

Rural migrant labourers and their livelihood during COVID-19 in India

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Abstract

The global crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to severe economic, social, and cultural impacts. In India, it has uncovered the harsh reality of the rural migrant labourers, by exposing the risks of their working and living conditions and the chronic homelessness they face in the city. The sudden enforcement of the lockdowns during the pandemic intensified the pre-existing vulnerabilities of the rural migrant labourer force living in the cities. Homeless and forced to return to their villages, the rural migrant workers and their families faced yet another form of marginalisation in their native hometowns as 'vectors' of the disease.

In light of this context, this paper attempts to explore and understand the experience of migrant labourers during COVID-19 towards issues concerning their livelihood, health, social security, and their experiences of stigma. Furthermore, it also delves into finding the kinds of alternative strategies adopted by the State to resolve and care for these communities. This study critically looks into these aspects through primary empirically collected data, in Muda, a small remote village in Damoh district in the northern part of Madhya Pradesh, a socio-economically backward region of India, with the help of existing secondary information about the region and communities. The study identified that migrants faced significant food, shelter and security challenges at both their place of employment in the city as well as their hometown in the remote village of Muda.

Keywords: COVID-19, livelihood, migrant labourer, rural citizens, stigma

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1. Introduction

The unforeseen challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected human lives all over the world. As lockdowns were imposed to reduce the spread, it brought economic activities to a near-standstill and exacerbated the livelihoods of many. In March 2020, the government of India also implemented stringent lockdowns and limitations on all forms of mobility, which affected different sections of society differently. Migrants who had moved out to different parts of the country for employment to sustain their families were the most affected by the pandemic (Singh, 2020a). These migrant workers and wage labourers mainly belonged to the poor and rural parts of the country and their hardships multiplied during the lockdown. They faced major economic setbacks with no jobs or money, besides being isolated from their families (Mishra and Sayeed, 2020; Jesline et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has uncovered the harsh reality of the Indian workforce, mainly the rural migrant labourer crisis. The global health catastrophe unleashed by COVID-19 re-emphasised the precarious working and living conditions of the rural migrant labourer force, who were compelled to return to their hometowns and villages following the lockdown, making them realise that their place of work was not their home. They realised their workplace could give them temporary earnings for day-to-day survival and send paltry remittances to their families in their villages. However, in a sudden, unprecedented crisis, the city as their workplace cannot accommodate them for long. The agonising visuals of the migrant labourers, some accompanied by their families and carrying their few belongings with them, walking thousands of kilometres barefoot under scorching heat, were testimonies to the crisis shouldered by this population in India. The lockdown affected more than 40 million migrants and 50000 to 60000 migrated from their place of employment from the urban centres to their hometowns in the rural areas as the restrictions were imposed which further led to large-scale exposure of COVID-19 in rural settings (The World Bank, n.d.).

The COVID-19 pandemic posed two main threats to the rural migrant labourers. The first threat pertains to the forced migration back to their native villages in the initial days of the pandemic due to the lockdown; the second threat occurred with the non-availability of medical aid and the death of kin followed by the struggle to cremate or bury and perform the last rituals of their family members due to COVID-19 (Prakash and Borker, 2022). These were the background conditions when the pandemic struck, further intensifying the informal sector workers' vulnerability (Sharma et al., 2021). Rural migrants, as urban workers, once the backbone of the rural remittance economy, lost jobs and entered a situation of socio-economic vulnerability (Vasavi, 2021). The population that is often invisible to the State and the public, the migrant labourers, were further disenchanted by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic unravelling in an informal urban economy in the neoliberal paradigm.

It is essential to understand the context of the rural Indian economy, which is already in dismal conditions. The rural economy has been closely associated with agricultural and allied activities, with the agrarian structure being the backbone for a long time. However, in present times, agriculture's contribution has declined over the years in a significant manner in India. The contribution of agriculture to the nation and the rural inhabitants in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) and in terms of offering livelihood is evidently shrinking. For instance, the composition of Agriculture and allied activities, Industry and Service sector was 51.81%, 14.16%, and 33.25%, respectively, in 1950-

51. The share of agriculture and allied sectors declined to 18.20% in 2013-14. In the meantime, the share of industry and services has improved by 57.03% and 24.77%, respectively (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2021). It was also noted in various empirical agrarian studies that around 30% of the livelihood of the rural locality depends on agriculture, and the rest on non-farm activities (Jodhka, 2014; Kumar, 2016) within the non-farm activities, out-migration to informal urban economy contributes significantly. It is important to note the rural changes taking place contributes to the rural out-migration.

In Madhya Pradesh, India, rural non-farm activities must provide a viable livelihood source to the rural labourer force (Narayanan, 2020). Notably, in Bundelkhand, the landless agricultural labourers and rural poor in the Muda village, the study region, hardly found any work in the non-farm economy in their immediate locality. Hence, migration to metropolitan cities has become their only livelihood option. As migrant workers, they are mostly employed in the informal sector, especially in construction sites. Female migrants work as domestic help, often cooking and cleaning houses. These types of employment opportunities do not guarantee stability or security and the pandemic exposed the precarity of their work conditions.

Given this context, it becomes imperative to ask questions concerning the livelihood of rural migrants during the pandemic, their experience, and the alternative livelihood strategies adopted during such difficult times. This paper is an attempt to explore and understand the experience of migrant labourers during the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this paper, other issues concerning their livelihood, health, social security, and their experience of stigma are also looked into. Further, this paper will also analyse alternative strategies and remedies adopted by migrant labourers to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects and various measures enforced by the State to address the socio-economic crisis caused by the health pandemic.

The first section of the paper introduces the research topic, followed by the second part which comprises a detailed description of the study site. The third part of the paper briefly explains the migration issues in the same region. The fourth part delves into the livelihood strategies adopted during lockdowns. The next section of the paper describes the stigma and discrimination faced by migrants in their native villages, and lastly, it ends with a conclusion.

2. Methods

This is predominantly a qualitative study that is based on ground realities captured during the COVID-19 period. Mixed methods are used to make sense of the situation of the migrant workers upon returning to their villages. It was tough to converse with returned migrants in the village due to the restrictions imposed to curb the pandemic. Observations were made on the treatment of migrants returning to their village by the local dominant groups and government actors. Apart from this, the author conducted ten individual interviews with returnee migrants, after the lockdown was partially lifted. Additionally, in-depth conversations were made to get the detailed lived narrative of the migrant labourers and returnee migrants of the Muda Village, Damoh district, Madhya Pradesh regarding their experience with the pandemic and its consequences on their lives.

Despite all the first-hand information, secondary data, such as articles, and newspaper reports, have also been referred. The respondents are migrants who belong to the economically, politically

and socially marginalised rural populations. Most were Dalits and other backward castes (OBCs) social groups, including Muslims. These are the groups of people who work primarily as migrant labourers away from the village as migrant households that earn livelihood majorly from the migration. Therefore, how they dealt with it in the crisis and managed to survive during and after the lockdown is significant. These migrant households are the ones who have negligible or no agricultural land in the village and struggle for survival hence leading them to migrate to earn their livelihood. Lack of economic opportunities in these villages are further amplified as agriculture has become heavily mechanised. Migrant labourers were selected as interlocutors for the study based on purposive sampling based on the accessibility and broader representation of different social and economic groups such as caste, class and gender. Data was collected for this study from April 2020 to October 2020 and from March 2021 to July 2021. Mostly, caste was a significant determinant for migration as the Dalit and lower backward class were agricultural and wage labourers. They migrated to another place for their livelihood after the severe agrarian crisis in the last few years (Perspective, 2010; Mishra and Reddy, 2009). For this study, migrant labourers who had returned during the pandemic were interviewed to map their experiences during the COVID-19 crisis.

Interviews were chosen as a medium through which data was collected. The goal of any individual interview is to see the research topic from the respondent's perspective and to understand how and why she/he comes to have a particular perspective and context (Symon and Cassell, 1998). Due to high illiteracy, the research participants preferred to talk to someone rather than fill out forms. Also, due to migration, many labourers lead socially excluded lives and enjoy talking to people, especially those from rural-agrarian backgrounds.

The observation method was also used to note the happenings at the field site during COVID-19. Atkinson and Hammersley (1998) argue that, in a sense, all social research is a form of participant observation because we cannot study the social world without being part of it. Barnes et al. (1996) suggest that it is helpful for grounded theory researchers to experience respondents' culture by living or working in their culture before investigation.

Study Area

For the field site selection, purposive sampling was done as per the researcher's convenience due to COVID-19 regulations. Since the researcher belongs to the study village, it was relatively easy to access the field, which was helpful in data collection and making observations. The researcher is aware of the outsider and insider influence debate and biases in data collection and has adhered to the ethical research practice of not making charged and biased judgments.

The study area encompasses a village in Damoh district, Bundelkhand region in Madhya Pradesh. The village is named 'Muda' in Muari Panchayat of Patera Tehsil. Muari Panchayat, located in Patera Tehsil, was chosen. Muari is located 13 km away from the Patera block headquarters and 45 km from the Damoh district. It has two villages, Muari and Muda, each with 180 and 173 households, respectively. There are 353 households with a total population of 1107. Among the total population, 168 members belong to Scheduled Caste (S.C.), 10 members belong to Scheduled Tribes (S.T.), and the remaining include Other Backward Castes (OBCs) and the general category population. It has 60 households as main cultivators and the remaining as casual manual labourers as per the 2011 Socio Economic and Caste Census data. Muari Panchayat, in both villages, has different caste

groups, such as *Kurmi, Yadav, Sahu, Dubey, Chadar, Namdev, Soni, Sen, Vishwakarma, Jain, Rajak, Ahirwar, Basor, Kumhar Patel, Varma, Khare, Thakur, and Muslim*. These are the social communities that reside in this Panchayat.

The study has considered the phenomenon of mostly the small and marginal farmers and agricultural labourers of the region from the lower castes of the Muda village undergoing out-migration. In the last few decades, most small/marginal farming families and families of agricultural labourers have left their traditional cultivating land and migrated to urban centres like Delhi, Mumbai, Pune, and Indore as wage labourers. This study, therefore, seeks to understand the transformation of the livelihood strategy and its impact on village migrant labourers during the COVID-19 time. In Madhya Pradesh, 56.5% of migrant labourers remained unemployed during COVID-19, prompting Maharashtra to impose a lockdown. 90% of them did not receive the financial assistance promised by the State government (The Hindu, 2021). According to the Ministry of labour and Employment (2021), more than 10.6 million migrant workers, including those who walked during the lockdown, returned to their home State.

Madhya Pradesh, located in central India, is bordered by five Indian States. Madhya Pradesh was the most prominent until November 2000, when Chhattisgarh was carved out, creating two separate States. Nonetheless, the State ranks second in geographical area (3.08 lakh sq. km) after Rajasthan, accounting for nearly 9 percent of the country. Madhya Pradesh has ten divisions, 51 districts, 342 tehsils (blocks), 55,393 villages, and 24061 villages.

The State has a population of over 72.6 million people, accounting for 6.0 percent of India's total population; the State is ranked sixth in India in terms of population dimension. According to the 2011 census, 76.6% of Madhya Pradesh's population is rural, accounting for 7.63 percent of India's total rural population. Furthermore, agriculture is their primary source of income. According to Census 2011, 34.80% of rural households were primarily engaged in cultivation (farming), while 56.6% were engaged in manual casual labour, with the remaining relying on non-agricultural activities. Hence, it becomes imperative to understand the livelihood pattern both in the standard and crisis times where most of the population is rural and depends upon an agrarian economy for their livelihood, with tiny landholding and landless households in the majority. However, it is noticed that the rural agrarian economy is changing quite rapidly towards the non-farm economy under the border project of rural modernisation and development at the national and global levels. So, it is important to note how certain regions cope with it when it has its own local social and economic culture, such as central India.

In central India, Bundelkhand is divided into Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh and located in the State's northern regions, including six Madhya Pradesh districts: Datia, Tikamgarh, Chhatarpur, Sagar, Damoh, and Panna. Bundelkhand is distinguished by linguistic homogeneity, an essential feature given that most people in this region speak Bundeli, a dialect of western Hindi spoken in Madhya Pradesh. The area's backwardness can be attributed to social, historical, and institutional factors. Inequality in landholding remains unchanged against the backdrop of a solid feudal relationship. One of the most critical issues was the presence of elites, which resulted in a feudalistic relationship in all aspects of financial activities, support and ancestry of social wealth, and unequal access to financial capital. These factors keep agriculture's contribution to growth output at a low level. Non-farm employment is nearly stagnant, and the region needs more economic opportunities

and tourism still needs to be enhanced and hence fails to contribute towards local employment opportunities. As a result, underemployment has been a significant push factor in the region's increased outward rural migration in recent decades. However, in other parts of the State, tourism offers many possibilities for a job, like the Malwa region. The character of region is also very important to understand in the context of rural out-migration and makes it more interesting how out-migration has become a new norm in this locality over time instead of developing alternative employment space. Further, this poses the question of local democracy and politics and how it is being done in the region when it is to be processed at the State level.

More than 80% of the population in Bundelkhand is dependent on agriculture, with the majority being small and marginal farmers. Due to the severe and prolonged drought, agricultural activities have essentially stopped. As a result, locked houses are a common sight. Crop failure and debt have become a reality in the region over the last two decades, leading to farmer suicides. Droughts have become a regular occurrence, resulting in a lack of production and food. Lack of food results from malnutrition and hunger (Shiva, 1993). Numerous field surveys show a severe food shortage in the region (Niti Aayog, 2012; Gupta et al., 2014). Because of their precarious food and livelihood situation, rural people have been forced to migrate for their survival. Migration to cities for work has become the norm in this region. The COVID-19-induced national lockdown revealed its unnoticed reality. It raises an important point that if employment is regularly available for the rural poor, what would they have done to survive the pandemic?

3. Results and discussion

3.1 What led to out-migration from Bundelkhand?

Migration is the only livelihood for rural Bundelkhand poor and marginalised people in the agriculture crisis, as there are no other alternative employment options. The rural labourer migration is primarily the result of a lack of livelihood options and no exposure to regional resources. Rural out-migration has been critical in providing poor households with an alternative source of income, though not with choice but necessity.

Observations and evidence from the field study reveal that migrant labourers come from the poorest, most deprived, and marginalised sections of the society, including the Schedule castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes(OBC). However, most parts of the country are more concerned with rising inequalities, insufficient livelihood generation, and agrarian instability. Farming is no longer a secure source of livelihood for the small and marginal cultivators and landless agricultural workers in rural settings as farm technology has displaced labourers from agrarian work. However, there has been a growth in non-farm economic activities. Despite that, it still has not guaranteed the provision of concrete non-farm employment in the regions. In some parts of Madhya Pradesh, migration is not only a survival strategy but also has an 'accumulative' nature in some parts of the State as noted by Deshingkar (2008).

One similar case was found of one of the landless respondents who belonged to a lower OBC caste group. He migrated to Delhi almost a decade back with his family and works as a daily wage labourer in the informal construction sector. Back in his village, he worked as a tenant farmer but drought-induced crop failure led to his inability to pay loans and forced him to migrate. However,

his new job in Delhi allowed him to pay off his debt and also buy one acre of land through savings.

The respondent's migration story is one of few positive stories from his village that is not representative of the plights of migrants in the field site. Therefore, this further requires empirically understanding the structural factors responsible for creating and perpetuating kinds of regional migrant stories.

3.2 The conundrum of State-sponsored employment and schemes

There are government schemes to employ the rural population such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 (MGNREGA). It is a central government scheme introduced to create employment opportunities in rural parts of India². However, it still needs to ensure livelihood security in the study area. This is precisely noted in the conversation with another research participant who is a 35-year old migrant labourer belonging to the Kushwaha caste. He worked as a labourer but returned to his village during the lockdown in April 2020. He shared his plight on the false promises delivered through the MGNREGA scheme: 'There were claims of employment provision through the MGNREGA scheme but I could not get any work after I came here. Despite not being employed, I heard that the local Panchayat authorities withdrew money from my job card.'

So there are many cases where local people are not getting any work employment, and money is coming to Panchayat in their names. However, evidence has yet to be collected and found of this. Nevertheless, the issue here is that local democracy is not functioning correctly; therefore, local people are not benefiting from it. So, this needs to be kept in mind when the government frames the policy and schemes for the rural people because, in the end, they do not get the benefits of basic facilities as they are entitled to being citizens.

Thus, local social networks were affected due to out-migration, such as migrant labourers from the village. Its effects have been witnessed throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, as the migrants moved back to their village, their fellow villagers were not very welcoming of them. They poorly treated returned migrant villagers. Not only were the local government actors harsh to them by asking for information regarding the checks and quarantine, but they were also not given any facilities. They were kept outside the village in such local schools. As respondent said:

In one case, a returned migrant family entered the village without prior information to the village Panchayat actor. The family was brutally harassed by the local dominant people in the village who said that they entered the village without informing the village authority and might have carried the disease too. Then they were not allowed to enter their own house. As a result, they were kept outside the village for around two weeks.

In this context, it is essential to note that the village has different social settlements based on the caste groups in most rural settlements. So, one, they (marginalised section of the society) live in the peripheries of the village, and second, when they come home in this crisis, they are not allowed to

² Formally notified on 7 September 2005, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act has come to be one of the biggest programmes of rural development in the history of India. The programme was envisioned with a right based perspective and passed as an act by the Indian Parliament, which gave it legal status. Its legal status makes employment a right of those who seek it, and providing it becomes a responsibility of the government (Jodhka, 2023, p.110)

enter their house, which reflects how the dominant community and other caste groups view the migrants in their village.

Respondents also Stated that many could not access essential government services such as the Public Distribution Service (PDS) due to their temporary disconnection and disassociation from the village. In the time of pandemic, the PDS, the government had ordered to give free rations to villagers, particularly to returnee migrants of the village. However, the study found that migrant labourers did not have easy access to these food rations since they lacked proper government identification documents.

Although I did not own a ration card, the village head used to provide me ration once in a while out of goodwill before the pandemic. As COVID hit, I heard that the State government announced free ration for everyone who had returned to the village, regardless of their ownership of the ration card. However, I was denied any ration while those from the dominant groups received it despite not having an official document. I approached the village head regarding this matter, but there was no action taken. It was a difficult period for me since there was no means of any employment and no access to proper food. I felt stigmatised by my fellow villagers as a returnee migrant.

Another respondent also shared a similar plight due to the lack of any government support:

I worked as a house maid in a middle class household in the city. As soon as the pandemic hit, I was fired from my job and had no other means of work to support my family. I survived on my savings for some days but had to return to my village as the lockdown was further extended. Although I came back in hopes of receiving support from the local government, I was not provided with anything. The State government mandated free rations and other necessities but my local government did not abide by it. I took loans at a high-interest rate from my local trader to support my family during the crisis.

Such complexities of migration leave migrant labourers vulnerable and without any benefits from the government welfare schemes in either of the places and raises critical questions on their belongingness. The inability to prove belongingness to a place severely impedes their ability to access essential resources like food. It represents a grave ontological crisis for this already marginalised population for whom migration already emerged because of their livelihood crisis. Unemployment, poverty, inequality, and discrimination are all critical reasons people migrate from rural to urban areas, as is the desire for better resources such as employment opportunities, education, housing, and health care (Keshir and Bhagat, 2012). Hence, the pandemic exposed a double crisis for the migrants- the lack of a livelihood and then the loss of home. This also highlights the issue of citizenship entitlement.

As Vasavi (2021) argues, rural residents' citizenship has been severely compromised, and democratic deficits that mark their lives also constitute the very fabric of the political system. It would be pertinent to call for a fundamental shift in conceptualising the rural and agricultural economies and to recognise marginalised citizens' foundational rights and needs. The new orientation for rural and agrarian India policies must eschew the adverse integration of ruralities of India into a political and economic apparatus. They were expropriating, distorting, depleting, and disabling rural citizens and resources (Vasavi, 2021, p.22).

While many struggled to establish their identity after returning to their villages during the pandemic, many migrants did not even have the privilege of returning since they did not have any homes.

This reveals the hidden story of migration and its associated structural problems with the State and society, and how the system fails to recognise the technical and practical obstacles linked to rural society. As Prakash and Borker (2022) note, “The State emerges as a result of citizens’ consent to delegate power to be governed. In exchange, the citizen has a claim to various types of entitlements. Sen (1984) defines entitlements as “the set of alternative commodity bundles that a person in a society can command in a society using the totality of rights and opportunities that he or she faces (cited in Prakash and Borker 2022).”

Entitlements are simultaneously created, sustained, and preserved by the State, the market, and civil society domains. It is a claim against the State for failing to produce circumstances for preserving and protecting its citizens, such as food, shelter, health emergencies, protection, a decline in living and health conditions, and a deadly pandemic. Such as one of the respondents said:

There was a discussion that a relief scheme was introduced that would provide INR 1000 (USD 11) on a monthly basis to the returnee migrants. However, none of the respondents reported receiving any relief funds which implies irregularities in the implementation of the government schemes and how it put vulnerable communities such as the migrant labourers without any assistance to sustain their livelihoods during the pandemic.

As a result, they remain primarily marginalised and excluded due to ineffective strategies, unequal employment provisions, insufficient requirements, and the destruction of human rights (Paltashigh and Bhue, 2021). Between the two waves of COVID-19, which lasted from 2020 to 2021, the vulnerability of rural citizens to multiple disadvantages exposed the fault lines in the nation’s society, economy, and polity. Fear, migration, loss of employment, and illness related to COVID-19 rendered most rural citizens into ‘sacrificial subjects’ (Vasavi, 2021).

3.3 Stigma and discrimination faced by migrant labourers in their original place during COVID-19.

The Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman theorised that social stigma is an attribute or behaviour that socially discredits an individual under being classified as the “undesirable other” by society. There has been a long association of social stigma with illness. Through othering, social stigma segregates the healthy from the ill. It creates stereotypes and prejudice. This generates a “we versus them” dichotomy that helps establish a socio-economic hierarchy. During a social crisis (pandemics in this case), it can lead to discrimination and blame. Those who associate with the illness are discriminated against and socially isolated, violating their human rights. The unknown factors about illness create fear, myths, and rumours that heighten social stigma. It can negatively affect the treatment and prevention of the illness. Especially pandemics of infectious disease outbreaks have historically been linked with stigma and prejudice (Bhattacharya et al., 2020).

COVID-19 ushered in a new era of social inequality. In many parts of India, migrant labourers who returned to their hometowns faced various forms of discrimination (Agrawal, 2020). Even if not diagnosed with COVID-19, they could not utilise public spaces, ponds, or tube wells. Many non-migrants in the area began to regard them as untouchables. For a long time, even the migrants’ family members had to deal with social isolation in their town. Even after completing the necessary 14-day quarantine period, the migrant labourers claimed their families were picked out, sneered at, and harassed by the locals. According to Bhattacharya et al. (2020), the pandemic outbreak

has resulted in social stigma and discrimination against anyone with any contact with the disease. Social stigmatisation of persons infected with COVID-19, including their family members, has been widespread (ibid.).

Untouchability emerged in various forms against stranded migrant labourers by locals during the pandemic as the result of COVID-19 and multiple lockdowns. In many cases, they (returned migrants people) were not allowed to enter the community and use public assets such as ponds, marketplaces, taps, wells, light, hospital, grocery store, or vegetable shop employment, and so on. They faced various challenges and were mostly excluded from society's economic and sociocultural realms. They did not have access to government-mandated social protection and benefits, such as lawful rights and decent health care. This reflects the systematic stigmatisation of disease-carrying migratory labourers from lower castes and classes by upper dominant caste communities in a separate location, as well as direct social exclusion and discrimination of migrant labourers from lower castes and classes. Not only migrants were stopped, but also their family members, and their mobility was restricted.

A national lockdown commanded by COVID-19 was enforced to limit people's mobility and movement to rescue them and prevent the virus from spreading to others. The government's decision to impose a lockdown has become a significant issue for the city's homeless population, particularly migrant labourers who come to the city searching for work in the informal economy. They began returning home due to the lockdown, and they were eventually discriminated against as they entered their village homes for fear of bringing sickness from the city. They were prohibited from returning home and were barred from entering the communities. A member of a Dalit family from Muda village who was denied entry and forced to spend quarantine outside the hamlet recalled: 'The village had isolated us and given no support or facilities. We did not have access to food, shelter or even water and spent our quarantine period under trees.'

He further added that the rural dominant caste community made numerous accusations and used a variety of insult phrases against them. Furthermore, people threatened another village with a reprimand if caught in physical contact with the ostracised family. Like this migrant, many other migrants from the marginalised community in the village were socially excluded by the dominant community because, in the dominant community, people did not generally migrate for work. It is easy to follow all the rules and regulations which do not affect them.

In the field site, that OBCs are the dominant caste groups in some parts of Bundelkhand, particularly in this study village. They have a good amount of land and resources, and they are capitalistic farmers as well. So, in a few cases, no one from this community migrates for work besides for education and services. Therefore, it is easy for them to make such decisions and rules for the other communities in the village, particularly in a difficult time. This, again, requires severe engagement even when it comes to Panchayati schemes, local politics, and local politics and schemes for improving these communities and rural development in general. Dominant caste groups play significant roles and shape their pictures, which benefits them.

Furthermore, the higher caste hampered village movement, and they were the ones who benefited from every government project. Migrants received no assistance at all. The most surprising aspect was that the authorities made no significant efforts to stop it. According to the labourers, such lack

of support made them feel completely alone and Stateless in their own country. Stigma has been linked to increased vulnerability among persons who have been infected, making disease control and public health activities ineffective (Gilbert, 2016).

The experience of stigma only intensified when there was a COVID-19-induced mortality in the family. These families had been subjected to an “othering” experience that was brutal and unexplained, as well as abrupt and unexpected. The respondents experienced much pain and suffering due to stigma, with many claiming that the stigma was worse than the condition.

3.4 Migrant labourer and COVID-19

The countrywide lockdown to contain the spread of COVID-19 pushed labourer migrants into a vulnerable situation marked by homelessness, hunger, and unforeseen human miseries (SWAN, 2020). Since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected billions of employees’ occupational practices worldwide, causing harm to their health and employment. According to the 2011 Census data, India has 456 million migrants, accounting for 38% of the total population which as Iyer (2020) points out has increased far more than the average population in recent years. The global pandemic has significantly impacted the livelihood of the country’s migrant labourers. Around 40 million internal migrant workers in India have lost their jobs due to the lockdown which led to many of their relocation from urban to rural areas (World Bank, 2020). The nationwide lockdown, enacted to combat the rapid spread of COVID-19, has disrupted ordinary people’s lives. Mobility was restricted, and social distancing was enforced across the country. As a result, the transportation system and economic activities were severely disrupted (Paltashigh and Bhue, 2021). It is dangerous for migrant workers to return home knowing that no work is available. They can only stay much longer if they have work and a place to live at home. However, they came to the village with the idea of home as a secure place because home provides them with a sense of security. One of the respondents shared, ‘We cannot look anywhere for support if anything happens to us in the city. Although it is difficult to receive financial support from the community in our own villages, we are certain to at least receive moral support from them.’

In India, labourer migration has been caused by indebtedness and poverty (Akinola et al., 2014). Some forces causing internal migration are a lack of job opportunities, low labour costs in the area, and a lack of farmland. However, migrant labourers in cities live in unsanitary and dangerous situations and, hence, are vulnerable to shocks and crises (Agrawal, 2016; Dutta, 2020).

In the urban informal economy, roughly large chunk of workers (over 40 million being migrant workers (Paltashigh and Bhue, 2021) lost their jobs and income during the first phase of the lockdown, as was noted in many studies on migrant labourer, particularly those from rural areas working in urban and peri-urban areas, has paid the price for the lockdown. One of the migrant labourers recalled his experience:

I was working as a guard at the construction site for the last five years and went home only for 15 days a year. However, as the lockdown was imposed, I was fired by the Takedar (boss). Moreover, I did not just lose my job but also my place of shelter because I used to live 24 hours at the site. I was clueless about what to do in this dire, helpless situation. I came home barefoot as there were no transport facilities.

Srivastava (2020) notes that this loss of work and income directly threatens their ability to obtain

food and non-food essentials, particularly rented rooms. In several cases, they were not paid for previous work and lost housing at their destination.

3.5 Loss of livelihood

People from the upper classes, white-collar workers, public-sector employees, home-based entrepreneurs, and others who are economically affluent could spend their valuable time with family members while continuing to spend their regular salaries and savings. The concept of remote work also made it easier for these groups of people to continue having their jobs. However, daily wage labourers, farmers, small business owners, and migrant workers who rely on physical labour work suffered the most. According to a survey conducted by the Stranded Worker Action Network (SWAN), approximately 78% of these workers had not been paid, 82% had not received government rations during the lockdown, and 64% had less than INR.100 (USD one) with them (Yadav, 2020).

Most respondents mentioned that they did not receive government rations. According to the survey conducted by the Hindu Data Team, 70% of the surveyed migrant workers had less than INR 200 (USD two) (The Hindu Data Team, 2020). Migrant women are the most vulnerable groups, particularly during the pandemic. During the lockdown, over 17 million women lost their jobs (Rukmini, 2020). It is to be realised that migrants are not victims or victimisers but vulnerable. In an urban society where migrant labourers are denied access to social security schemes, health facilities, and other entitlements and are excluded in many cases. One of the respondents shared:

My daughter and I were working as maids (the work of cooking and cleaning) in the house of a Thekedaar (construction manager). As the lockdown got extended, we returned to our village. Mobility was restricted at the time so we had to walk for a week to get to our village. As we reached our home, the problems did not stop but rather worsened. The villagers stigmatised us for carrying the virus since we had travelled a long distance from the city. There was no support and we had to take loans from a microfinance at a high interest rate. I migrated to pay my debts but now I am in a situation that requires taking more loans just for my survival.

3.6 Livelihood strategies adopted during and post-lockdowns

a. Selling property

It has been observed in the field that those migrant labourers with property, such as jewellery, machines, homes, bikes, and so on, have sold it to sustain their family's livelihood during the pandemic. However, they had to sell them at a low price due to the urgent nature of the situation. A few migrants also chose to keep their property on lease for some time and not sell them. One of them said: 'I sold my gold and silver jewellery to a trader to feed my family and receive treatment for my ill husband. I also had to support my son and send him money since he was stranded without any job. My jewellery was the only piece of hope for me to save my family during this time of crisis.'

Therefore, it is believed that household things have always been the crisis savior at any time. But this also shows the inadequate support system of the State and the failure of the modern State to protect their citizens in times of deep crisis. Vasavi (2012) writes that the State has overlooked and marginalised rural society, economy and rural people. The traditional local coping mechanism of controlling crises has been eased by the project of modernisation and development. It is also

important to note that not all migrant labourers would have assets on standby to help them during such a crisis.

b. Local kinship network

Some migrant labourers also said that they received support in the form of food and money from their close relatives and kinship network during the COVID-19 crisis when they returned from the cities. Such kinship networks have been instrumental not just to provide tangible support such as food and money but also to act as a support system- listening to their grievances and providing advice. Giddens (1998) recognises kinship as an old coping mechanism for crises. However, due to rapid migration to the informal urban sector, it is getting eroded due to challenges in staying connected. This important crisis-coping mechanism system is disappearing, and we are searching for other supported systems in crisis times. It has affected the village social relationships of the village. These changes in rural society have ontological insecurity (Giddens, 1998; Jodhka, 2014), also a significant reason for the rural movements. One of the respondents shared:

It is not the first time that we have faced a crisis like this. There were other challenging crises in the past such as a drought. However, despite the circumstances, our village unit has always stayed together and supported one another. Kinship has always been our biggest source of support but it is drastically changing now due to migration.

c. Savings

Saving is always essential during critical times, such as during a pandemic. A few migrants mentioned that their savings from work- although small amounts- helped them survive in the village when the pandemic hit. The two migrant labourers said they had given some money to some of the people in the village last year and then taken it back during the COVID-19 crisis.

We provided money to small farmers since they also helped us when we were financially compromised. As COVID-19 hit, and we returned to our villages, we received the money back from these farmers which helped us sustain our lives for some time.

d. Migrating back to cities

Migrating back to the cities was the only alternative for migrant labourers who had run out of livelihood options in the village. Following the first wave, many migrants returned in quest of employment, putting their lives in danger since the village did not have any employment opportunities. The rural agrarian economy is in a hopeless condition for giving them employment in order to make a living. Otherwise, poverty and malnutrition will take their children's lives before the epidemic or virus. Their predicament has rendered them helpless, forcing them to relocate to the city for work. One of the respondents shared:

I do not own any land in the village and there is no means of employment for me here. These couple of months without any work have already been tough for me and my family. There is no certainty when the pandemic will be over so I have no other option but to migrate for work again.

So, the rural agrarian economy needs to provide employment, and there is no work at all after the harvesting season. Like the mentioned case, however, it is the case with most rural landless people in the village, mainly migrant labourers. Moreover, it was observed that in good numbers, the villagers are migrating back to cities for their livelihood.

e. Loans

Many migrant workers resorted to loans, either by mortgaging their assets or by developing social links, such as promising to work for them wherever they are required at standard rates, despite being charged a high-interest rate. Several also borrowed money from village members to fund their daily expenditures and keep their families afloat during the lockdown. One of the respondents shared:

I borrowed money from a market-based trader at a high-interest rate to sustain my family's livelihood. I immediately moved back to the city for work after the lockdown following the first wave of the pandemic was lifted since there were no employment opportunities in my village. There was no support from the State as well. My wife was supposed to receive monthly support from the government as part of an aid scheme for women during the pandemic which was announced by the central government. However, she does not have a bank account and could not receive the money. The lack of access to any amount of support that could have been received also worsened our condition.

This reflects the inefficiency of the local authorities in generating employment within villages and the helplessness of the landless rural poor people. Serious consideration must be given to the policy and welfare scheme, particularly in underdeveloped regions (Perspective, 2012).

f. Leasing of land

Some labourer households with tiny amounts of land and small and marginal peasants, in particular, have leased their land and relocated with their entire families. In the wake of the pandemic, this poses some critical questions about their survival and well-being. One of the respondents shared:

In such a grave situation, there was no work they could have done and survived. During the lockdown, nobody was ready to give money until and unless we did not keep something as the mortgage. Since we did not have any other household valuable things, we leased out our tiny amount of land and then took some money from them. Since it was lockdown, even grocery shops that provided goods on a pay-later basis stopped selling groceries without money.

So leasing out the tiny amount of land for this household was a way of surviving in the pandemic. Therefore, relocating to cities from the rural space was an imposed choice in post-lockdown time.

In May 2020, according to other observations and Statements, a poll by *Ekta Parishad*, a land and forest rights organisation, found that despite the risk of financial loss and unemployment during the months of lockdown, 95% of migrants preferred to return home. This reversal of the casual workforce outflow is a significant storyline for leading the country toward holistic growth and societal development rather than the current path of advancement, primarily directed toward metropolitan areas. We can provide economic opportunity and well-being where people are rather than 'driving' them into cities in pursuit of work by creating robust rural infrastructure in local areas.

While the administration announced several steps in late March 2020, including the relaxation of agricultural and fishery closure restrictions, there needs to be more delivery and implementation on the ground. According to media news, there have been delays in getting cash and other help to the poor, needy, and vulnerable. Several civil societies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) on the ground have worked hard to provide assistance such as medical facilities, foods, transportation feasible given the conditions (Bhavani et al., 2020).

Due to local politics, the State has not done much for them, and whatever it has done has failed to reach the village's poor residents. Elites from the upper castes and landlord families have long dominated local politics. They have taken advantage of all the State schemes that have benefited the local population, such as the PM *Garib Kalyan Yojana* or free rations and cash transfers into their accounts as migrant labourers in the village's fields as most of the respondents mentioned in the conversation.

Agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry, poultry and fishing, and allied activities were exempt from lockdown restrictions, according to recommendations issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs of the Government of India on April 15 2020, with the lockdown extended until May 3 2020. Markets, procurement, agri-input stores, and agro-processing centres were allowed to operate. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 (MGNREGA) project has also begun as farmers finished harvesting the Rabi crop and prepared for the Kharif season; the instructions needed to be effectively disseminated and followed (Bhavani, 2020).

Throughout history, all types of advances, modernisation, and technical advancement have been prejudiced and selective in their approach. The nation's policies and programmes are shaped by the elite class, who benefited from destroying natural resources, local culture, and indigenous knowledge and practice decades ago. The migration of workers was a critical challenge. Due to all improvements, when global crises occur, society must pay prices indiscriminately—especially by the poor and marginalised parts of any community, such as the type of migrant labourer in rural India.

Many social and economic inequalities already exist for migrants. Due to lower income, increased financial duties, and a rapid transition from urban to rural, the epidemic has mentally fatigued them. Poverty is to blame for much of the psychological stress that has put their lives into disarray. Due to a lack of knowledge, information, and testing facilities, populations are not safe from catching the disease (Vasuniya and Rajak, 2021).

Inevitably, the pandemic has damaged their social and economic lives. Minimum Support Price (MSP) prices have been steadily declining because of supply chain interruptions caused by transportation constraints and a lack of valuable ties to the organised market. Because of the poorly connected agriculture system, reverse migration strains the agricultural and associated sectors.

4. Conclusion

It was found in the conversation with the rural migrant labourers that the majority of them do not own land/property in their native village that can sustain them financially. Migrant labourers returning from 'Ridden cities' found themselves excluded within their home villages, where villagers prohibited the entry of such migrants into the villages owing to health risks posed by the returning migrants.

The stigma and threats pushed the migrants into an immediate exclusion and marginalisation in the village. The stigmatisation of rural citizens narrates a poignant story of how citizens (migrant labourers) became outsiders to their home places and in their own country. They do not have substantial material resources or financial infrastructures to provide for their family's survival in

the city. The uncertainty of working as a daily wage earner, having a hand-to-mouth existence in the city brings to the fore the dire reality of migrant labourer employment in India. The sudden imposition of the lockdown further amplified this precariousness of their livelihood. With economic activities suspended, vulnerability, and mobility restrictions, migrant labourers found it harder to sustain themselves in the city and returned to their home villages and families.

Previous savings, mortgages of expensive pieces of jewellery and land, and increased borrowing through social networks and moneylenders were the main sources of survival for migrant labourers in the village. Apart from this, other factors of support such as help from residents of the neighbourhood, family, kinship, patronage, and microfinance. In the second wave of lockdown, few migrants with ownership of government documents got PDS help to survive during the lockdown.

There is a deep interaction between village and city in today's time. Their interlinkages could be significantly felt during the pandemic. Policymakers need to think about generating local employment in the rural economy that can offer sufficient work and employment. Challenges pertaining to their lack of documents also hindered access to welfare scheme benefits. Hence, besides employment opportunities, there should be a robust mechanism to also ensure that rural residents are in ownership of crucial government documents.

Policy makers should remember that the rural population is a heterogeneous group, and needs to be dealt with from multiple perspectives. The migrant crisis is not simply a crisis of the pandemic but a crisis of the "social contract" with the State where the right to claim entitlement from the State is taken away from labourers.

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