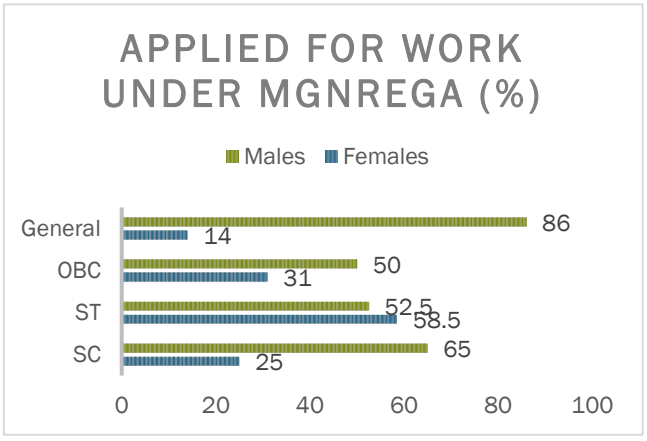
However, a stark gender disparity is visible with 42% of female respondents reported migrating to neighbouring rural areas within the state. Given that migrant women constitute a substantial portion of intra-state, rural-to-rural migration- working primarily in brick kilns, agriculture and other allied sectors- they face near complete exclusion from state systems and public consciousness due to the invisibility of these migration streams.[29]

Male migrants on the other hand predominantly migrate to cities outside the state, with 46% of respondents reporting the same. 45% of male migrant respondents reported working in the construction sector, one of the worst impacted sectors by the pandemic with work sites coming to a near standstill.

3.4 MGNREGA

MGNREGA promises 100 days of guaranteed employment each year to every rural household in demand of work. The nationwide lockdown and migrant exodus resulted in a massive increase in the demand for work under MGNREGA, with the government allocating an additional Rs. 40,000 crores (Rs. 400,000 million) for the scheme in May 2020. With scarce employment opportunities available, it was expected that MGNREGA would accommodate the increasing demand for work and provide income and livelihood support to the millions of returnee migrants.



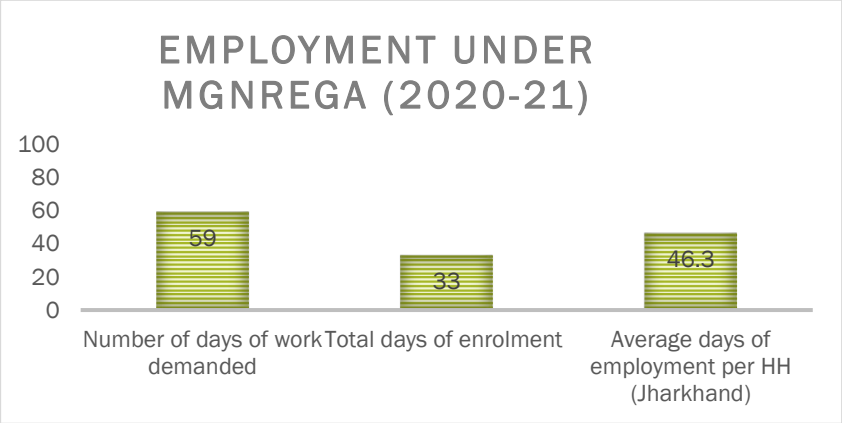


While 77% of the respondents reported having an MGNREGA job card, stark disparities were visible across communities. The presence of a job card was highest among migrants belonging to the general category, while only 53% of migrants from the SC community reported having access to the same. The gender disparity can be highlighted by the fact that **only 33% of female SC respondents reported having a job card.** The participation of Adivasi and Dalit workers in MGNREGA employment has decreased since 2017, leaving them more vulnerable to the economic shock of the COVID-19 pandemic. As per the MGNREGA dashboard, SC person-days as a percentage of the total person-days have declined from 11.05% in 2017-18 to 9.22% in 2020-21, while ST person-days have declined from 28.68% to 24.9% during the same time period.

[29] *Ibid*

While it was thought that MGNREGA would act as an economic lifeline for the returning migrants, the proportion of migrants with job cards who actually applied for work under the scheme was not that high. Across the communities, only 50% of respondents with a job card applied for work under MGNREGA. **One of the key reasons for lower uptake of the scheme is the low wages under MGNREGA.** Even after an increase in the notified wages for MGNREGA in 2021-22, the wage rate for Jharkhand at Rs. 198 per day is much less than the basic minimum wage for unskilled labour in the state (Rs. 274.81).

The data also revealed discrepancies in the number of days of work demanded vs the total days of work provided to returning migrants. Across the surveyed communities, the average demand for work was for 59 days. However, the average days of work provided to the surveyed migrant workers was a mere 33 days, a far cry from the legal guarantee of 100 days of wage employment. This was also lower than the average days of employment provided per household in Jharkhand- 46.3 days as per the MGNREGA dashboard.



4. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Build a robust framework for generating disaggregated data and undertake regular quantitative and qualitative monitoring of the development status migrants with special focus on social identities and further women, children, youth, persons with disabilities, elderly, etc. to update data and document intersectional vulnerabilities.
- Finalize the draft Migrant Labour Policy by NITI Aayog after due consultations, and ensure proper allocations and units within the Ministry of Labour and Employment, along with monitoring mechanisms for effective implementation of the policy.
- Undertake rapid macroeconomic recovery in the form of a National Relief and Recovery Package to protect the right to life, partially compensate for loss of livelihoods and income, and boost demand in the economy for faster recovery.
- Ensure portability of all social security schemes and universal coverage of all migrant and informal workers. All states must effectively implement the ONORC scheme to ensure food security of migrants.
- Ensure strict enforcement of labour laws and facilitate access of migrant workers to remedial justice.
- Build up adequate infrastructure and resources, including human resources, to implement welfare measures across state and central departments for making cities and urban development more inclusive for migrant workers.
- Expand MGNREGA work entitlements to 150 days and design an urban employment guarantee scheme along similar lines as MGNREGA, with regular and timely payments. Ensure that migrant workers are purposefully included in the ambit of such schemes, providing job and income security for low-skilled workers.
- Expand and improve economic activities and livelihood opportunities (including under MGNREGA) available in origin areas. Design vocational and skill development programmes to improve migrant workers' self-employability, wage employment and entrepreneurial capacities to break the cycle of poverty.
- Ensure timely completion of the NDUW portal and identify and register migrant workers and unorganized labourers to ensure their rights, welfare and food security. Develop a national self-registration process for migrant workers and build a foundation for interstate coordination on the fiscal costs of migration.
- Given the high mobility and subsequently high risk of infection of migrants, undertake free vaccination of migrant workers on priority to limit their vulnerability to the virus and help reduce COVID-19 caseloads.