

Road to Resilience

Post-Lockdown Coping Strategies of Migrant Labourers from Odisha





With a poverty ratio of 32.6%, migration for work has been a key survival strategy for millions of poor from rural Odisha

Context

Temporary migration for work 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.^{1,2} A host of factors such as fluctuating agricultural production, high poverty, low level of literacy and recurrent natural disasters result in distress migration from several regions of the state.³ In addition to groups of men and families, there is also significant migration of women and girls to various Indian states either as groups or as individuals.⁴ The coastal, northern, western and southern regions of Odisha have distinct migration patterns.⁵ The lockdown by the Government of India that came into effect on March 25, 2020 to arrest the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic devastated migrant labourers all over India. The 21-day lockdown was first extended up to May 3, 2020 and further to May 17, 2020 for now. The lockdown has already substantially impacted the migrant labourers from Odisha in other states and their families in the villages.⁶ Given the long lasting impact of the lockdown on the Indian economy and the lives of the labourers, their post-lockdown behaviours have a pivotal role in reviving the village economies of Odisha. In order to understand the coping strategies of migrant labourers from Odisha, Gram Vikas, in partnership with the Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development (CMID) conducted a rapid assessment among them in May 2020. This report summarises the key findings from the assessment.

Methodology

A total of 572 labourers who had migrated for work from 13 Community Development Blocks across Ganjam, Gajapati, Kalahandi, Kandhamal and Nayagarh districts of Odisha were contacted over phone by a trained research team who

speak Odia, after obtaining their phone numbers from their native households. The data collection took place during May 1-4, 2020. The team was able to complete interviews with only 392 among them. The workers were enquired about their current location, access to money at disposal, food and shelter. Information was also gathered about their plan after lockdown, if they were staying back at the destination after lockdown and whether they had a job and accommodation available. Those who reported that they wished to return to native places were enquired if they had registered at the portal by Government of Odisha to return to the native place. They were also enquired about their strategy to manage the household expenditure once they arrived home. Their plans to return to workplace were also explored.

All the workers were enquired about the most important support they currently needed and also about the minimum monthly income they expected at the native place if they were not to migrate. After the completion of the survey, the workers were briefed about the symptoms and preventive measures to protect themselves from COVID-19. Being a rapid telephonic assessment, the findings from the study need to be interpreted carefully. This is not a probabilistic sample and the findings cannot be generalised. Besides, one-third of the labourers who could not be contacted may be in a much more vulnerable condition than those who currently have access to electricity and money to recharge the mobile phones.

Profile of Labourers

The migrants were mostly young men with a median age of 23 years, three-fourths of them being less than 30 years old. There were also 28 women/girls among them. Over 90 per cent of the labourers belonged to socially disadvantaged



Ananya Behara

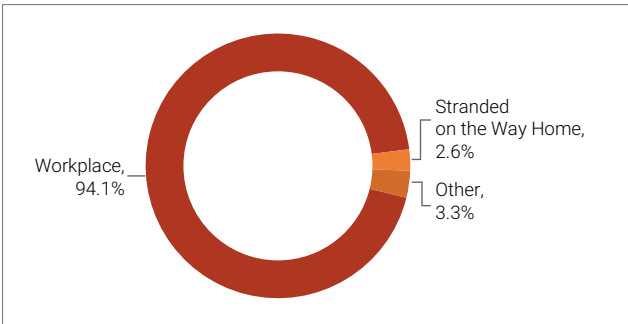
Majority of the migrant labourers from Odisha belonged to socially disadvantaged communities

communities. Slightly over half the of labourers were *Adivasis* and nearly 20 per cent belonged to Scheduled Castes. All those who were aware of the type of ration card their native households possessed, belonged to priority households (PHH). Also, 20 per cent labourers did not have a ration card at all. A little over 10 per cent of their native households were ultra-poor with the Antyodaya Anna Yojana ration cards. Over 80 per cent of the native households of the labourers possessed land and 11.2 per cent reported that they were currently in debt. Out of the migrant labourers who were currently indebted, one in every three had an outstanding debt of over ₹10000. Almost 70 per cent of the workers had smartphones and a quarter of them used basic phones. There were also about six per cent of the labourers who did not have a mobile phone.

Location during Lockdown

The labourers were enquired about their current location and destination state. Almost 95 per cent of the workers were still at their workplaces at respective destinations and nearly three per cent of the workers were stranded on the way back home. A few people also reported other destinations such as on the way to Odisha on a *Shramik* special train.

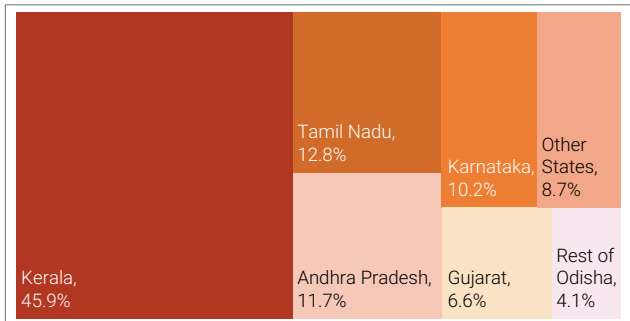
Figure.1: Percentage Distribution of Migrant Labourers by Current Location, N:392



Most labourers had migrated out of Odisha and four-fifths had moved to southern Indian states. Gujarat was the major destination outside southern India attracting about seven

per cent of the labourers and 4.5 per cent of the labourers had moved to destinations within Odisha. Nearly half of the labourers had migrated to Kerala for work whereas about ten per cent each had moved to Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Telangana and Maharashtra were the other interstate destinations. Three-fourths of the women had moved to Tamil Nadu, Karnataka or Kerala.

Figure.2: Percentage Distribution of Labourers by Destination State, N:392



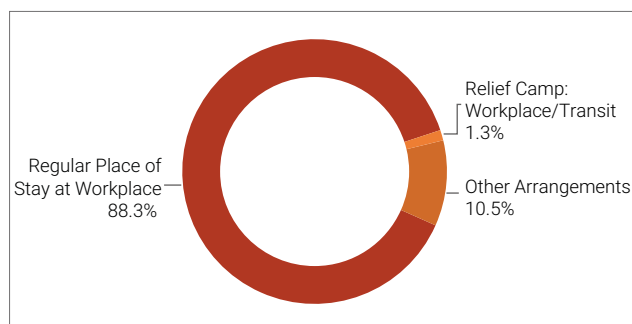
Aravind A.R.



Access to Food, Shelter and Money

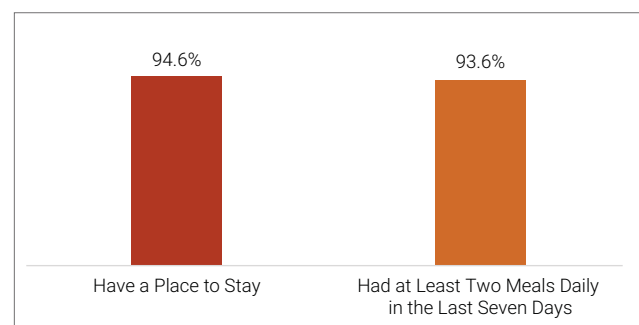
The labourers were enquired about their current living arrangements, access to food as well as income at disposal. Nearly 90 per cent of them were at their regular places of stay at the workplace and slightly over one per cent said they were at a relief camp either at the workplace or on the way home.

Figure.3: Distribution of Migrant Labourers by Type of Place of Stay, N: 392



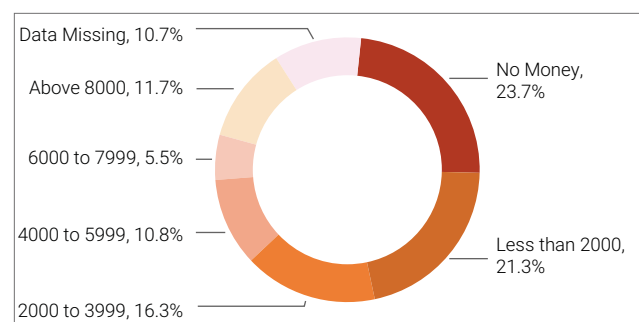
About five per cent of the workers reported that they currently did not have a shelter while the majority of the labourers had a room with a roof that accommodated them. The labourers were enquired, on how many days in the past seven days they failed to have at least two meals a day. About six per cent of the workers were unable to have at least two meals every day in the past seven days as they revealed (Figure.4).

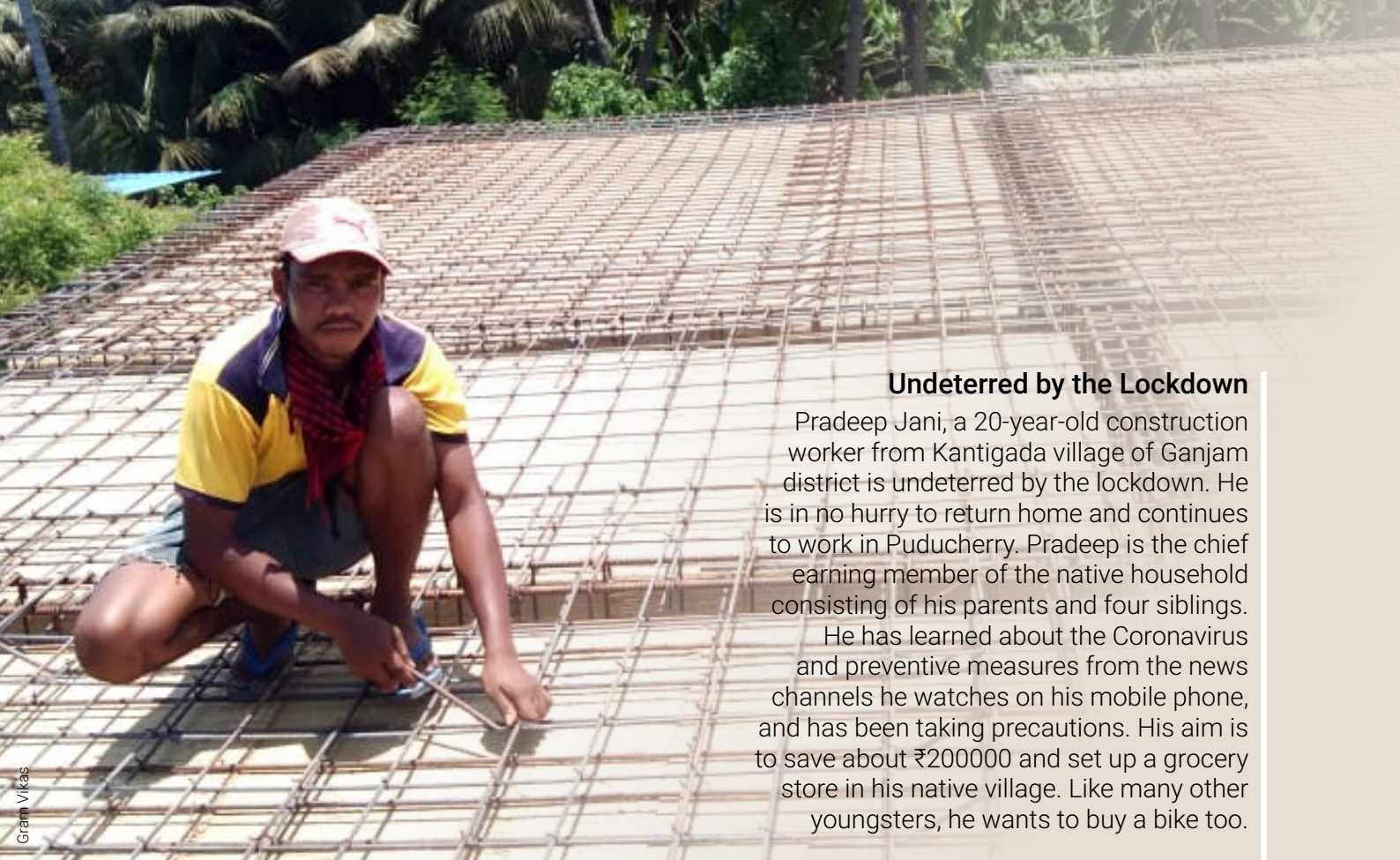
Figure.4: Percentage of Labourers by Current Access to Shelter and Food, May 4, 2020, N:392



Migrants were enquired how much money they had access to either at hand or in bank that they can currently use. Nearly a quarter of the labourers shared that they did not have any money at all left with them. Slightly over one-fifth reported that they had less than ₹2000 with them. About 16 per cent of the labourers had between ₹2000 and ₹4000 at their disposal. The median amount at disposal was ₹1900 only.

Figure.5: Distributon of Labourers by Money at Disposal (₹) , May 4, 2020, N: 392





Undeterred by the Lockdown

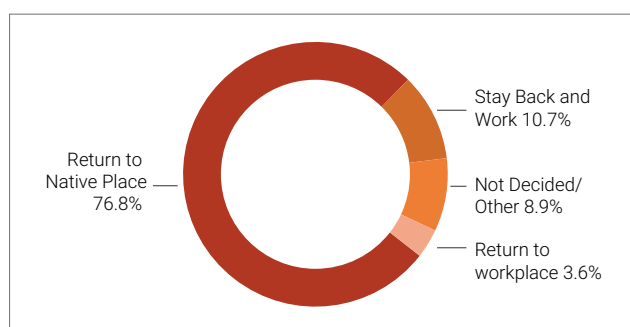
Pradeep Jani, a 20-year-old construction worker from Kantigada village of Ganjam district is undeterred by the lockdown. He is in no hurry to return home and continues to work in Puducherry. Pradeep is the chief earning member of the native household consisting of his parents and four siblings.

He has learned about the Coronavirus and preventive measures from the news channels he watches on his mobile phone, and has been taking precautions. His aim is to save about ₹200000 and set up a grocery store in his native village. Like many other youngsters, he wants to buy a bike too.

Post Lockdown Plans

All the labourers contacted were enquired about their plans once the lockdown is lifted. Every three out of four labourers planned to return to native places once the lockdown is over. About 11 per cent of the labourers informed that they planned to stay back and continue working. Nearly nine per cent of the workers revealed that they had not decided yet. Less than four per cent of them who were at a place other than their workplace, revealed that they planned to return to the workplace once the lockdown is over.

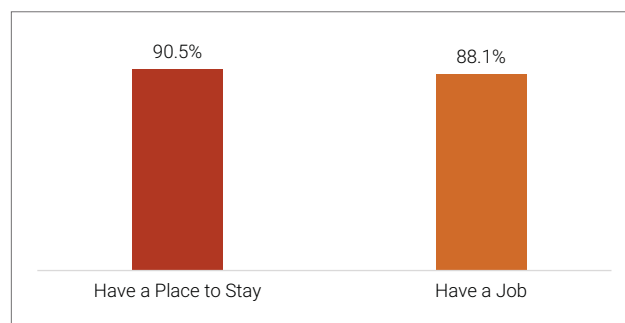
Figure.6: Distribution of Migrant Labourers by Plan after Lockdown, N: 392



Staying Back at the Destination

Those who planned to stay back and work were enquired about their access to a room with a roof and a job immediately after lockdown. About 90 per cent of the labourers who planned to stay back shared that they had access to a place where they can stay once the lockdown is eased. A similar proportion, about 88 per cent of the labourers informed that they already had a job that they can resume once the lockdown is over.

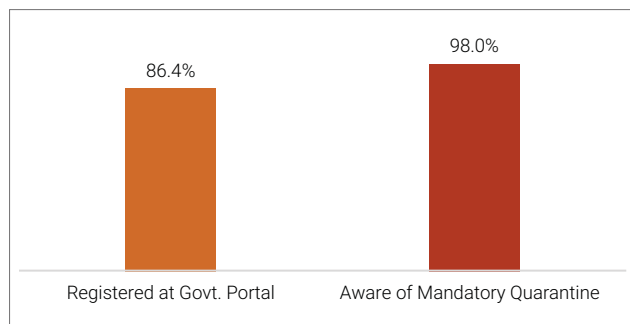
Figure.7: Percentage of Migrants Who Plan to Stay Back at Destination by Access to Shelter and Job after Lockdown, N 42



Returning to Native Place

To understand the level of preparation of the workers who had reported that they would return to their native places immediately after the lockdown, they were asked if they had registered at the portal that Government of Odisha has established for workers from Odisha who were stranded elsewhere in the country. They were also enquired if they knew that they would be quarantined once they arrived in Odisha. Most of the workers who planned to return to their native places had already registered at the Government portal. This was true even in the case of the workers who did not have a smartphone. However, there were a few people who were not aware about the need to register to return to Odisha. Almost all the labourers who planned to return, except about two per cent, were aware that they would be quarantined for 14 days before they could go home once they arrived in Odisha.

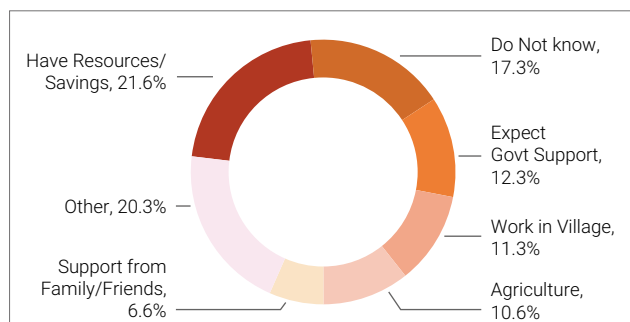
Figure.8: Percentage of Migrants Who Plan to Return by Select Characteristics, N 301



Coping strategies

The workers who reported that they desired to come back to native places were enquired about their plan to manage the expenses of the household after the lockdown since the remittances will stop as he/she returns. Slightly over 20 per cent of the workers shared that they had resources/savings with which they can manage the expenses post lockdown. However, a little less than one-fifth of the labourers said they had no idea how they will manage the expenses once they return. Slightly over 20 per cent workers hoped that they will be able to manage with some work in the village or through agriculture.

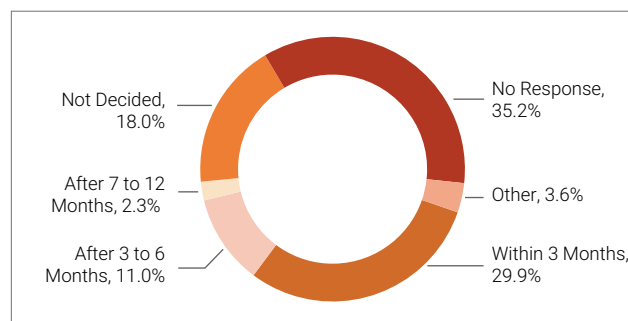
Figure.9: Distribution of Migrant Labourers Who Plan to Come Back to Native Place by Strategy to Cope with Expenses Post Lockdown, N: 301



Since both the village economies as well as the urban centres where they had worked needed the labourers to resume work, the plan of the labourers to return to their respective workplaces from home was explored. A little over one-third of the labourers did not respond to this and

18 per cent shared that they had not decided. About 30 per cent of the labourers shared that they planned to return within three months from the time they reached home. A little over 10 per cent planned to return after spending three to six months at the native place. The median duration before returning to the workplace was three months.

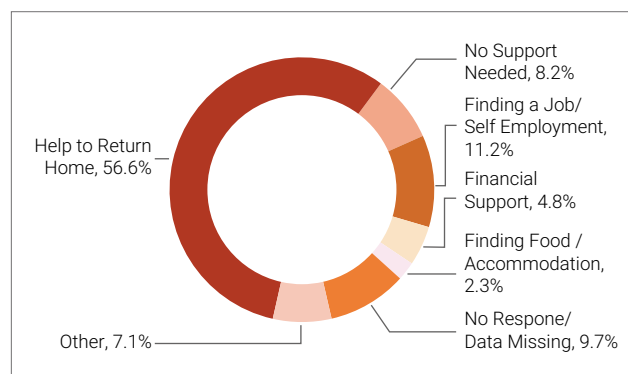
Figure.10: Distribution of Migrant Workers Who Plan to Come Back to Native Places by Their Current Plan to Return to Workplaces, 4 May, 2020, N:301



Support Required

All the labourers were enquired about the most important support they needed currently. Over half of them reported that they needed help to return home. About 11 per cent of the labourers needed support in finding a job/self-employment. Nearly five per cent of the migrants sought financial support and about two per cent sought support in obtaining food/accommodation, as their immediate need.

Figure.11: Distribution of Migrant Labourers by Immediate Support Needed, May 4, 2020, N: 392





Missing Home

Sanjay Swain worked in a factory in Kolar, Karnataka which has not been in operation for the past several weeks due to the lockdown.

Sanjay is managing with the money his father had sent from the village, borrowing from someone.

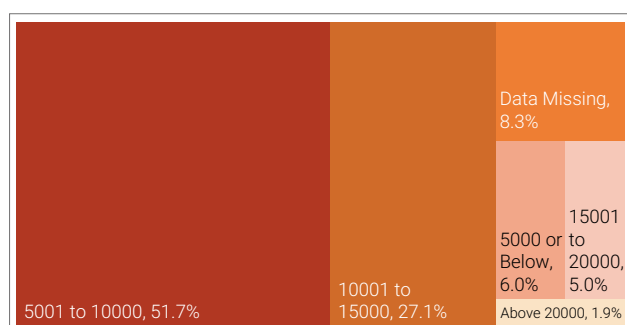
Although unsure of how he will manage the household expenses, Sanjay is desperate to go home.

If he gets a job that fetches at least ₹10000 in Odisha, he does not want to come back.

Income That Prevents Migration

In order to understand the income threshold that triggers migration, all the workers were enquired to suggest the average monthly income that could prevent their migration for work. A little over half of the labourers mentioned that a monthly income of ₹ 5001 to ₹10000 at the native place would help them live in village. Slightly over a quarter of labourers do not wish to migrate if they had a monthly income ranging between ₹10000 and ₹15000. Nearly five per cent expected an income between ₹15000 to ₹20000. The median monthly income that would prevent the workers from migrating to the cities was ₹10000.

Figure.12: Distribution of Migrant Labourers by Expected Monthly Income (₹) at Native Place That Would Prevent Their Migration, N:392



Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant lockdown have severely impacted migrant labourers from Odisha. It has not only thrown them out of job, but also pushed them into a long and winding road of uncertainty. While most of them continue to be at their usual workplaces with access to food and shelter, seven weeks of lockdown has made them financially and psychologically drained. As a result, most of them long to return to native places once the lockdown is lifted. However, given the order of the High Court of Odisha to ensure that all the migrants who are in queue to come

to the state needed to be tested negative for COVID-19 and the resultant litigations in the Supreme Court are likely to exacerbate the delay in the process of repatriation of the labourers who wish to return.

Only about one-fifth of those who planned to come back are able to manage their expenses on their own once they return. This points towards the fact that significant external interventions are needed to ensure that the households in rural Odisha that depend on migration for consumption do not experience a deepening of misery which might force them to liquidate their minimal assets or borrow from moneylenders. Such experience is likely to accentuate distress migration in the post-lockdown scenario. Although most of the labourers plan to return to their workplaces within three months from their arrival, their return depends on how COVID-19 unfolds in rural Odisha as well as in the destination states. Hence, Odisha may have to prepare a medium term strategy for safeguarding the households that depend on migration for work. In the context of the discussion above, the following recommendations are made towards alleviating the miseries of the stranded migrant workers and improving their resilience post lockdown:

Government of Odisha should take immediate measures to ensure cash transfers to the migrant labourers stranded elsewhere:

It must be noted that nearly a quarter of the workers stranded do not have any money and about seven per cent of the workers were unable to have two meals a day. Even if they wish to return to native places, the workers will have to buy train tickets on their own. Given their plight, similar to what other states with high outmigration have done, Government of Odisha should take immediate measures for cash transfers to the stranded migrant labourers. This can help alleviate the misery of the stranded workers in the interim and also enable them to buy tickets and board trains if they wish to return.



It is time Odisha reimagined rural development within the state rather than leaving the labourers to be exploited in other states

Provide telecounselling to stranded migrant workers through outbound calls and facilitate logical decision making:

The earliest re-entry of the migrant labourers into livelihoods is important in reviving the village economies through remittances. Hence, encourage the labourers to stay back and work if non-exploitative livelihood opportunities are available wherever they are. Providing telecounselling to stranded migrant workers through outbound calls and facilitating logical decisions than emotionally charged ones, appear to be strategic given the course of the COVID-19 epidemic in the country.

Reimagine rural development within the state rather than leaving the labourers to be exploited in other states:

It is time Odisha geared up its safe migration programme by providing livelihood alternatives beyond NREGA, that make migration for work a choice than a desperation. Majority of those who currently move to other states for work are likely to stay back and work locally if they are assured a livelihood opportunity that fetches a monthly income of around ₹10000. Given the manner in which some states including Odisha plan to suspend/modify select labour laws that safeguard the welfare of the workers, the state needs to reimagine rural development within the state rather than leaving the labourers vulnerable to exploitations elsewhere.

Prioritise households with migrants for lending: Migrant workers who return to their native villages and plan to find livelihood alternatives there should be encouraged to invest in medium and long-term livelihood options. Banks, other financial institutions and SHG networks should be motivated to offer customised loan products with limited collateral security, flexible repayment options and wherever possible, at lower rates of interest.

Focus on skill training/recognition beyond current initiatives:

Given the job market uncertainties, there is a high likelihood of wage cuts and fluctuating demand for unskilled/semi-skilled workers. The current break could be a good opportunity for the state to formulate a comprehensive skill development strategy. The ongoing PMKVY and DDU-GKY schemes, that focus on placement-linked skill training are not appropriate for these workers. Anecdotal evidence reveals that such programmes have negatively impacted the retention rates of girls in schools in Odisha. The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) needs to be given a fillip, to acknowledge the experiences gained by the migrant labourers in different sectors. This will benefit both those who wish to find job options locally and those who explore livelihood options in other states.

Source-destination collaborations with the southern states such as Kerala, can ensure the workers decent wages and better social protection:

In order to ensure the best wage rates and relatively less exploitative working arrangements for the interstate labourers, Government of Odisha may forge partnerships with destination states such as Kerala which offer the best wage rates in India and relatively better social security measures for migrant labourers.

Promote adaptive behaviours among migrant labourers so that their remittances substantially improve the resilience of the households:

Promote adaptive behaviours among migrant labourers so that their remittances support investments for livelihood diversification than consumption. This can substantially improve the resilience of the migrant households so that the majority of them are able to manage on their own during shocks. This is particularly strategic in the context of Odisha which is highly vulnerable to natural disasters.



Promote adaptive behaviours among migrant labourers so that their remittances substantially improve the resilience of the migrant households

Annexure

Percentage Distribution of Migrant Labourers by Select Characteristics

Variable/Category	Percentage	Variable/Category	Percentage
Sex		Other Backward Communities	13.5
Male	92.9	Other	11.0
Female	7.1	Type of Ration Card (Village)	
Landownership by Native Household		AAY Card	11.7
Have Land	80.9	Other Priority Card	40.8
No Land	17.6	Do Not Know	34.9
Age		No Ration Card	12.5
15 to 19	17.9	Debt Status of Native Household	
20 to 24	40.5	Have Debt	11.2
25 to 29	16.7	No Debt	87.2
30 to 34	8.7	Mobile Phone Owned by Labourer	
35 and Above	16.2	Smartphone	69.4
Median Age	23	Basic Phone	24.0
Ethnicity		No Phone	5.9
Scheduled Caste	19.1	Total	100
Scheduled Tribe	56.4	N	392



Endnotes

- 1 Government of India, 2018, SDG India Index Baseline Report 2018, NITI Aayog and the United Nations. Available at https://niti.gov.in/writereaddata/files/SDX_Index_India_21.12.2018.pdf
- 2 Gram Vikas and CMID, 2019, Challenges of Migrant Workers and Families Left Behind: Insights from Thuamul Rampur, India, Gram Vikas, Bhubaneswar. Available at <http://cmid.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Challenges-of-Migrants-and-Families-Left-Behind-Insights-from-Kalahandi-2019-Gram-Vikas-CMID.pdf>
- 3 Government of Odisha, 2020, Odisha Economic Survey 2019-2020, Planning and Convergence Department, Government of Odisha. Available at https://pc.odisha.gov.in/Download/Economic_Survey_2019-20.pdf
- 4 Centre for Women's Development Studies and London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, (Forthcoming), Women Migrating in India: Evidence from Odisha, CWDS, New Delhi.
- 5 Aajeevika Bureau, 2014, Studies, Stories and a Canvas: Seasonal Labour Migration and Migrant Workers from Odisha, Centre for Migration and Labour Solutions, Aajeevika Bureau, Udaipur. Available at <http://www.aajeevika.org/assets/pdfs/Odisha%20State%20Migration%20Profile%20Report.pdf>
- 6 Gram Vikas and CMID, 2020, Impact of COVID-19 Lockdown on Migrant Labourers from Kalahandi, Odisha, Gram Vikas. Available at <http://cmid.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/ImpactofCOVID-19.pdf>

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Gram Vikas is a community development organization working in Odisha and Jharkhand since 1979, with rural poor and tribal communities to help them lead a dignified life by building capacities, strengthening community institutions and mobilising resources, focusing on issues around water, livelihoods, sanitation and hygiene, habitat and technologies, education as well as mitigating the effects of natural disasters. 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. For more information, 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