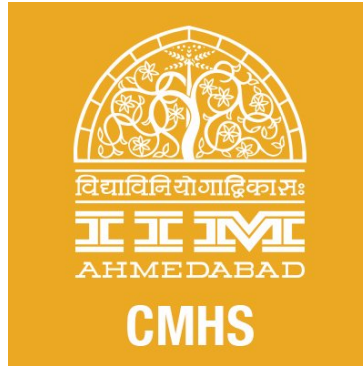# Health, Wealth and Dignity: Towards a New Social Contract For India's Internal Migrant Workers

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# Introduction

The extent of the global migration crisis can be gauged from the fact that one out of every 122 people is either displaced, seeking refugee or asylum in some other country. The report by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) cites that currently, there are around 60 million people who found themselves displaced, amongst which a significant chunk of 20 million remains classified as refugees.[2][1][2] The leading causes of international migration mainly stem from the geo-political instability, macro-vulnerabilities, and economic uncertainties surrounding a particular region, which acts as the donor-nation and, in contrast, the prospects of peace and economic stability of the countries which are primary targets of the migrants or refugees.

The situation of the migration crisis at an international level is quite staggering, and in a similar vein, the landscape of the within-country migration is non-trivial. Chinese New Year is marked by massive mobility as 277 million migrants travel to return home by boarding trains from different parts of the country, which is estimated to be around 25 per cent of the workforce. Mass migration from rural towns and villages to the modern cities and industrial towns has accompanied the growth of the Chinese economy.[3]. An interesting study on internal-migration published in the Economic Survey of India (2016-17) (endorsed by the Government of India)[5], analyzed census data and railway passenger traffic data published by the Ministry of Railways while deploying Cohort-based Metric and gravity model to yield an estimate of the nature and extent of the work-related migration carried out in India for a particular year. The findings of the report place the estimates of the within India migration to be somewhere around 5-9 million per annum, indicating that prior studies have drastically underestimated the extent of migration within India.[4].

Interestingly, the report also suggests that the migration was particularly pronounced for females and grew at nearly twice the rate of migration observed in the case of their male counterparts. The report concludes that India has seen an accelerated rate of labour migration especially after the year 1980 which some economists claim to be the starting phase of the liberalization and privatization of the Indian economy which was the marking event of the last decade of the twentieth century in the context of the growth story of India. This finding then clearly posits a hand-in-hand relationship between economic growth and labour mobility.[5]

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[1]texthttps://www.unhcr.org/558193896.html

[2]These numbers have been cumulated over several years and do not reflect a measure for a single year.

[3]Estimates of the National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China.

[4]https://www.indiabudget.gov.in/budget2017-2018/es2016-17/echap12.pdf

# A Brief Historical Account of the Internal Migration in India

A vital attempt at producing a historical account of migration within India is visible in the book "India Moving: A History of Migration"[6] authored by an economic-historian Chinmay Tumbe. In this book, authors draw his knowledge from a wide range of disciplines such as Economics, Anthropology, Archaeology, Demography, etc., to sketch an excellent picture of how internal and external migration has evolved in India pre-historic to present times. The book mentions the "largest and longest migration streams for work in documented history", which is labelled as "Great Indian Migration Wave". The marked phase is characterized by a "mass migration that is male-dominated, semi-permanent, and remittance yielding" and implications reflect toward the indication that " India's engagement with the global economy, rising from the late 19th century to the 1930s and then once again since economic liberalization was introduced in 1991". This 'wave' symbolizes that how migration can sometimes act as a device to uproot the evil and socially and economically repressive regimes, and other times it helps to solidify and perpetuate the already pervasive socio-economic inequities in the society. For instance, the author claims that the two most important factors in causing internal displacement and within-country migration were supposedly development-related activities and violence. They collectively account for the displacement of more than 40 million people in India since Independence.

Demographic characteristics also played its part in determining the nature of mobility, as documented in the book. Historically, more privileged classes have been mobile as the author states that "The lack of substantive spatial mobility continues to disempower the lowest-ranking castes of India." This follows from the mere absence of "informational-networks" coupled with the fact that lowest-ranking castes mostly lacked capital which are necessary elements behind any mobility.

In the contemporary period, internal migration in India is primarily driven by economic factors as inhabitants of small towns and villages are geared towards metropolitan cities and urban hot-spots in search of brighter economic prospects. The rise in educational levels that accompanies surge in technical and soft skills among people is shaping an emerging trend of outflow of labour from primitive occupations such as landless labourers, artisans, etc. to the relatively sophisticated jobs such as the construction sector, or mining, etc. More generally, the increase in mobility on account of the increased movement of people in search of a fortune or better economic prospects is the highlighting feature of the observed modern-day mobility.

# Inter-State dynamics of the mobility-patterns in India

Waldo Tobler (1970) famously characterized the gravity equation as the fundamental law of geography, according to which "everything is related to everything else, but near things are more related than distant things." The inter-state migration patterns emerging in the contemporary period seems to be in sync with the above the law. As is evident from the figure borrowed from the ESI(2016-17)[5], Delhi, Gujarat, and Maharashtra are the desired locations for the migrants, and they attract crowds from the states comprising of the Hindi heartland, such as Bihar, Madhya-Pradesh, and, Uttar-Pradesh. Similarly, West-Bengal attracts large swathes of migrants from neighbouring states such as Jharkhand, Bihar, and UP. The process underlying the dynamics observed here can be characterized by the feature such as accelerated mobility of the people towards the rapidly growing towns in different areas. Initially, people from the neighbouring areas in expectation to reap the awards of the booming economy of that region pave their ways following which gaps are filled by the migrants arriving from the far-distant towns/states enticed by the same expectations.
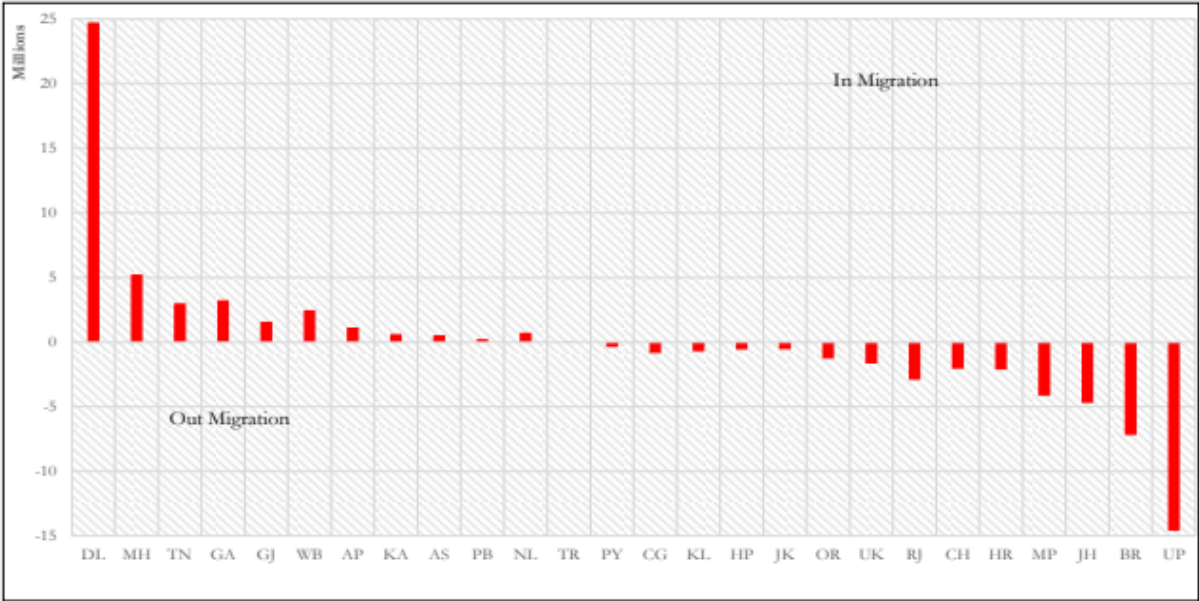


Figure 1: Inter-State Mobility Dynamics in India
**Source:** Economic Survey of India (2015-16)

More broadly, less affluent districts and states are a source of higher out-migration. In contrast, relatively wealthy states and metropolitan cities are the main attraction of large inward-mobility. One straightforward implication of this accelerated rate of labour mobility is that the gains from migrating to a more advanced city/state ultimately outweigh the costs and risks associated with such movements. This finding is strengthened during periods of high economic activity and growth as a multitude of opportunities could act as a catalyst to labour-mobility in the go-go time. However, when tables turn, and

the economy goes south, then the same displacement serves as a ready ingredient to turn a fruitful synergy between migrants and the flourishing region into an equally tragic and catastrophic event marking that period. That is primarily because of the lack of the proper health-care, food security for the migrants in their working states, and the complete absence of any social security benefits for them, emanating from the coordination failure between in-migration and the out-migration states concerning such provisions.

# From a Health crisis to a Migrant Crisis

COVID-19, a pandemic caused by the coronavirus, has brought several aspects ranging from social to economic dimensions of human life to a grinding halt. Given the nature and potential of the virus coupled with the fact that the emergence of a vaccine in a short period is a rare possibility, we are in a long haul. Social distancing, lockdowns, and travel bans have brought the entire economy to a standstill. To tackle the COVID-19, Government of India announced the first lockdown on 25th March as a preventive and precautionary matter to contain the spread of the virus. That entailed, an almost complete shutdown of all the economic and social activities, however, with subsequent versions of extended lockdowns, have seen further relaxations. On 30th June, centre withdrew the nation-wide lockdown and empowered states to administer their strategies concerning restricting movements. They also shared guidelines to safely and effectively kick-start the economy. Although, a fair amount of restrictions are still at a place in case of the severely inflicted states, nonetheless, movement of people across and within states has been allowed to a certain degree, with the added clause of following appropriate social distancing norms and other regulations. To see how public mobility in different spheres evolved and differed between pre and post lockdown needs very detailed data on compliance in different regions of the country. We exploit a novel data-set to see the compliance pre and post lockdown period in comparison to the mobility observed before the outbreak of COVID-19. In particular, we deploy the mobility data or anonymized location data aggregated at the country level and collected and collated by Google. For more information related to the data, please refer to the Google Mobility website[4]. An extra advantage of this data-set is that everything is defined relative to the baseline (pre-COVID) period, which enables us to assess the effectiveness of lockdowns in containing the movement of the people by comparing it pre-lockdown levels. The baseline value is calculated as a median value for a typical day in a week where data was collected for five such weeks (3 January-6 February).

Right after the emergence of the Janata-Curfew and Lockdown-1.0 following shortly, retail and recreation activities plummeted quite sharply as is evident in Fig 2. The retail and recreation activities include trends for mobility patterns for places like cafes, theme parks, malls, restaurants, etc. Some improvement is visible in the recovery of economic activity in this sphere, though, still far-away from the pre-COVID levels.
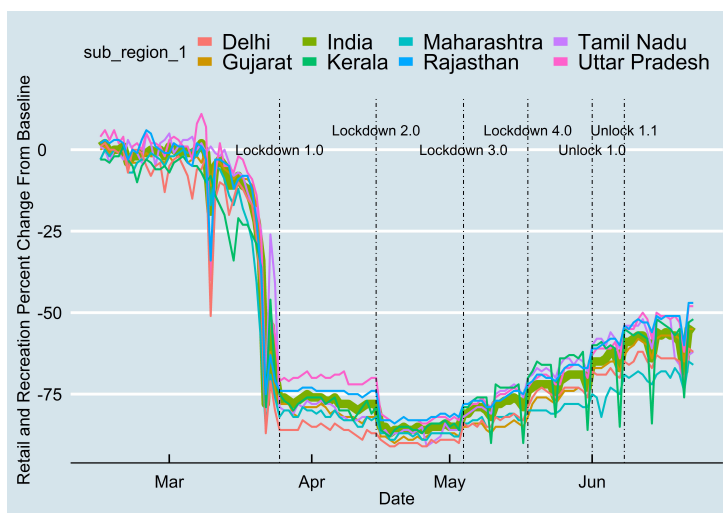
Figure 2: Evolution of retail and recreation mobility
**Source:** Data is extracted from the Google Mobility Reports.[4]

Another vital measure classifying the mobility patterns surrounding transactions related to essential items is displayed in Fig 3 and comprises of the movement patterns for places like drug-shops, pharmacies, food-warehouses, grocery-stores, and food-shops. In the beginning, the mobility for these activities plummeted following the announcement of the lockdown; however, an upward trend has pulled this activity to pre-COVID levels. The constant trend suggests that no stringent restrictions were imposed on the people to carry out the transactions in essential items. That is in complete contrast to mobility encompassing recreational and retail activities which are dictated by voluntary movement, whereas needs dictate the essentials such as medicines or regular groceries.
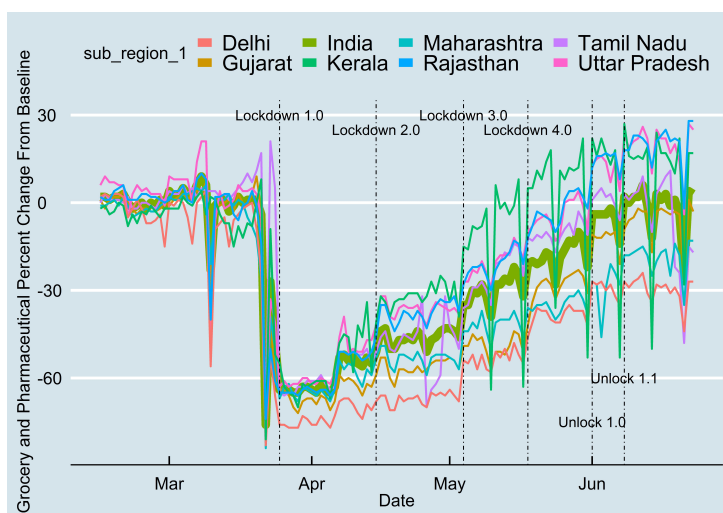


Figure 3: Evolution of grocery and pharmaceuticals mobility
**Source:** Data is extracted from the Google Mobility Reports.[4]

6

One of the main objectives of the lockdown was to restrict the movement of the masses to induce the breakdown of the human chain, which would have lead to a full-blown pandemic. In a populous and dense country like India, it is hard to estimate whether lockdown was able to achieve its objective, given that media is overwhelmed with a lot of heterogeneous reports, thus amounting to considerable uncertainty haunting policymakers. One of the quite useful estimates that can gauge the success or the failure of the lockdown introduced, albeit imperfectly is the measure of the work-related mobility. This measures the mobility in all the places that fall under the category of office spaces, or industrial areas, construction sites coupled with other work-related places.
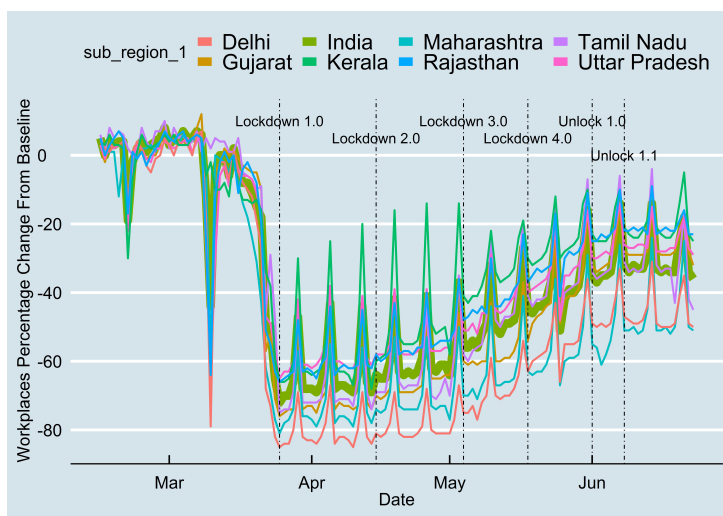


Figure 4: Evolution of workplace related mobility over the period of lock-down.
**Source:** Data is extracted from the Google Mobility Reports.[4]

If lockdown had been successful, then the mobility would have dramatically reduced in all such spaces. As indicated in the Fig 4, following lockdown 1.0, work-related mobility hit the rock-bottom, after which we observe a lot of short spikes, with an overall upward trend over the subsequent phases of the lockdown. With the lockdown scrapped, work-related mobility has returned to 65-70% in comparison to the benchmark levels. As production capacity and work-related mobility are quite correlated, the above finding might suggest that production is returning to its standard capacity. However, the picture drawn above is partial, and if we analyze it in conjunction with the finding of the retail mobility in Fig 2, then it leads to a more worrisome picture. With retail activity at an all-time low, demand is absent and coupled with the increasing supply would lead to disinflation, cutting the incentives of suppliers to expand their production to normal levels, thereby creating a vicious and downward spiral. This could have last-longing implications for the economy, especially with respect to the depletion of already scarce employment opportunities. Again loss in employment and hence income support would crush the aggregate demand further and bring the economy to the brink of collapse. All this has already pushed the most vulnerable sections of society near to catastrophic conditions,

where, millions of migrant workers with little or no social support have now lost their jobs and are stranded in out-stations, while their families also suffer from lost remittances.
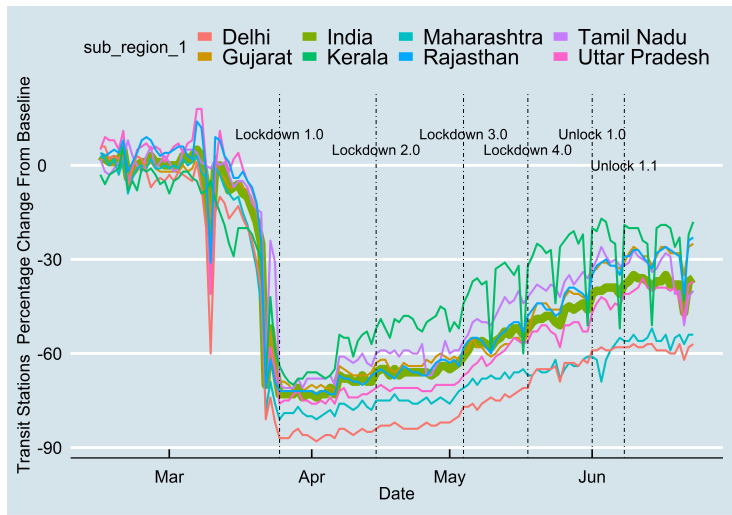


Figure 5: Evolution of mobility observed in the transit-stations
**Source:** Data is extracted from the Google Mobility Reports.[4]

Fig 5 depicts the despicable condition of transportation services in India since the lockdown. Almost, three months after the initial lockdown mobility in transit stations like railway-stations, bus-depots, metros, or airports is 50% below the benchmark levels. This shows the miserable road-journeys that many of the migrant workers have had to carry to reach their home-states, while others are still rambling and suffering at the places where they are stuck.
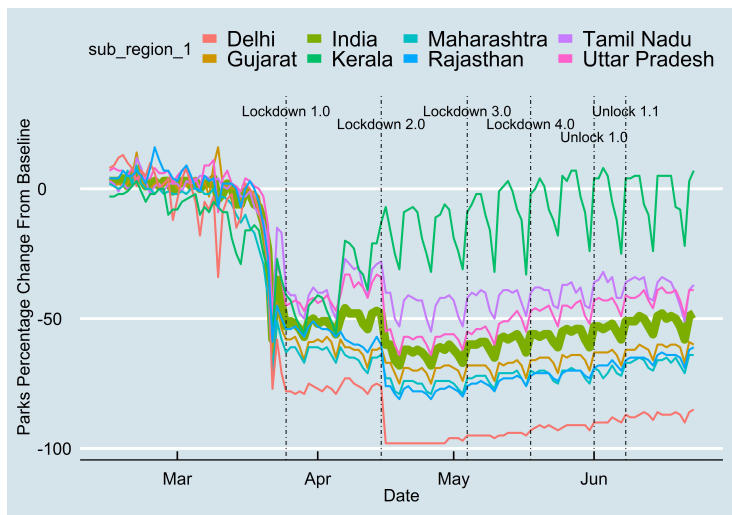


Figure 6: Mobility patterns in parks, public gardens, beaches, etc.
**Source:** Data is extracted from the Google Mobility Reports.[4]

Fig 6 displays an exciting pattern of heterogeneous responses of different states in tackling the pandemic. In particular, the figure shows the mobility patterns of people in places like parks, beaches and other outdoor leisure alternatives available to them. A key finding that draws attention is that the Kerala model has stood-out in opening up their public spaces after successfully battling the virus in such a short interval, and other states are still grappling with the virus and leaving traces of an overall failed strategy and dismal performance. Of course, Kerala draws from its rich experience in battling health outbreaks which accompany its remarkable health infrastructure. Other states should follow the lead of the Kerala and design and devise their strategies on the model laid out by this model state.

To test if all the results shown previously does not appear by random chance or are driven by some factor other than the lockdown, we also check the mobility patterns in the residential spaces which ideally should have surged during the lockdown, and at worst stayed the same. Indeed, Fig 7 clearly shows that residence mobility dramatically rose after the first-phase of lockdown in comparison to the benchmark levels. Furthermore, it is gradually converging to the normal levels as we are unshackling the economy and social movement.
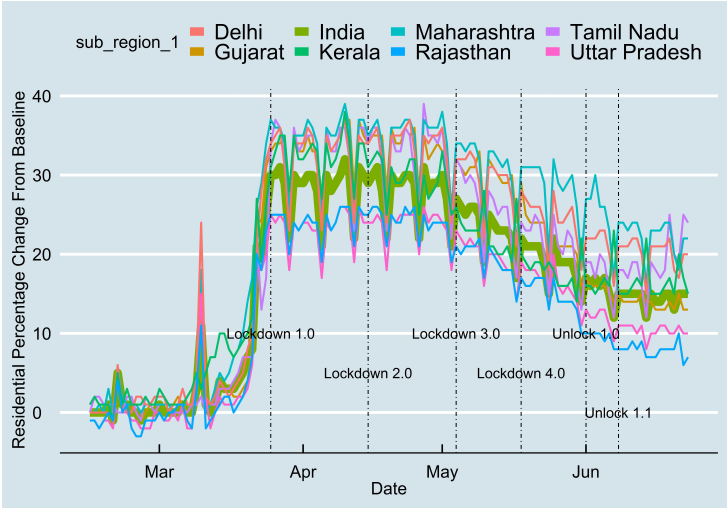


Figure 7: Patterns emerging in residence related mobility
**Source:** Data is extracted from the Google Mobility Reports.[4]

# Rapid Rural Community Response Household Survey

A household-level survey was conducted by the Srijan Foundation to measure the welfare of the migrant workers during the period of lock-down. The title of the survey is *Rapid Rural Community Response to COVID-19 Household survey*[3], and this was carried out for sixty-eight districts belonging to nine different states. One hundred eighteen blocks

were selected for the survey, and 100 participants were selected from five villages belonging to each block. The time-period of this survey ranges from 15th-23rd May 2020. Even though the findings of the survey are not based on a representative sample for the entire country, nonetheless, the survey quite nicely depicts the main challenges and difficulties faced by the households belonging to rural India. One added advantage of this analysis is that the findings are categorized based on migrant and non-migrant households, which helps us to draw from their findings and complement our analysis of the situation of the migrant workers and their families during the coronavirus crisis. The distribution of the state-wise sample is shown in Fig 8. Out of the total sample, 57.2% were females; 91% belonged to reserve category (SC+ST+OBC); 3% were religious minorities; 52% individuals belonged to small-size households (2-5 members), and 58% of them were wage labourers in either agriculture or non-agriculture sector. That shows that the design of the survey was meant to capture the living conditions for the most vulnerable group of people.
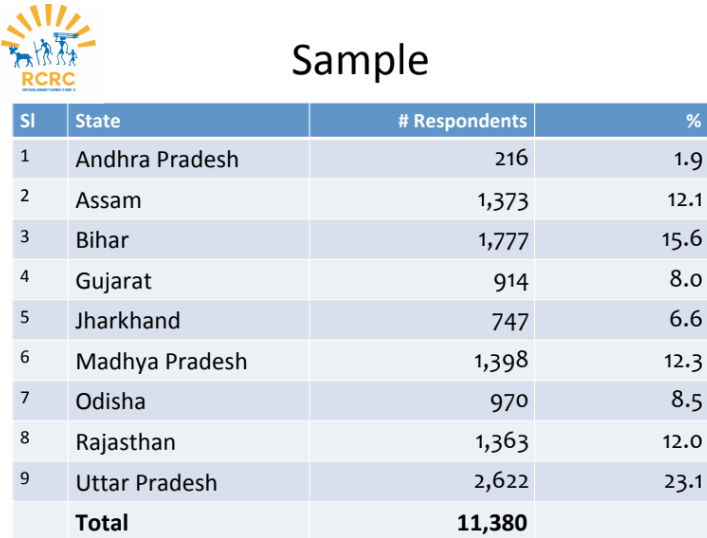


| Sl | State | # Respondents | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Andhra Pradesh | 216 | 1.9 |
| 2 | Assam | 1,373 | 12.1 |
| 3 | Bihar | 1,777 | 15.6 |
| 4 | Gujarat | 914 | 8.0 |
| 5 | Jharkhand | 747 | 6.6 |
| 6 | Madhya Pradesh | 1,398 | 12.3 |
| 7 | Odisha | 970 | 8.5 |
| 8 | Rajasthan | 1,363 | 12.0 |
| 9 | Uttar Pradesh | 2,622 | 23.1 |
| | **Total** | **11,380** | |

Figure 8: State-wise distribution of the sample
**Source:** RCRC Household survey,Srijan Foundation[3]


One of the stark findings of this survey is that the most backward states like U.P., and Bihar were the ones with the lowest proportion of people holding an MGNREGA job card. In contrast, around 61% of overall sampled individuals across all states had access to the job card. The picture remains gloomy even if we restrict our attention to the migrant workers family, as both of these states had the lowest proportion of migrant families having access to the MGNREGA job cards. The distribution of the state-wise migrant families is displayed in Fig 9, with a typical pattern that most of the poor states are the primary source of migrant workers.

**Migration among the respondent households**

| State | Total | Migrants | Migrants in % per the total hh |
|---|---|---|---|
| Andhra Pradesh | 216 | 31 | 14.4 |
| Assam | 1,373 | 79 | 5.8 |
| Bihar | 1,777 | 849 | 47.8 |
| Gujarat | 914 | 226 | 24.7 |
| Jharkhand | 747 | 365 | 48.9 |
| Madhya Pradesh | 1,398 | 766 | 54.8 |
| Odisha | 970 | 364 | 37.5 |
| Rajasthan | 1,363 | 560 | 41.1 |
| Uttar Pradesh | 2,622 | 948 | 36.2 |
| Total | 11,380 | 4,188 | 36.8 |

Migrants: OBC (32%), ST (32%), SC (25%), General (9%), and Minority (3%)

Figure 9: State-wise distribution of sampled migrant families
**Source:** RCRC Household survey,Srijan Foundation[3]

The finding can also aid the above evidence that most of the people emigrate outside of their state with the hope of better economic prospects and social security. That shows up in the survey responses as well, where the most fundamental cause of migration is the complete absence of economic opportunities in their native villages: Fig 10.

## State of Migrant Workers

In this section, we would briefly provide the circumstances and the conditions of the migrant workers during the lockdown period supported by the evidence documented by the survey.For the ease of navigation, we have divided the findings into three categories:

### Income and Livelihood

The significant proportion of the surveyed migrant workers were either daily-wage labourers or mainly self-employed, and notably both the categories fall under the informal economy: Fig 11. This figure illustrates the point that we have been emphasizing quite a lot, that by the nature of their occupation, migrant workers are most susceptible to lose their income and livelihood, if and when, an economy suffers from any crisis, and are exceedingly vulnerable if a pandemic fuels the crisis.
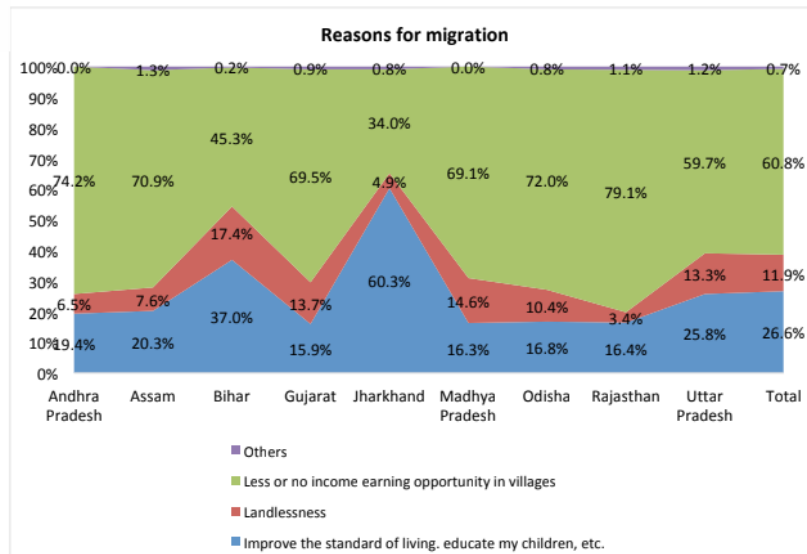
11

Figure 10: Main Reasons for Migration
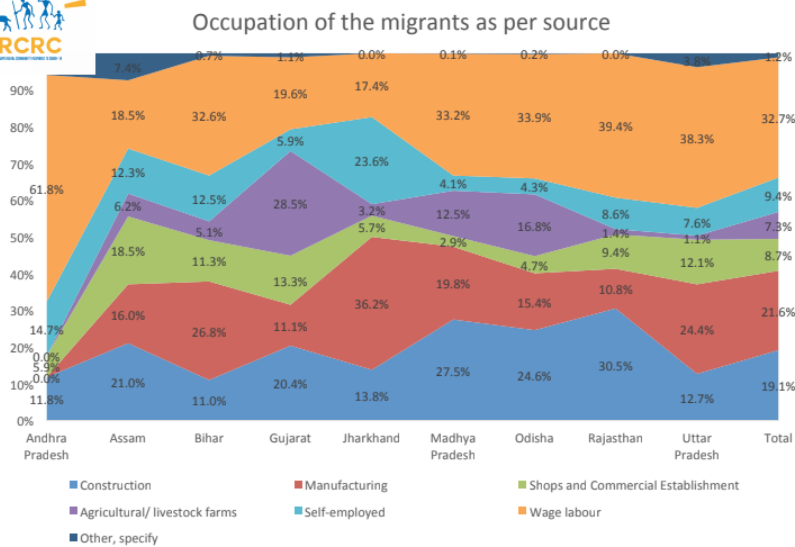**Source:** RCRC Household survey, Srijan Foundation[3]



Figure 11: Occupation of the migrants
**Source:** RCRC Household survey, Srijan Foundation[3]

Migrants walked for several thousand miles and have had to painstakingly take arduous journeys to their way back home, however, after reaching back they were burdened with the same concerns for which they had to emigrate to cities in the first place. In par-

ticular, out of all surveyed migrant households, those who were able to reach their homes found themselves with almost none or very few employment or economic opportunities back at their place Fig 12. This coupled with the earlier finding that most backward regions are least likely to provide ample opportunities in terms of employment guarantees in public-funded programs like MGNREGA, straightaway leads to the starvation and impoverishment possibilities for the migrant families.
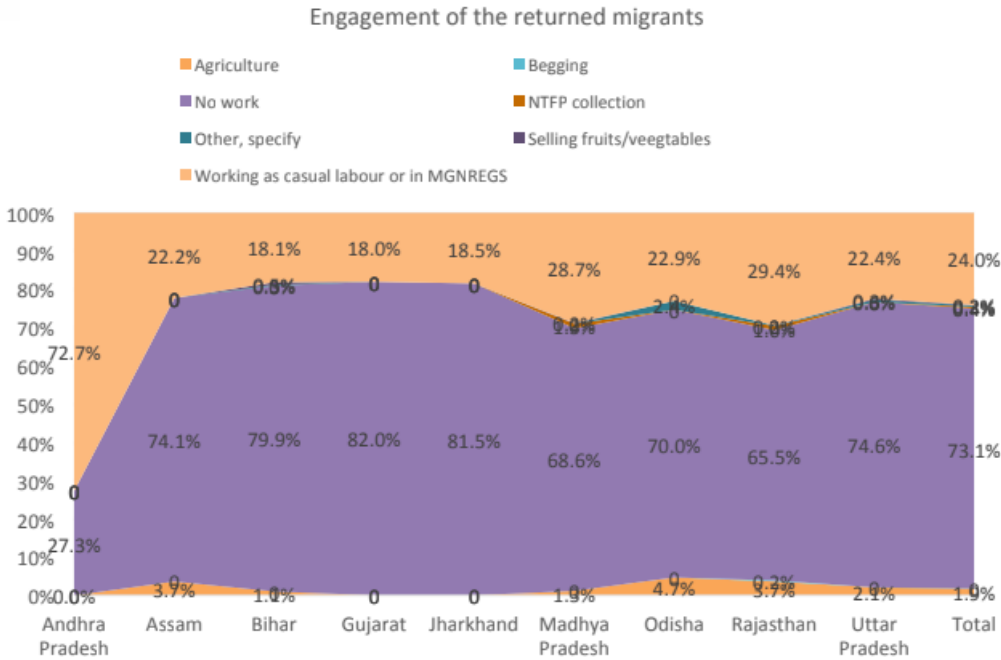


Figure 12: Employment opportunities to migrant workers upon returning.
**Source:** RCRC Household survey, Srijan Foundation[3]

The above finding shows that the treatment migrant workers are subjected to both at their work and native states. In any situation of crisis, they have to revert to their home-states due to the informal nature of work accompanying zero social security, food security, or any health-care benefits; however, upon returning to their native states, the ugly realities of economic backwardness and lack of opportunities pushes them to try their luck in the big cities again. This fact is illustrated in the Fig 13, as at least two-thirds of the migrants wished to return to the cities across all states.
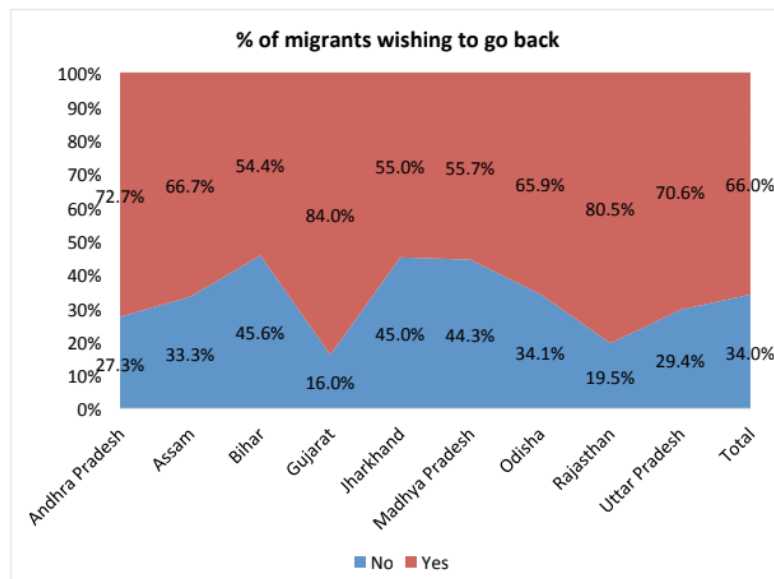
**% of migrants wishing to go back**

Figure 13: Wanting to go back to cities again
**Source:** RCRC Household survey, Srijan Foundation[3]

## Government Support to Migrants

The lockdown and the subsequent migrant crisis also unveiled the on-ground reality of several government Schemes directed towards ensuring livelihood to millions of people.
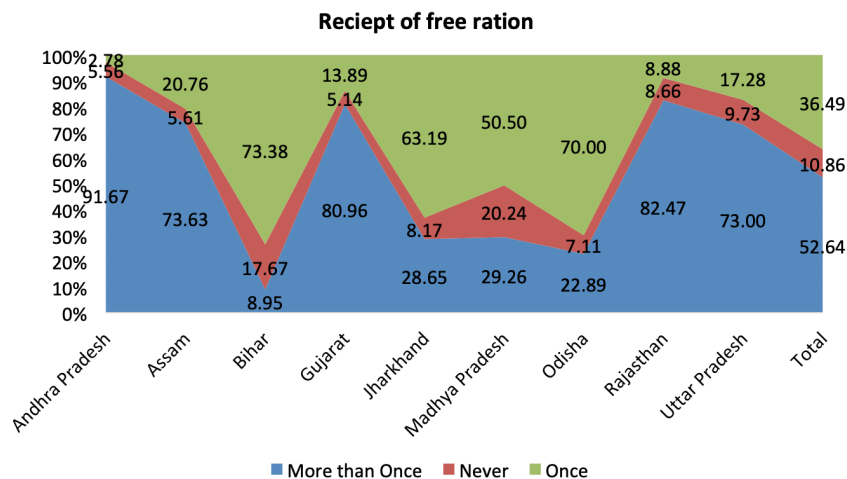


**Reciept of free ration**

Figure 14: Proportion of people receiving free ration
**Source:** RCRC Household survey, Srijan Foundation[3]
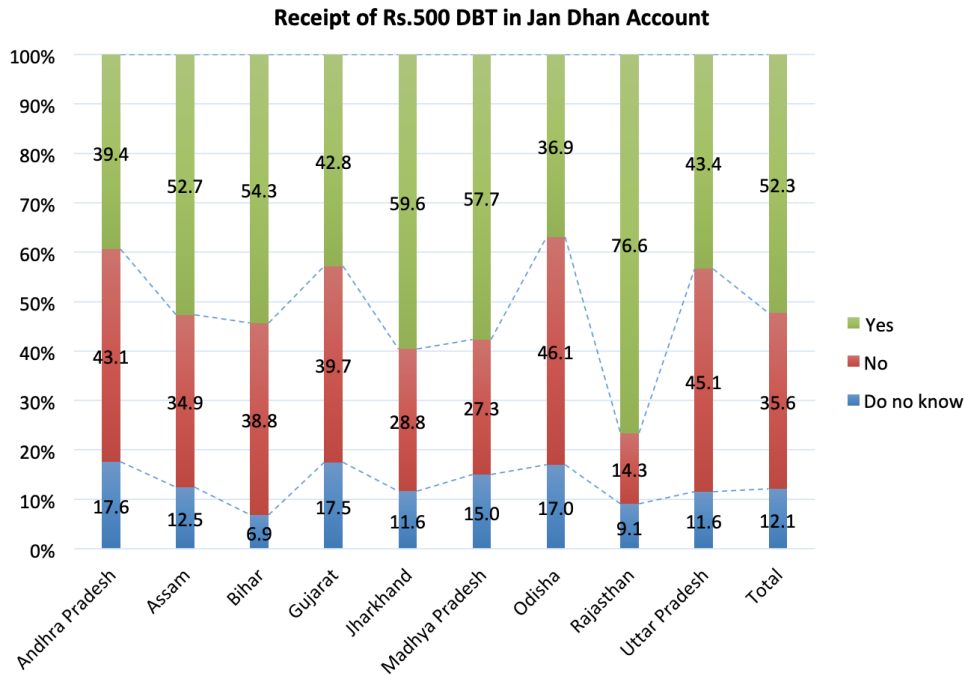
**Receipt of Rs.500 DBT in Jan Dhan Account**

Figure 15: Proportion of people benefitting from PMKGY
**Source:** RCRC Household survey, Srijan Foundation[3]

The COVID-19 Relief package also involved transferring Rs—500 each to 19.86 Crore women Jan Dhan account holders. The survey underlines the fact that 35% of all households (pan-India) have not yet received this amount, even a month after the announcement-Fig 15. The survey shows that only 31% of households received money from the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Yojana (PMKY), an initiative in which all farmers will get up to Rs.6000 (US$84) per year as minimum income support.

## 0.1 Health Outcomes

We saw that 39% of the households responded that they had experienced hunger/inadequacy/shortness of food supply during the last week of the survey. Once again, we see a vast difference across states with hunger being much more prevalent in some states (Bihar, 68%) compared to others (Assam 15%, Andhra Pradesh 16.2%)-Fig 16.
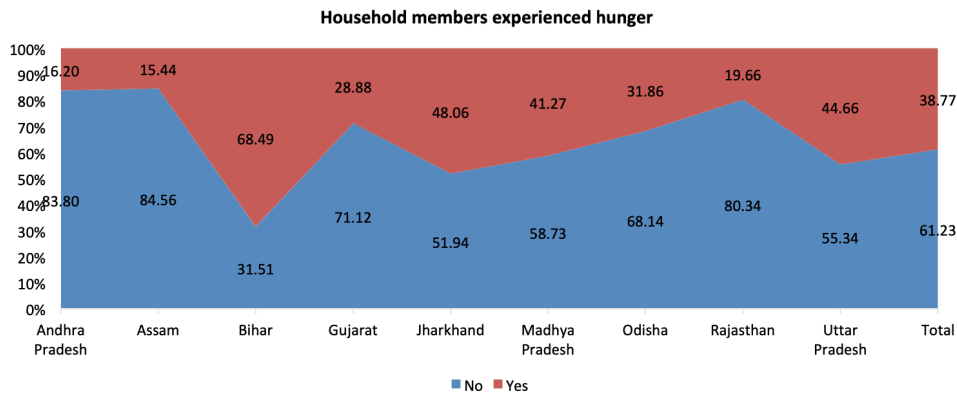
**Household members experienced hunger**

Figure 16: Household members experiencing hunger
**Source:** RCRC Household survey, Srijan Foundation[3]

The migrant crisis has also left a significant toll on mental health. The survey shows that across states, 80% of the respondents are anxious and fearful, with no current sources of income and uncertainty about what is to come-Fig 17.

With respect to the COVID-19 pandemic, healthcare access is one the key issues as 6% of all COVID-19 Cass need hospitalization[5]. This is a significant concern for the migrants as our survey shows that over 40% of all respondents will depend on self-treatment for any healthcare emergency-Fig 17.

The survey recorded that 143 people have lost their lives among the 7365 respondents, which translates to 21 death per 1000. Out of these 143 deaths, 77 deaths (54%) are caused due to lockdown as migrants had to travel thousands of kilometres without any viable source of transportation and while being on the brink of starvation 17.

This section aimed to demonstrate the pain and misery inflicted upon migrant workers, as the pandemic ravaged the economy and the livelihoods of the people. We observed that, even though there are few government schemes which are engineered and designed to extend support to the people suffering from poverty and impoverishment, however, due to leakages, and lack of proper dissemination channels of information, the benefactors of these schemes are still very limited. Poor people have not only lost their livelihood during the imposed lockdown, but also their health conditions have worsened. In the next section, we will see how the general public has responded to the government's response to alleviate the miserable situation of migrant workers.

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[5]link      https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/only-6-cases-need-hospitalisation-over-40-000-have-recovered-govt/story-4jTOt7S5TNhKpPzaBZ0YQI.html
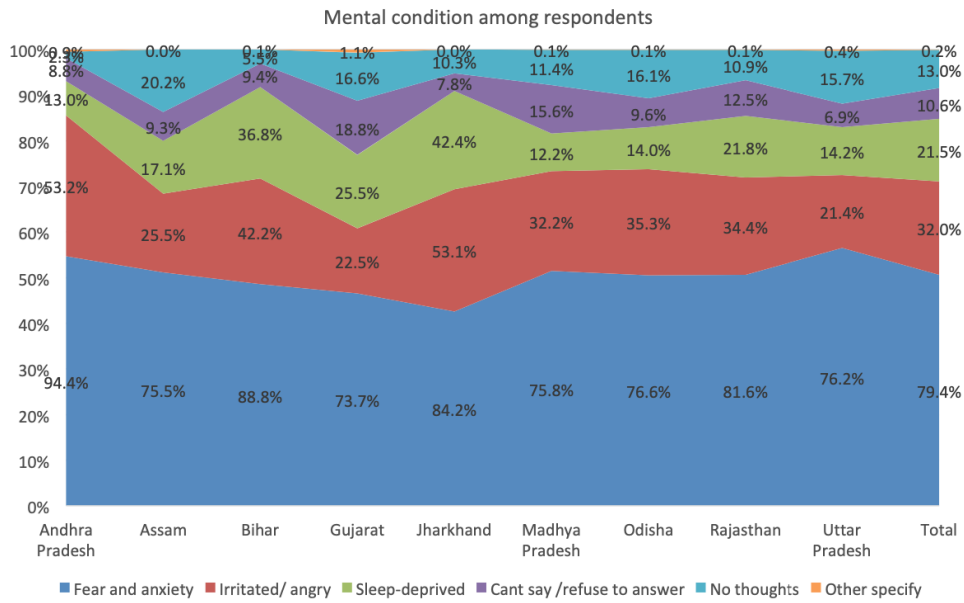
Figure 17: Household members experiencing mental health issues
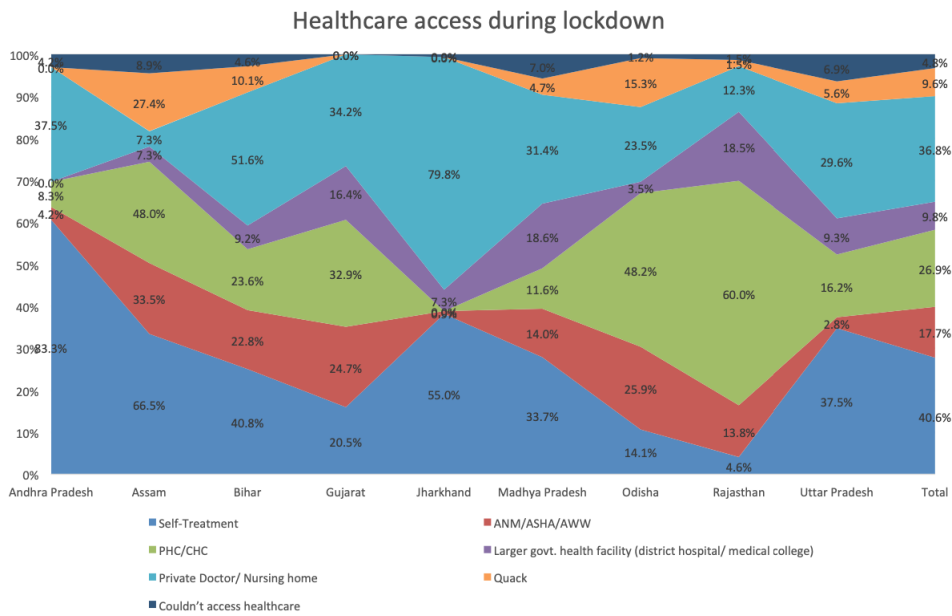**Source:** RCRC Household survey, Srijan Foundation[3]



Figure 18: Household access during lockdown
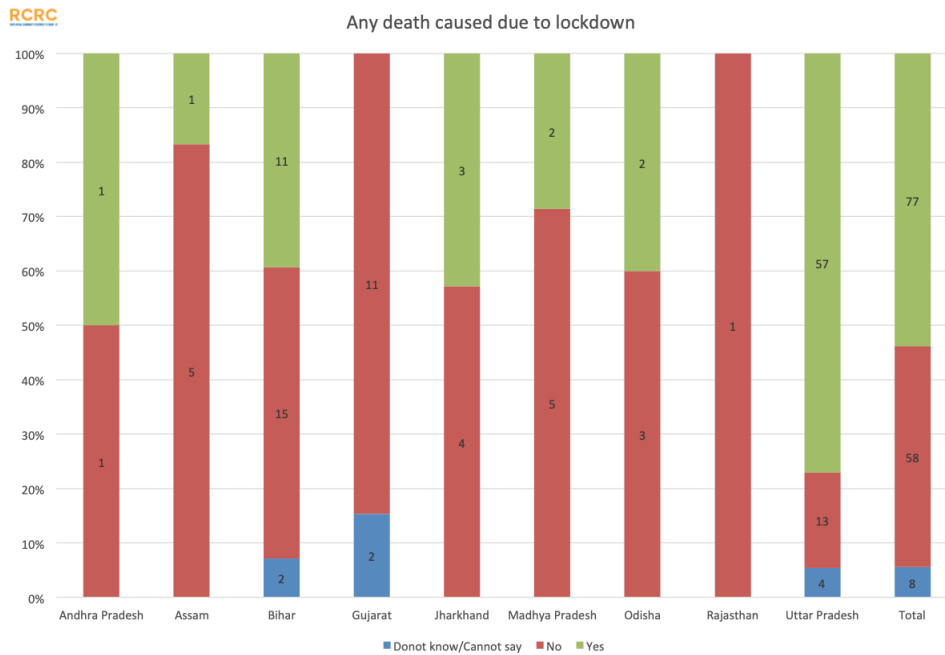**Source:** RCRC Household survey, Srijan Foundation[3]

Figure 19: Deaths caused due to lockdown.
**Source:** RCRC Household survey, Srijan Foundation[3]

# Sentiment Analysis

The migrant crisis in India has generated a mixed set of emotions in the public forums. To gauge this sentiment in India, we exploit Twitter Search API to understand how perceptions vary over space and time. To extract this data, we collected all tweets from 8th to 21st June which mention the word 'migrant'. We collected 70k such tweets from all over the world. After some basic filtering to only have the meaningful (and English) tweets, our corpus size for the analysis became 52k tweets. Machine Learning Classifiers – To assign sentiments to our corpus, we manually annotated 950 tweets and assigned them a sentiment of Positive, Negative or Neutral. The neutral class is helpful in eliminating unopinionated tweets as well as several News sources available on various Twitter handles.

To facilitate our analysis, we resorted to Machine Learning, utilizing a Voting Classifier (Based on an ensemble of Logistic Regression, Naïve Bayes, kNN, Perceptron, Passive Aggressive and Random Forest classifiers). Our model labeled 13k tweets as negative, 5k tweets as negative and the rest were labeled as neutral. Using the Geo-tag available of the Tweet location, we see that among all English-speaking nations, India has been the hotspot of all discussion around the migrant crisis, as displayed in Fig 0.11.
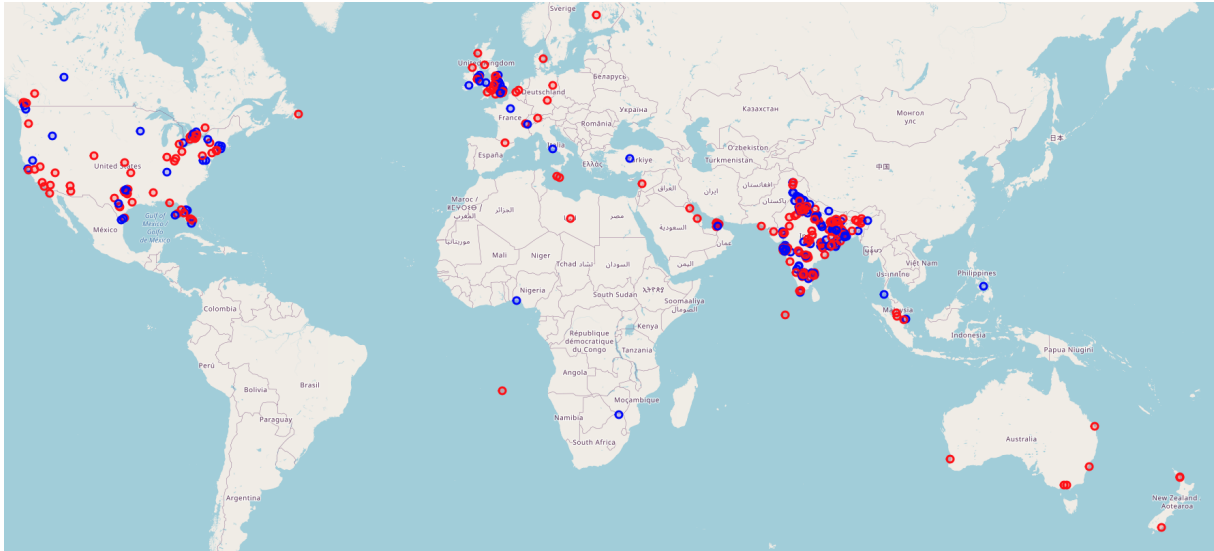
Figure 20: Twitter based migrant discussion all around the world.

Zooming further into India, we see that discussion has been mostly concentrated to clusters around the major metropolitan cities. Though the data points are scarce at the moment, it can be reasonably inferred that net sentiment in North India (around Punjab etc.) is more positive compared to central India.
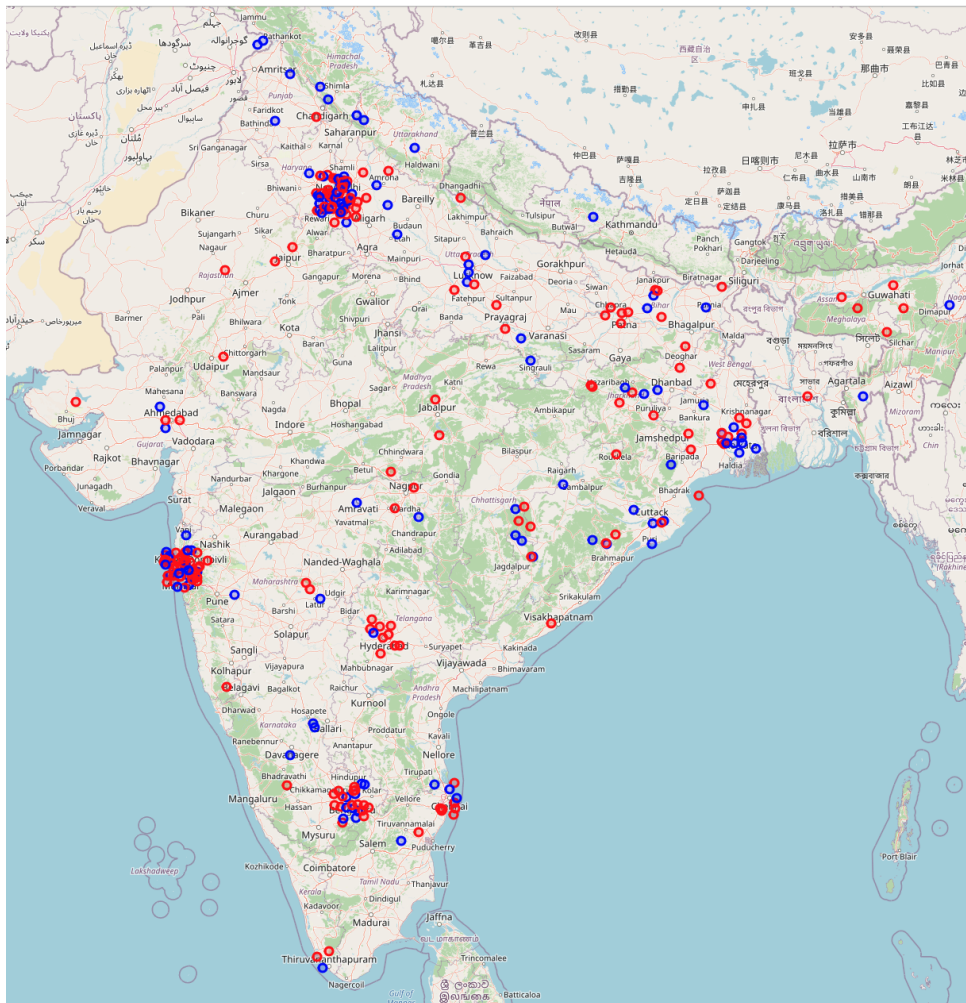
Figure 21: Twitter based migrant discussions in India.

As we expand on our dataset (March – June), we plan to plot these sentiments state-wise and district-wise and map them with interventions introduced by the government.

Next up, we analyzed how the 'Verified' tag of the user makes the more susceptible to post positively about Migrants. We saw that a verified user is much more likely to tweet positively compared to the general public (44.6% vs 26.19%). This can be correlated with the fact that some local governments are running their PR campaign by asking influential people to post favorable tweets.

**% Positive Tweets related to 'Migrants'**
Verified Users vs General Public
Tweets from 8 Jun to 21 Jun
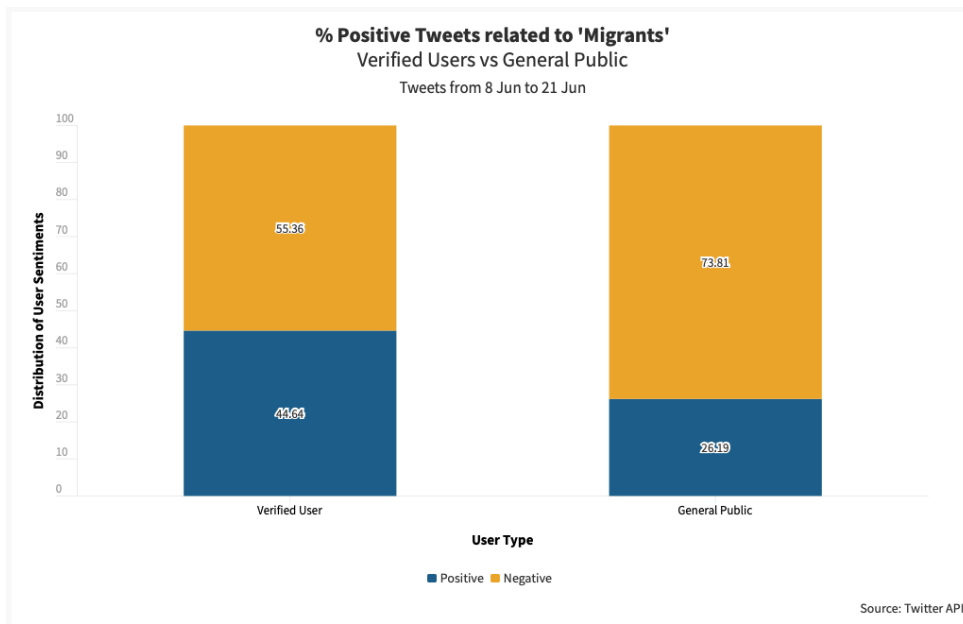
Figure 22: Categorizing migrant-related tweets into verified and unverified users

To see not only how people are tweeting about 'migrants' but also about how they feel about the government's handling of the situation, we looked for tweets that mention the India's ruling party vs tweets that don't.



**% Positive Tweets related to 'Migrants'**
If tweet mentions 'BJP'
Tweets from 8 Jun to 21 June
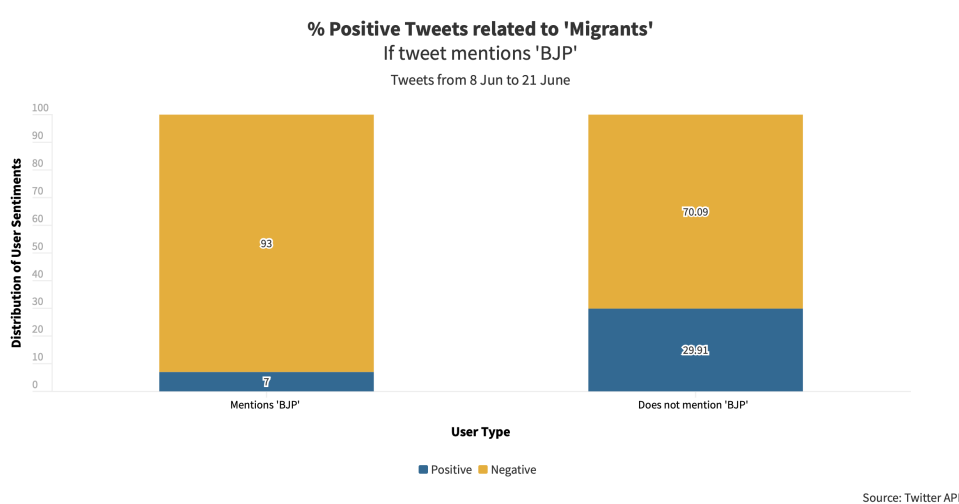
Figure 23: People's perception of how the government is handling the migrant crisis.

We notice a stark contrast between tweets that mention the ruling party versus tweets that don't (7% positive vs 30% positive).

Although, this crisis has made everyone's life miserable, however, some vulnerable sections of the society like migrants are incredibly vulnerable in this context. Along with

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the problems described earlier, the following points lay out the problems that migrants find themselves circumscribed in:

(i) Migrant workers face the formidable risk of losing their jobs and income support due to the casual nature of the most-migrant jobs in India.

(ii) With jobs gone and no prospects of income support, migrant workers run a massive risk of ending homeless, as most of them depend on the rented dormitories/rooms for the accommodation purpose.

(iii) Migrant workers are more prone to the contagion on account of the lock-down imposed in the dormitories and the labour camps, which usually falls under the most cluttered regions of the city.

(iv) Millions of migrant workers found themselves stranded amidst this crisis with the suspension of the transportation services without any food, health or income security.

The defining feature of the migrant crisis is the abject apathy shown to the migrant workers by all sections of the society. A train crushing the 16 migrant workers who were seeking rest out of the fatigue caused by the long journey on foot, did diverted attention of some people to the plight of the migrant workers, but it was already too little and too late. The constant questioning of the motives behind the movement of the laborers by institutions such as media, state and central governments, and even judiciary and labeling them as irresponsible, selfish, and insensible creatures who does not follow the strictures laid out by the lockdown, had already caused an irreversible amount of damage. However, most of us fails to understand the feeling of what it takes to be a migrant, a person traversing two different worlds: an urban life filled with economic opportunities but plagued with great uncertainty, and the soothing rural life with affection and closeness of family but marked with abject poverty and absence of any economic or social ladder to climb. That is where we as a society have failed to keep our promise of offering an apt social contract to the migrant workers in the time of distress and in that process, not only we have snatched their fair share of wealth by forcing them out of employment without any measure of social or health security and left hung to dry but also ripped them off of their dignity by turning blind to the deadly walks that migrants were forced to take marked by starvation, desperation, and derogatoriness.

To counter the aberrations carried out against the migrants, and to devise and design solutions that encapsulate the principles of equity, camaraderie, trust, and empathy, a group of renowned academicians, public workers, government officials, and private players met and organized a seminar during which they laid out the challenges and the hurdles that lie ahead of us in both the short and long run in adopting those principles. Such a meeting aimed to draw from the scholarly abilities of these people to craft an architecture of policies which could then be implemented systematically and systemically to address the plight of migrant workers pertaining to this crisis as well as the structural fissures that are embedded deeply in our society and keep haunting the public sphere during the

moment of crisis. We have decided to divide these results into four different heads for more accessible navigation purposes and are presented below. The summary of the policy prescriptions are presented in the Fig 0.1



Figure 24: Table summarizing the policy prescriptions.

# 1 Health Related Policy Prescriptions

## 1.1 In the short-run

1. **Information Passage:** Building and enabling an efficient information infrastructure, to pass on crucial information related to COVID-19 to the relevant actors. The nature of the information could be related to aspects such as recognizing symptoms, the primary point of contact, accessing medical facilities, essential precautions that need to be taken, measures taken to extend financial support and social services, etc. all in the context of COVID. All key ministries should establish multiple communication fronts to coordinate and exchange information within themselves, along with the general public to inform and reassure them of the fundamental mechanisms. Institutional setup in place to battle the pandemic, to avoid any chaotic situation. National hot-lines must be set up as the outbreak gear towards community transmission in order to communicate the vital information such as- the first point of contact, designated hospitals in a particular region dealing with COVID crisis, precautionary measures to avoid infecting family members, etc. Also, this infrastructure could be leveraged to extend the valuable information to the most vulnerable section of our society, such as migrants, or the people with disabilities.

2. **Strategic Prepration:** Even with the perfect dissemination of information, it is necessary to be prepared for the worst-case scenario. If people do not follow the

guidelines and the instructions issued by the health officials, then it is necessary to design and deploy adequate measures to prevent the spread of infection. In particular, certain health operations such as isolating, and diagnosing each patient before letting them enter the hospital premises and demarcating clinics and wards dealing with other diseases and medical services, and taking appropriate steps to avoid exposing the front-line workers by mandating and implementing the critical standard procedures to be followed by them.

3. **Micro-level Preprations:** In order to combat the possibility of transformation of an outbreak to a community transmission, constant supervision of different regions is necessary to identify the host-spots and isolating that region. It is also critical to identify the hospitals, clinical services or other organizations and designate them to the COVID treatment centres without jeopardizing their capability to treat other illnesses. To expand capacity and provide vital support in the form of ICU's and isolation wards, less useful areas such as recovery rooms and other unimportant wards must be transformed into the treatment areas and concentrate infectious patients in that particular regions.

4. **Protection of healthcare and front-line workers:** In order to win the war, we must ensure that the soldiers fighting it are safe and healthy. Health-care workers are particularly at high risk of catching the virus and should be regarded as such. Preventive measures such as providing Personal Preventive equipment should be done with immense seriousness and streamlining the operational procedure to report shortages, procuring them and maintaining efficient supply chains should be a high-priority task. In addition to that, proper rest and recuperation time should be given to workers to avoid any fatigue-related conditions. Also, informing and teaching them the new procedures and guidelines to handle infectious patients should be carried out immediately.

5. **Free-up space for other essential health services:** While fighting a pandemic should be assigned an utmost priority; nonetheless, this should never place any obstacles in the treatment of other essential health services. For that, proper identification of essential services should be made, and operational procedures with regard to facility division in a hospital should be brought into force to avoid the contact of non-COVID patients with the contaminated people. Non-essential services and visits of all the professionals on the hospital premises should be curtailed, and an effort should be made to carry those meetings in a virtual space.

6. **Pooling resources under emergency:** In a state of emergency, every effort should be made to provide indispensable resources to the health sector, and other sectors who are working closely to mitigate the pandemic. Either through legislation, or by drawing from emergency funds resources should be pooled together to provide for the medical provisions, hiring contractual health workers, and designating and authorizing apt medical students to carry out the treatment.

## 1.2 In the long-run

1. **Strengthen and equip public health services to combat health emergencies:** Public health infrastructure plays an integral part in response to any health emergency, and therefore, utmost priority must be given to bolster its preparedness for any such event. Routine training exercises like scaled laboratory testing, epidemiological analysis, contract tracing, disseminating evidence-backed information, and quickly adopting non-pharmacy interventions should be made available to the medical professionals, and health care workers, to escape the situation of getting caught off-guard. In addition to that, old technology should be replaced with their modern counterparts promptly to avoid cost-escalating expenditures during emergencies.

2. **Optimizing supply chains of critical medical supplies:** It supposedly helps to battle emergencies if the state of the art rules and regulations are formulated and followed at all times. That also includes the guidelines on the procurement and logistical support framework that has been put in place by the public health officials. It must be ensured that critical supplies are sourced from multiple vendors to diversify and mitigate the chances of supply-shortages in case of single supplier fails to serve during emergency times. In addition to that, no compromise should be made on the set medical standards placed by the medical institutions concerning the quality of the medicines, even during a health crisis. A serious effort should be made to formulate the rules and guidelines to streamline the above procedure during standard times. Lastly, rules guiding rationalization of orders should be put in place, which could be helpful, especially during emergencies.

3. **Formation of SFG's for vulnerable groups:** The provision of special focused groups (SFG) should be made, and professionals should be chosen and prepared to be part of such groups. The main task of these groups would be to identify the most vulnerable group of people during a health emergency and assess the barriers they might be facing in accessing the health services. In case of an emergency, special attention should be paid by the SFG towards the outbreak occurring within these groups, and an apt intervention can be designed ex-ante to implement prevention measures, by eliminating the barriers and extending health care promptly. The vulnerabilities could be based on several factors like socio-economic, demographic, geographic, environmental, etc. and all of these should be taken into account while designing and curating SFG's. Had these groups been formed earlier, we could have avoided a full-fledged migrant crisis that occurred in India.

4. **Preparing for health crisis emanating from climate crisis:** Scientists are continually flagging the possibility and potential of climate change, which could induce a health crisis of its own. Hurricanes, storms, floods, droughts are a few possibilities of disasters that could emanate from the climate crisis. These disasters could themselves pose a threat in the form of a health crisis, and therefore, we need to take preventive and precautionary steps to avoid the situations. Some of the suggestions include: Routinize evacuation plans, slow the growth of carbon emissions, mitigate the health crisis by relocating measures, etc. Furthermore, most importantly, an inclusive social

contract must be written and enforced, which extend benefits and protective measures to everyone rather than concentrating them to any elite group of people.

# 2 Non-Health Related Policy Prescriptions

## 2.1 In the short-run

1. **Target relief measures towards distressed migrant workers:** Many public and private organizations stepped up in providing various kinds of relief measures to ameliorate the heart-wrenching conditions of migrant workers brought upon by the COVID crisis. The measures included drawing upon the government and voluntary support to extend the travel support, serving them food on their way home, crowd-funding the resources to set-up the provisions, organizing and managing the community kitchens on highways, and other services to migrants and their families during the time of distress. This should act as a public-partnership model to be followed and built upon in eliminating the problems faced by the starving migrants stuck and stranded in different parts of India. Most importantly, critical public means of transportation should be directed in full capacity for the movement of migrant workers between their work and home states while maintaining the utmost standards of hygiene.

2. **Income and social security support:** COVID lead to shutting down of the entire economy which further caused a massive amount of job losses and if any particular group has experienced the brunt of this situation more than anyone else, probably it is the group of migrant workers. Losing out their jobs which comes with practically no social security, due to their informal nature, has exposed both the migrants as well as their families and communities back at home to the brink of starvation and impoverishment. Policy support in the form of temporary job opportunities under the scheme of MGNREGA can salvage the critical situation of migrant workers. This way, they can regain their lost self-esteem by earning their livelihood in a dignified and legal manner rather than stumbling into poverty. Secondly, unifying the state-level Public Distribution System and collating it to a national level policy, and by admitting Aadhar card to issue ration would go extra-mile in ameliorating the situation of workers still stranded at their work-stations and their families and communities back home. Some researchers have also shown that intra-state portability of ration cards has to lead to a significant reduction in the intra-state movement; however, the results are not yet as robust in case of inter-state portability's effect on interstate mobility. (could not find the paper to cite here.) It must be ensured that no person is denied access to health-services owing to the lack of financial resources in the time of the pandemic, including migrant workers. Proper social security in the form of food security, health security, and income security should be granted to the migrants.

3. **Extending vocational support and upskilling:** In addition to the income support and other social security measures, extending vocational support by teaching them

new skills that they can later furnish and draw upon to translate into employment opportunities, is a crucial step in attaining the self-sufficient and the resilient livelihood and can help them climb the social and economic ladder. This strategy could be complemented by providing further assistance in the form of micro-financing to set-up and start small-scale ventures and businesses in nearby towns, or even their native villages would assist them in living a dignified and respectful life, thereby rewriting the long-awaited social contract in favour of these workers.

4. **Support by industries & business enterprises:** A coordinated response from the industrial organizations and business houses, in advancing the concessions to the poor migrant workers to return to and resume their jobs will prove extremely fruitful, in not only salvaging the lost economic prospects of the migrant workers but are also justifiable on the legal grounds as most of these workers were dismissed from their jobs without any support in the most demeaning manner. Now to retain their services, some incentives must be offered to them, coupled with the respect they deserve from us as a society. To mitigate the concerns in the short run, money from the funds like construction industry fund should be drawn and extended to support the most vulnerable group of unregistered migrant workers.

5. **Devising empathetic policies towards the benefit of the workers:** Lessons should be drawn from the Kerala-model of handling the corona-virus, where not only did they most successfully and efficiently fought and won the battle against the virus with the least causalities observed so far for any state in India, but also complemented their fight while deploying most compassionate policies concerning the migrant workers. They ensured that every migrant worker has access to a mobile phone and the facility to charge it, organized sporting events for recreational purposes, and extending them food pertaining to their native places. This not only reduced the extent of the displacement of migrant workers but also avoided any left-out feeling to inflict them, which could have eroded their trust in the societal institutions. Similar policies could guide the pan-India to show more compassion and empathy toward workers even when no one requires their labour services. This affinity would have certainly helped in guiding the policy choice when all the means of public transportation were prohibited while keeping the movement of private vehicles intact. That showed the imperial and elitist mindset of the policy-makers and the government, which needs to be changed for more just and equitable growth.

## 2.2   In the long-run

1. **Strengthening labor laws:** In the wake of the pandemic, some regional governments have gone to the extent of scrapping and diluting the hard-fought labour-laws, albeit most of them have only symbolic existence, in order to revitalize the industry and the economy. The reason that it would incentivize entrepreneur in opening new or expanding already existing businesses, as they will not have to worry about arduous rules pertaining to labour. Even if this holds, then also it is obscure and unjustified

to scrap labour laws, without consulting the main stakeholders-trade unions, which unanimously opposed all such decisions. However, not an ounce of that reasoning is correct. If history is any guide, then there are tons of reports[1] showing that an inverse relationship exists between diluting the labour laws and exacerbating the unemployment crisis, [6] a situation which India can not afford amid a pandemic. On the contrary, upholding and strengthening the already existing labour laws could have mitigated the crisis by holding the businesses and industries accountable and reportable who enjoyed the services of labour in the boom years and left them to rot with the emergence of the crisis, thus sketching a complete greedy and apathetic landscape. And this is what should be deliberated and legislated in the policy and the government circles to avoid any further escalation of the situation.

2. **Reversing the casualization trend of labor:** The trend of casualization emerged in India, right after the implementation of the 1991 policies, which were brought to liberalize, and privatize the economy, and thus unleashing its potential from the shackles imposed by the bureaucratic control. However, due to the demographic shape of India, it proved disastrous for the labourers in India, as an excess supply of labour and relatively low demand levels, soon lead to change the nature of employment to casualization. Casual labour have had been exploited to the ultimate degree, as none of the benefits they are entitled to receive from their employers under the labour laws, were granted to them, given the nature of their contract. Another peculiar attribute of casual labourers is that mostly they are migrant workers, which make them more vulnerable, as terms of the contract dictate no social security provisions for them in the event of a downturn. This trend needs to be curtailed in a fast-track manner, and all members of the working class should be granted similar provisions and entitlements with a cover of social security and health care provision to prevent their unchecked exploitation. That would further prevent the kind of migrant crisis that we are experiencing today.

3. **Distributed model of working:** A new model of corporate businesses is meticulously designed, articulated and planned to launch, wherein, rather than setting up their production centres in big industrial parks, or metropolitan cities, they will be set up in small and medium towns. One motivation behind is to curtail the poaching of skilled workers by the fierce competitors of the firms is much more comfortable in a big city in comparison to a small town. This would have enormous implications for the migrants, as now they would be able to live nearby their home villages and towns while accessing endless employment opportunities. This would significantly reduce the burden on exceedingly cluttered cities and reverse the ongoing trend of migration. One unintended benefit of the lockdown imposed all around the world was the realization that to execute a lot of work does not require the physical presence of employees, in their offices, at least not for the entire work-hours, in the 21st century. This has induced some companies to permanently shift their model to work-from distance or home which is again a design along the lines of distributive model of working, which employs the vast potential of unclogging the city spaces and causing reverse-migration.

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[6]https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/—dgreports/—inst/documents/publication/wcms414588.pdf

This potential of the model needs to be adequately tested, and if proved feasible, and efficient, then local community support along with the government assistance needs to be provided to bolster this kind of corporate centres, which seems to be more equitable and sustainable than the ones grouped in a single metropolitan region.

# Appendix: Some Important comments by Panelists

(1) **Mr. BK Jha:** A public-private partnership, along with a group of volunteers in a systematic and organized manner, could relieve the distressed situation of migrants around the country. The relief activities could include setting up a central helpline for distressed calls and then coordinating with the local government officials and the volunteers to follow-up and help workers, providing food in the form of ration-kits, through community kitchens, etc. to the migrant workers, providing assistance in monetary or additional support to the migrants and their extended families.

(2) **Mr. Deepak:** Although migrant workers had to suffer from significant difficulties like lack of social insurance, inadequacy on the modes of communication and means of communication, while they were travelling back to their homes, nonetheless there is some left as many organizations, institutes, entities and volunteers stepped forward to extend help to the migrants who were travelling back. There is a potential to use this goodness for a greater good and eventually help converge the idea of India and Bharat.

(3) **Prof. Anil Gupta:** As migrant workers travel back to their respective home-towns/villages, there is a vast potential to tap the knowledge potential present in those workers, that they have gained over their lifetimes, directly from the art-of-survival. In return, policies should be shaped to extend help to the workers and their families in from of issuing multiple ration cards, help them initiate and organize the small-scale businesses and job opportunities in the farming sector. Also, industries and business houses should come forward and extend concessions to these workers as an effort to attract them back to work.

(4) **Prof. Rishikesha Krishnan:** There is a need to reverse the trend of casualization of labourers by organizing and registering them. There is a need to generate a healthy eco-system of work in the cities where workers do not feel left out and are offered treatments and benefits of regular workers, while assisting this effort in conjunction to tho support of rural workers by various public programs like MGNREGA, etc.

(5) **Prof. Michael Spence:** Special care should be directed towards overburdened systems and personnel during the pandemic, and effort should be made to avoid any glitches. It is imperative to do a trade-off analysis while opening up the economy during a pandemic. On what side, a sinking economy, and job losses risk pushing millions back into poverty, while by choosing other option of unlocking, exposes many people to contracting the virus.

(6) **Prof. Elizabeth Cobbs:** The world has encountered countless migrant crisis induced by pandemics, climate-change, uncertain geopolitical circumstances, etc. We need to be prepared for any such future occurrences by careful planning, routinize evacuation plans, shifting to more sustainable sources of energy, and rewriting social contract to include everyone while sharing the benefits of the advancements.

(7) **Prof. Prithwiraj Choudhary:** An exciting finding suggests that intra-state portable ration cards lead to 12% reduction in worker's mobility within the states; however, the results are not sharp for across-state workers mobility in case of inter-state portability of ration cards. There is a massive potential for a distributive work model, wherein, industries and companies start their production centres in small towns and cities to dampen the risk of poaching by their competitors which would help resolve the problem of excessive migration to few-metropolitan areas.

(8) **Mr. Pradeep Nair:** India boasts a huge percentage of informal labourers, and a long-term perspective should be formed to tackle the situation. Lending support to labourers in the form of credit, vocational education, skilling programs, etc. would help mitigate the crisis. There is a tremendous opportunity in both corporate and social sector to shift their work culture to distributive, and online mode of work, which would significantly reduce the possibility of the migrant crisis that we are passing through right now.

(9) **Prof. Chinmay Tumbe:** Designing empathetic policies in favor of workers, as is evident in the case of Kerala, will help in alleviating the concerns of the migrant workers. On the contrary, divisive policies such as allowing for the free movement of private vehicles and prohibiting public transit services would add to the woes and causes of concerns for already distressed migrant workers. There is a need for policy-makers to change their elitist mindset and show compassion and sympathy for the vulnerable group of people while designing the policies.

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