

Impact of COVID-19 Lockdown on Migrant Labourers from Kalahandi, Odisha





Alaya Behera

With wages in the agricultural sector ranging from a mere ₹100 to ₹120 and irregular employment, migration for work is a major coping strategy for the youth

Context

The lockdown by the Government of India that came into effect on March 25, 2020 to arrest the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic suddenly exposed the plight of internal migrant labourers to mainstream India. The migrant labourers in India's urban centres and their families, irrespective of whether they were at the destination or staying behind in the villages, were devastated by the sudden lockdown. India witnessed the largest exodus ever after the partition and several miserable deaths en route. Migration has been a key survival strategy for millions of rural poor from the Indian state of Odisha, with a poverty ratio of 32.6 per cent in 2011.¹

The districts of Kalahandi, Balangir and Koraput, commonly referred to as the KBK districts, which are among the most backward districts of the country, contribute significantly to the labour migration from the state.² Thuamul Rampur, with the largest proportion of Scheduled Tribes and the lowest level of literacy among the Community Development Blocks in Kalahandi district, has been witnessing large-scale, long-distance labour migration of young men, particularly to the southern Indian states.^{3,4} Gram Vikas, in partnership with the Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development (CMID)

conducted a rapid assessment following up a robust random sample of migrant workers from Thuamul Rampur to understand the initial impact of the lockdown on migrant labourers from Kalahandi whose remittances play a pivotal role in the local economy. This report summarises the key findings from the assessment.

Migration from Thuamul Rampur

With wages in the agricultural sector ranging from a mere ₹100 to ₹120 and infrequent availability of work, the youngsters in Thuamul Rampur do not have many options left other than migrating for work. A lot of them also migrate for short periods to cope with the financial shocks. Overall, one in every three households in Thuamul Rampur reported a history of labour migration in the past ten years. About 40 per cent of Scheduled Caste (SC) households as well as households belonging to Other Backward Communities (OBC), had at least one person having migrated for work in the past ten years. This was almost 30 per cent in the case of Adivasi (ST) households. Household migration rate in Thuamul Rampur during December 2019 - January 2020 was nearly 20 per cent and most people who migrated, had moved out of the state for work. The rates were

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lowest among the *Adivasi* householdsⁱ, whereas among the Other Backward Communities (OBCs) one in every four households had at least one migrant labourer during the period December 2019-January 2020.

Household Migration Rates, Thuamul Rampur: 2019-2020 (Per 100 households)

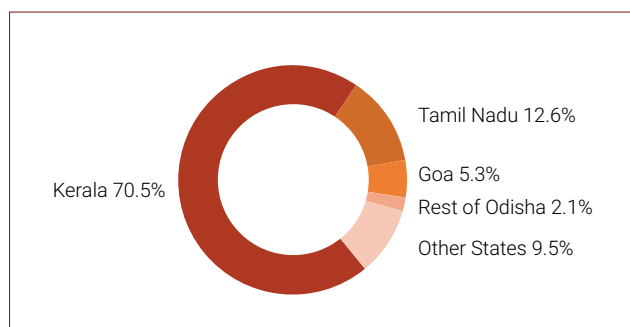
Migration Stream	SC	ST	OBC	Overall
Inter-District Migration	23.8	16.3	26.7	19.8
Inter-State Migration	20.5	16.3	25.0	18.6
Migration History in Last 10 Years	40.2	29.1	42.0	33.9
Sample Households (N)	122	258	60	440

Source: Gram Vikas-CMID Household Migration Survey 2019-20 (Provisional Estimates)ⁱⁱ

Major Destinations

Majority of the workers from Thuamul Rampur moved to southern Indian states for work. Seventy per cent of the migrant households of Thuamul Rampur had members who had moved to Kerala for work and about 12 per cent households had members working in Tamil Nadu. Goa was another preferred destination. Only about two per cent of the households had intra-state migrants and the destination was Bhubaneswar, the capital of Odisha. Most migrants were young single men with a median age of 22 years and with seven years of schooling although 20 per cent of the migrants were illiterate. Majority of the migrants were engaged in unskilled/semi-skilled labour either in the hotel industry or in construction.

Figure.1: Distribution of Migrant Workers from Thuamul Rampur by Destination 2019-20, N 95



Impact of Migration

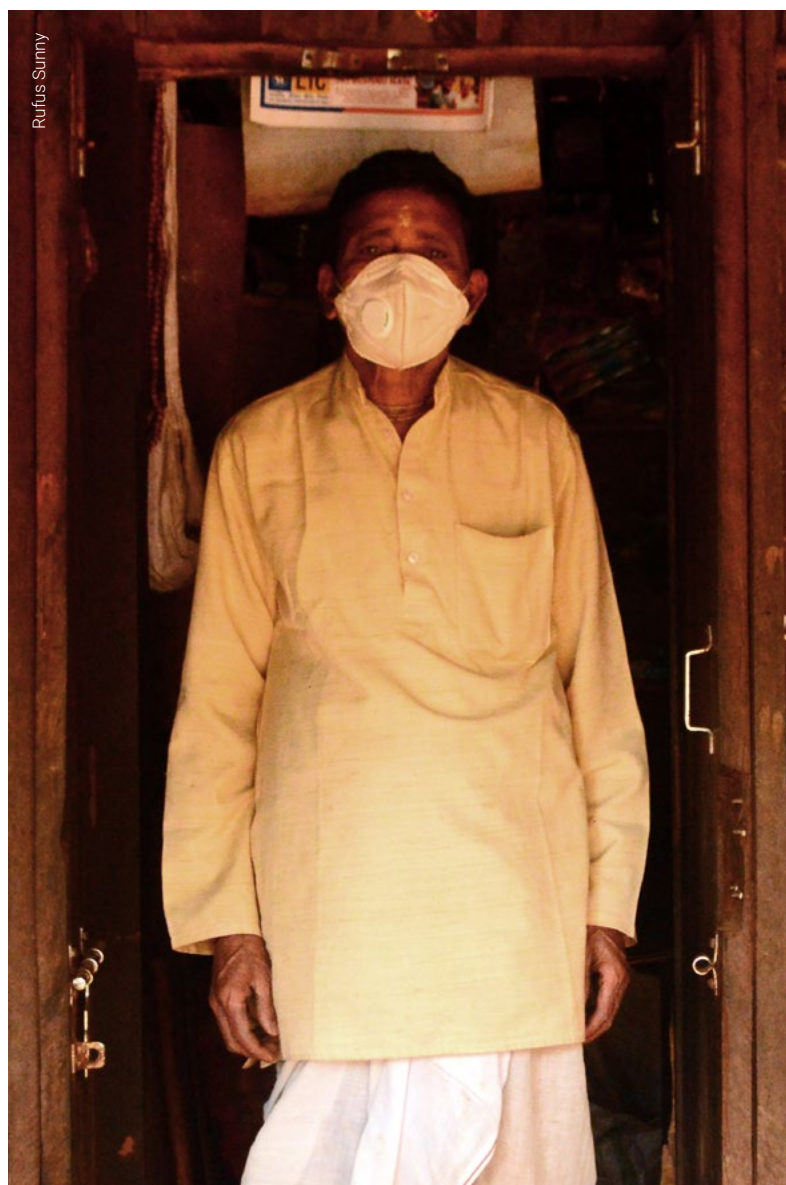
Thuamul Rampur has significantly gained from labour migration and the remittances. A modest estimate suggests that the block receives approximately ₹300 to ₹400 million annually as wages from migration which not only helps the migrant households but also boosts the entire village economies.⁵ The auto-rickshaws bought by enterprising migrant workers provide the much needed transport facilities between the villages. This has also provided employment to other youth in the villages, as drivers. Motorcycles bought by a large number of migrant households in remote villages also have substantially improved commuting facilities. Remittances have helped households hire labour for work in the farms, which was

otherwise impossible. It has also helped many migrant households build better houses, pay off debts, invest in small businesses and secure financial resources for marriages. The dowry paid also has gone up as a result of migration. The households with migrants are more likely to get credit from local financiers compared to households without migrants.

Methodology of the Rapid Assessment

Gram Vikas, with CMID, had conducted a survey in February 2020, among a representative random sample of 95 migrants from 440 households, across 22 villages selected from all the villages of Thuamul Rampur Community Development Block, pursuing a self-weighted design. All the migrant workers who were interviewed either through phone calls or face to face interviewsⁱⁱⁱ during February 2020, were followed up by the research team through phone calls during the period March 26 to April 6, 2020. The location of the migrant during lockdown was ascertained. The arrival details of those who were in the village were explored to understand the extent of their

iii Many were on a short visit to home at the time of the survey



i Predominantly due to the lack of resources and agency to migrate

ii Inter-District migration also includes Inter-State migration

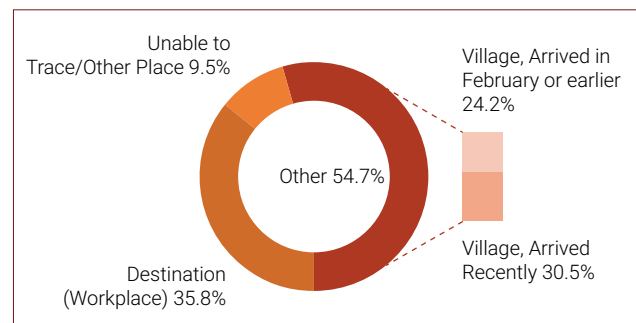


COVID. Being a rapid assessment, the findings from the study need to be interpreted in the context of its limitations. The data pertains to the initial days of the lockdown and the current situation of the migrants may have changed. The findings only give a glimpse of the initial impact. A lot of villages in Thuamul Rampur do not have mobile/telephone connectivity. Given the lockdown constraints, efforts were made to verify if the migrant whose phone was not reachable, had actually returned home. However, there is a chance that some of them who could not be traced may have already arrived home. This study did not cover migrants who moved with families, whose vulnerabilities are unique and compounded.⁶

Location during Lockdown

The rapid assessment revealed that over one-third of the workers continue to be at their destinations while most others are back in the village. The majority of the workers who returned, had arrived recently. Nearly half of them were already back in village for the Holi festival, by early February 2020 or before. About 10 per cent of the workers could not be contacted either directly or through their household members indicating their likelihood of being stranded at transit points on their way to the native place from the destination, prior to lockdown.

Figure.2: Distribution of Migrant Workers from Thuamul Rampur by Location during Lockdown, April 6, 2020, N 95



vulnerability and exposure of villages to potential infections. This was undertaken to ensure that necessary measures can be taken for the prevention of infections in the rural areas and also to facilitate early diagnosis and treatment. Migrants who were outside the village during the lockdown were enquired whether they had a place to stay and if they had access to at least two meals a day. They were also enquired if they had heard about Coronavirus /COVID and whether they knew about the symptoms of COVID and measures to prevent it. After the completion of the survey questions, the workers were briefed about the symptoms and preventive measures to protect themselves from

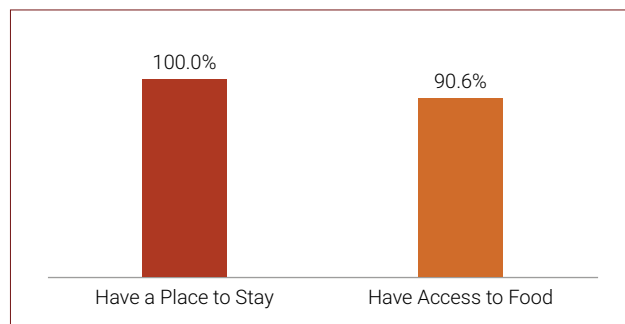


One of the major reasons for a large number of workers arriving immediately before the lockdown in Thumal Rampur is that, most of them worked in Kerala, predominantly as cooks or were engaged in other unskilled/semi-skilled jobs in hotels or restaurants. In India, hotels and restaurants in Kerala were one of the first to get affected by the COVID epidemic as people started avoiding visits to public places. Due to lack of business, a lot of them had closed down well before the lockdown, impacting the livelihood of these workers. They had no choice but return to their native villages. Several of them like Judhishtir Patel, with great difficulty, managed to reach home but had to forego his/her wage dues. Several villages, out of fear of COVID infection, have already started erecting barricades preventing others from entering the villages.

Access to Food and Shelter for Stranded Workers

All the workers stranded at various destinations reported that currently they had a place to stay. Also, among those who are at workplaces, 91 per cent get/had access to at least two meals a day. However, both the workers and their families back in the villages have been desperate. The workers at the destination were worried as they cannot afford to meet the consumption expenses and other expenses in the absence of income from work and were nervous about their dwindling cash and food stock. At many destinations they were getting food from civil society organisations or government agencies. The uncertainty about how long the lockdown would last was another cause of worry for those who were stranded at the destinations.

Figure.3: Percentage of Migrant Labourers Stranded at Destinations by Availability of Shelter and Food, April 6, 2020, N 32



Those who stay behind in the village, predominantly wives or aged parents of the migrant workers, were uncertain on when the migrant could return home. In the absence of remittances which sustain the household in the village, they were also worried about the resources slowly getting exhausted. Besides, several of the households have taken loans that they have to repay which is impossible without remittances.

Knowledge about COVID-19

All the workers at the destination had heard about the Coronavirus or COVID. However, most of them were totally ignorant about the symptoms of COVID or the preventive measures to be taken. While only less than 10 per cent of the workers knew the symptoms, slightly over 10 per cent had knowledge about at least two methods to prevent the infection.

Fleeing Empty-Handed

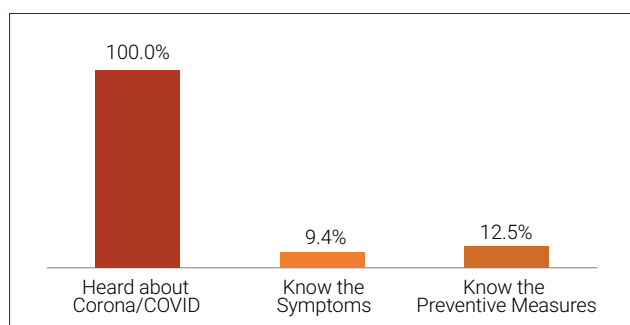
Judhishtir Patel from Maligaon village worked as a cook in a restaurant in central Kerala. As COVID cases were surfacing one by one, the restaurant was out of business. The employer suggested Judhishtir to return home as there were indications of a lockdown. Even Judhishtir was scared of COVID and wanted to go home. On March 14, 2020 he managed to take a train to Odisha, although his two months' salary of ₹30000 was not settled by the employer. Realising that his arrival might trigger panic among the villagers, with a couple of others who had returned, Judhishtir underwent a 14-day quarantine at a common facility in the village as advised by the local Anganwadi worker. He hopes to return to Kerala once the restaurant is back in business.



Unsettled, but Cannot Afford to Come Home

His wife and aged mother are desperate for Mohan Majhi's return from Kerala. They are finding it difficult to survive as Mohan is unable to send money home since he is out of work. A construction worker, Mohan cannot afford to return as the household has a loan to repay.

Figure.4: Percentage of Migrant Labourers Stranded at the Destination by Knowledge About COVID, April 6, 2020, N 32



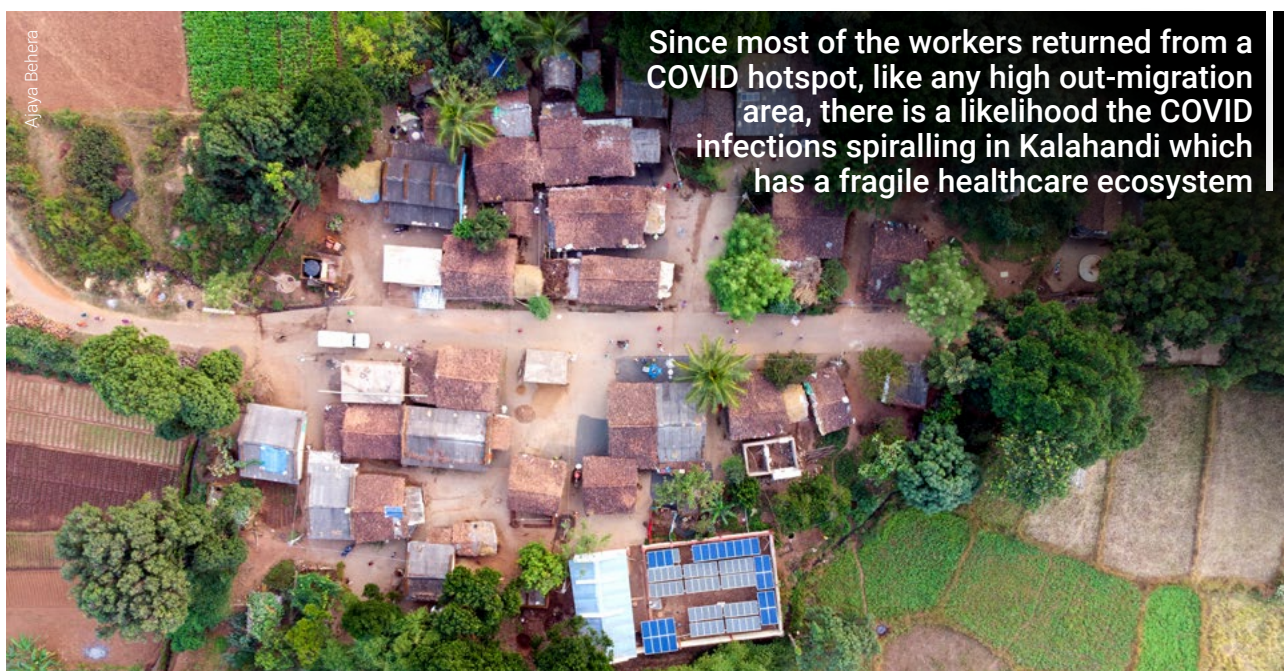
In the absence of a clear idea about the disease and preventive measures, the workers were anxious if they will be infected by the disease. As a result, a lot of them who

fear that they are going to die, are desperate to return home and be with their loved ones. At the same time, there were also others like Mohan Majhi, who felt that it is pointless to return home, as without work and money, survival is difficult.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic, subsequent lockdown and associated measures have catastrophic impact on the village economies of Kalahandi. However, the trajectory of impact cannot be predicted at this point. The Government of Odisha has extended the lockdown till the end of April and the Government of India also has plans for a staggered lockdown beyond April 14, 2020. This can exacerbate and further complicate the plight of the workers from Kalahandi who are stranded at workplaces or at transit points. Those

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at transit points would be more vulnerable given their limited network and agency to avail services at transit areas, compared to those at the destinations. Unlike in the rest of the country, most of the workers stranded at the workplace have better access to food and shelter since their destination is Kerala, where the state government is providing food/provisions and shelter for migrant workers in need, in a decentralised manner under the supervision of the Local Self-Governments. Reaching out to all the stranded workers through Helplines or through CSOs at the destinations/transit points, providing assurance to alleviate their psychological distress and connecting them to right resources to ensure continued availability of shelter as well as food, ensuring that their wages are paid by the employers and providing them with information and resources to protect them from COVID are important next steps. It is also important to address the distress of the members from the migrant households who stay behind in the villages.

Possibilities of cash transfers to workers at the destination may also be explored as it is less likely that these workers would be able to benefit from the measures announced by the Government of India or the destination states, given their profile and the nature of exclusion the inter-state migrant labourers experience at destinations. It will be almost impossible for the families in the villages to send money to the stranded workers during lockdown owing to financial constraints. Besides, sending money generally takes a day's travel to the block headquarters from remote rural areas and standing in long queues for hours. Cash transfers can support the stranded workers in meeting their essential requirements other than food and shelter. Workers who are at the destination may also be encouraged to stay back post lockdown if livelihood opportunities are available. This not only improves their income but also can revive the village economies through remittances. Besides,

this also reduces chances of disease transmission to the villages and increases the likelihood of the workers' access to quality healthcare if one contracts COVID, given that most of them are in Kerala state. However, this needs to be done in a non-coercive manner. Every worker who would like to return to the native place post lockdown should be supported in doing so. Measures need to be taken to ensure that such returnees are not discriminated or prevented from entering the villages but are provided safe and gender-sensitive quarantine facilities within or near the villages.

Since the majority of the workers are back home from a COVID hotspot, akin to any other high out-migration area, there is a likelihood of the COVID infections spiralling in the villages of Kalahandi which has a fragile healthcare ecosystem like the rest of rural India.⁷ This is strategic since most of them have returned from Kerala where the first COVID case was detected in India during January 2020. Hence, the thrust should be on prevention, early diagnosis and treatment. This calls for screening of migrant workers and their contacts actively for COVID symptoms, facilitating quarantine of those who are symptomatic and ensuring access to quality healthcare for those who require it. Given the remoteness of the villages, mobile medical units may be deployed for active COVID screening and providing healthcare services. Besides, measures are needed to ensure that every household has access to food, taking care of the nutritional requirements. The livelihood challenges of migrant households need to be addressed as an immediate priority. Facilitating the migrant workers' earliest re-entry to work either through the provision of employment opportunities at native places or connecting them to decent work opportunities at destinations through safe migration programmes can substantially alleviate acute poverty, indebtedness, malnutrition and starvation deaths in the villages.



Ajaya Behera



Endnotes

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Established in 1979, Gram Vikas is a rural development organisation with operations in Odisha and Jharkhand. Gram Vikas has been engaged in addressing issues related to livelihoods, health, water and sanitation, education and rights and entitlements of the rural communities in Thuamul Rampur since 1984. The Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development is an independent non-profit devoted to migration and inclusive development advocating for and promoting social inclusion of migrants in India. This research was conducted with partial financial assistance from the *Smart Community Interface* project implemented by Gram Vikas with Oracle and Charities Aid Foundation India. For more information and supporting villagers of Thuamul Rampur, please contact liby@gramvikas.org



📍 Plot No. 72/B, Forest Park,
Bhubaneswar - 751009, Odisha, India,
☎ +91-674-2596366 🌐 gramvikas.org
✉ info@gramvikas.org



Centre for Migration and
Inclusive Development.

📍 PMC.XX/1229, Near Town Hall, Perumbavoor,
Ernakulam District, Kerala, India-683542
☎ +91 484 2595256 🌐 cmid.org.in
✉ contact@cmid.org.in