HOMEWARD BOUND

The Epic March of the Migrants

Common Cause Team

The nationwide lockdown to prevent the spread of coronavirus underscored the unequal and excluded status of migrant workers. There has already been a surfeit of news reports and studies documenting how this vulnerable population has been dealt a cruel blow. However, we have curated a list of research-based and data-driven articles as additional reading material, offering multiple perspectives and a nuanced understanding of the crisis.

To be sure, these vulnerable workers have been hit hard. Many perished along with their dreams of a better life. According to the non-profit SaveLIFE Foundation (SLF), which works on improving road safety and emergency medical care across India, 198 migrant workers were killed during their commute back home, and they comprise 26.4% of the overall deaths during the lockdown (between March 25 – May 31, 2020).[1]

Those who managed to survive had hunger to contend with. There was food insecurity even when they returned to their origin states. Government data has revealed that only 13% of eight lakh metric tonnes of free food grains allocated for returning migrant workers under the Atmanirbhar Bharat package have actually reached migrants during May and June. This is apropos to the special allocation made by the Centre in May. Data shows that at least 26 states and UTs have lifted 100% of their allocation from the Centre but not one of them distributed full quantities to the beneficiaries in the last two months.[2]

Will the hardships of the neglected and underserved communities ever abate? Philip Alston, the UN's outgoing special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights has pointed out in a report that "many world leaders, economists, and pundits have enthusiastically promoted a self-congratulatory message, proclaiming progress against poverty to be "one of the greatest human achievements of our time," and characterising "the decline [in poverty]… to less than 10%, [as] a huge achievement."[3] **However, he contends that the success story airbrushes out the situation of hundreds of millions, often from groups disproportionately affected by poverty, including homeless people, pastoralists, migrant workers and many others.**[4]

Following is a selected list of article summaries for an overview of the humanitarian crisis. The links to the original articles are also provided below each summary.

'To Leave or Not to Leave? Lockdown, Migrant Workers, and Their Journeys Home'

The Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN), featuring volunteers from various civil society groups, academics and students enrolled in university education, released its third report on June 5, 2020. The study details the hunger, trauma and despair of migrant workers who have built our cities and kept them running. Amidst the lockdown-induced uncertainty, homelessness and dispossession, these are tales of acute deprivation. This report reveals that nearly four-fifth of migrant workers (out of 5,911) who called SWAN volunteers for help (a total of 821 distress calls were made) between May 15 and June 1, could not access rations provided by the government.

Stranded migrants faced similar levels of food distress during the second half of May as it existed during the first phase of the COVID-19 lockdown i.e. during March 25 to April

14. This happened despite the announcement of various schemes and relief measures/ packages by the Central and state governments, including the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY) and Atmanirbhar Bharat.

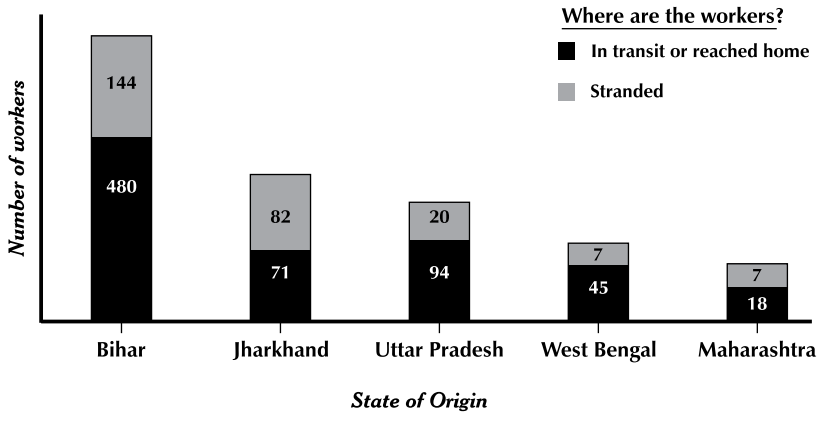
The latest report to a large extent covers the situation of migrants during the fourth phase of lockdown i.e. May 18 to May 31. It has been found by the report that almost three-fourth of people (i.e. 76%) who called SWAN volunteers since May 15 had less than ₹300 left with them, whereas 72% of people had less than ₹200 left with them. Almost 63% of people had less than ₹100 left with them.

Roughly 57% of the people sent in 'SOS' calls (representing 820 people) with no money or rations left or had skipped the previous meal. It indicates a sharp hike of seven percentage points in comparison to the second phase of lockdown.

The SWAN volunteers also collaborated with Gram Vaani (https://gramvaani.org/) -- a social tech company incubated out of IIT-Delhi -- to collect responses from 1,963 workers (to questions asked) using Interactive Voice Response (IVR) calls.

It was found during these IVR-based interactions that two-third (of 1,963) migrants were still stuck in the same place since the lockdown began, whereas only 33% were able to leave. **Figure-1**

Figure 1: Home States of the Stranded Workers



shows that Jharkhand has the highest proportion of migrant workers (i.e. nearly 54%) who reached home.

Of those who were stuck, 55% (out of 1,166) were eager to return to their homes/ native place immediately. When the same set of workers were asked the question at the end of April this year, then only one-third wanted to leave immediately after the second phase of lockdown ended.

Almost three-fourth i.e. 75% (of 1,124) of migrants who were still stuck in places they had migrated to for work earlier, did not have any employment due to the lockdown. So, there were concrete economic reasons behind migrants' willingness to return back to home/ native place, instead of mere 'sentiments.'

About 44% of those who left took buses and 39% managed to get on Shramik special trains. Nearly 11% travelled in trucks, lorries and other such modes of transport while 6% just trudged back home, risking their lives.

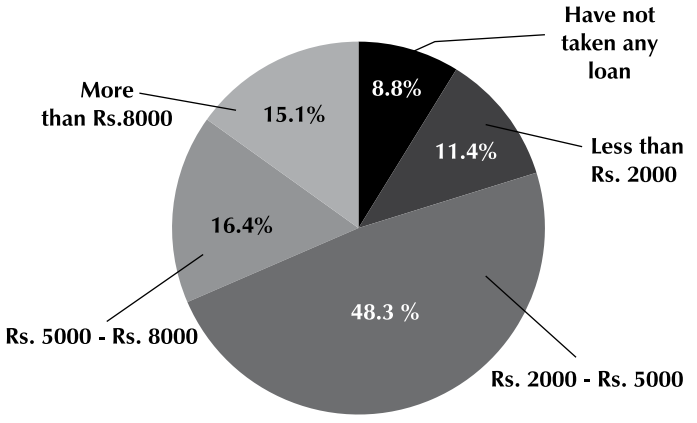
The Supreme Court had issued an interim order on May 28 that migrants will not have to pay for travel. However, that order came too late, according to the latest SWAN report. Over 85% of the migrant workers who returned home or were in transit had to incur expenses for their journey. Of those who travelled, more than two-thirds had to pay more than ₹1,000 for the journey.

Out of 1,559 migrant workers, over 90% had taken loans during the lockdown period and about 15% had borrowed more than ₹8,000 **(Figure-2)**.

The latest report also provides detailed testimonies of migrants, highlighting the range of travel-related problems they faced.

Report: https://bit.ly/3i33or6

Figure 2: Since the beginning of lockdown, how much have you taken as loan for rations, etc?



Percentage of responses (out of 1559)

'Azim Premji University COVID-19 Livelihoods Survey'

Azim Premji University, in association with 10 civil society organisations, conducted a survey in several major states to understand the impact of the lockdown on livelihoods and knowledge of and access to relief schemes. For the study, over 5000 telephonic interviews were conducted between April 13, 2020 and May 20, 2020.

Impact on livelihood

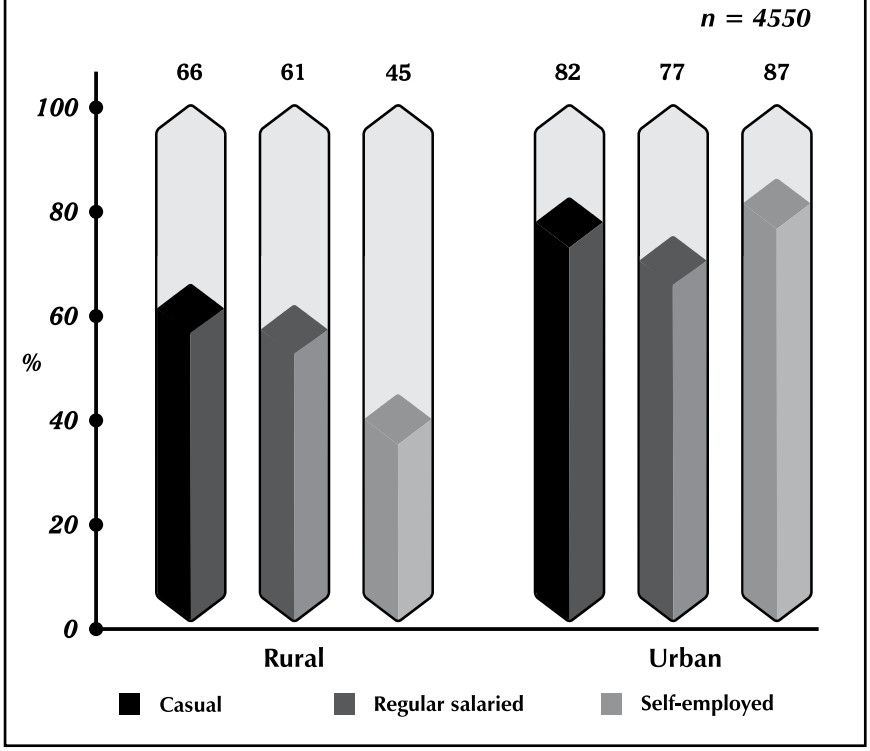
The study reveals that nearly two-thirds of urban and rural workers lost their employment during the COVID-19 lockdown. The self-employed in urban areas were the worst hit by the lockdown. In fact, 87% of them reported that they lost their employment. Regular salaried workers from urban areas were the least affected. In rural areas, casual workers, including daily wage workers, construction workers etc., were affected the most, with 66% losing their employment (**Figure-3**).

The percentage of female workers who lost their employment during the lockdown was higher in all categories (casual, regular-salaried and self-employed) and in both urban as well as rural areas.

Respondents have also reported a significant drop in earnings. Average earnings of casual workers from urban and rural areas dropped by 53% and 50% respectively. For self-employed workers from urban and rural areas, the average fall in earnings was 82% and 89% respectively.

More than half of the urban wage workers received either reduced or no salary during the lockdown period.

Figure 3: Workers who lost employment(%)



Impact on household

The study highlights the adverse impact of the lockdown on urban as well as rural households. However, data clearly indicates that the impact on urban households was much worse. Eight out of 10 urban households were forced to consume less food during the lockdown. Nine out of 10 urban households didn't have money to pay the next month's home rent and almost two third migrants from urban households reported that they didn't have enough money to buy even a week's worth of essentials (**Figure-4**).

Most urban (41%) and rural (33%) households had even taken loans from informal sources to meet their daily expenses.

Access to relief measures

Percentages of households who received relief measures like ration and cash transfer during the lockdown were significantly higher in the rural region.

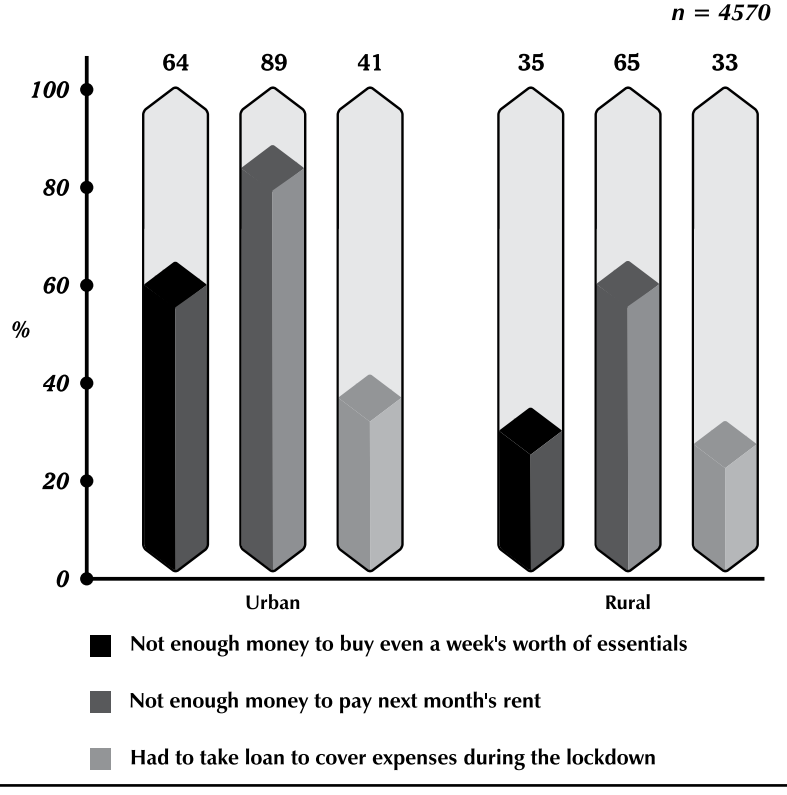
In order to help the poor during the COVID-19 lockdown, the government had on March 26, 2020 declared that an ex-gratia monthly payment of ₹500 would be given to women Jan Dhan account holders for the next three months, starting from April. Data from the survey indicates that nearly 41% and 24% of the Jan Dhan account holders from rural and urban regions respectively had received the cash transfers. However, among the 3535 workers surveyed, more than half said that they don't have Jan Dhan accounts.

Reach of direct cash transfer is weaker in urban areas as almost two third of urban migrants reported that they didn't receive a single cash transfer (**Figure-5**).

Report: https://bit.ly/30uz4hl

For additional reading: https://bit.ly/2VJA0Nh

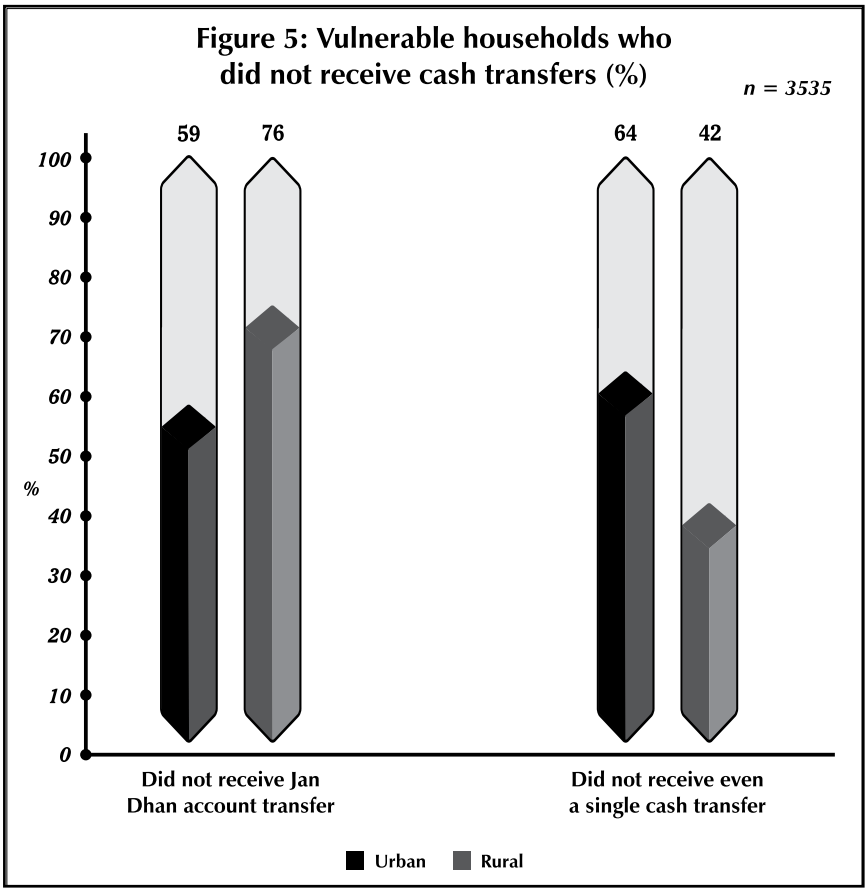
Figure 4: Households without enough money to buy even a week's worth of essentials (%)



'86% jump in MGNREGA demand in districts most migrants returned to'

In an article by Harikishan Sharma in *The Indian Express*, data analysis on the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) portal shows that the number of households availing MGNREGA work in districts most migrants returned to jumped to 89.83 lakh during May. This is a jump of 86.27% from 48.22 lakh in the same month last year.

As migrant workers wound their way back to their hometowns during the lockdown, work demand under the MGNREGA saw a dramatic swell in May in 116 districts across six states. Each of these districts received more than 25,000 returning migrants. Among these 116 are 32 districts from Bihar, 31 from Uttar Pradesh, 24 from Madhya



Pradesh, 22 from Rajasthan, three from Jharkhand and four from Odisha.

Earlier the government launched the Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyan in these districts to provide employment to those who have returned.

Out of the six states, Uttar Pradesh accounts for the highest jump of 313.81% in the number of households availing MGNREGA work. The number of households availing household work in the state's 31 districts went up to 27.78 lakh this May against 6.71 lakh in the same month last year. These 31 districts received a total of 17.47 lakh migrant workers.

Out of the 116 districts, nine — Ghazipur, Lakhimpur Kheri, Mirzapur, Deoria, Varanasi, Gorakhpur, Amethi, Rohtas and Maharajganj — saw a jump of over 500% in the number of households availing MGNREGA in May as compared to the same month last year. Similarly, a jump between 401% and 500% was registered in seven districts, 301-400% in six districts; 201-300% in 11 districts and 101-200% in 18 districts. The majority of districts registering the highest jump in demand of MGNREGA work are in Uttar Pradesh.

Only six districts out of these 116 — Saharsa, Bhagalpur, and Madhepura in Bihar, Karauli, Jodhpur and Hanumangarh in Rajasthan, and Giridih in Jharkhand — registered a decline in number of households availing MGNREGA work in May as compared to May last year.

The full-month data is available up to May, when the reverse migration process was not complete. These 116 districts have received a total of more than 63 lakh returning migrants.

Across the country, the number of households that availed work under MGNREGA this May reached the highest ever figure of 3.29 crore — the figure was 2.12 crore in the corresponding month last year. Till June 26, the figure has crossed 2.70 crore.

Read more at: https://bit.ly/3i9RvQ9

'The Covid-19 Lockdown in India: Gender and Caste Dimensions of the First Job Losses'

In a June 2020 Discussion Paper series on Economics published by Ashoka University, Indian economist and professor Ashwini Deshpande brings out the increased economic vulnerability of women and Dalits as a consequence of the Covid-19 lockdown.

The paper, *The Covid-19 Lockdown in India: Gender and Caste Dimensions of the First Job Losses* investigates the immediate after-effects of the lockdown on the employment status of individuals, particularly with reference to women, SCs, STs

and OBCs. Based on national-level panel data from Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE)'s Consumer Pyramid Household Survey (CPHS) database, this statistical analysis provides insights into how women, and Dalits in particular, have been disproportionately affected by the economic shutdown caused by one of the most stringent lockdowns in the world. As pointed out in the study, India had already reached the highest possible level of stringency by March 22, 2020, according to the Stringency Index developed by the Blavatnik School of Government at the University of Oxford.

Deshpande's analysis reveals the following findings:

1. The main effect of the lockdown was that in the first month (April 2020) individuals were 12.8 percentage points less likely to be employed, compared to the pre-lockdown period, which translates into a 33% reduction in likelihood of being employed. However, individuals who were already employed in the pre-lockdown period were 53% more likely to be employed in the post lockdown period compared to those who were not employed earlier.
2. In absolute numbers, due to the pre-existing gaps in labour force participation rates and employment, more men have lost jobs in the post-lockdown period compared to women. However, the pre-lockdown employment, which is the strongest predictor of post-lockdown employment, has a much stronger effect for men than for women. Women who were employed in the pre-lockdown phase were 23.5 percentage points less likely to be employed in the post-lockdown phase. Put simply, while the overall drop in male employment is greater than female, women who were employed pre-lockdown are less likely to be employed post-lockdown compared to men.
3. The lockdown also had a differential effect on caste groups. The employment of OBCs, SCs and STs declined by 6, 12.3 and 9.4 percentage points more respectively in the post-lockdown period compared to upper castes. Further, pre-lockdown employment made upper castes 12.8 percentage points more likely to retain employment compared to the base category of STs. Thus, as with women, SCs, STs and OBCs who were employed pre-lockdown are less likely to be employed post-lockdown compared to upper castes.

The above analysis brings out the precariousness of the employment status of vulnerable groups in the face of an unprecedented economic shutdown. As pointed out by the author, the pandemic has exposed the many fault lines that lay beneath the surface across the world.

Deshpande also contextualises the above findings with the ground situation of women and Dalit workers, many of whom are employed as frontline health workers (ASHA or Accredited Social Health Activists), manual scavengers, etc. In doing so, she touches upon the choice, or perhaps the lack of it, between unemployment on the one hand and the increased risk of exposure to the virus on the other.

Read more at: https://bit.ly/2COOTHt

(Endnotes)

1. Save Life Foundation, Road Crash Deaths During Covid Lockdown Tracker (June 2020) from https://bit.ly/31BaueU
2. Sharma, Harikrishan (2020, July 2). Only 13% of allocated free food grain handed out to returning migrant workers, reveals govt data. *The Indian Express*. Retrieved August 12,2020 from https://bit.ly/3ivmVjf
3. Human Rights Council, The parlous state of poverty eradication Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights (15 June–3 July 2020) from https://bit.ly/2DWmEH6
4. *Id.*