TRAJECTORIES OF MIGRANTS' MOBILITY AMID COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN ODISHA

Soumen Ray, Ph.D*
Monika Oledzka Nielsen, Ph.D**
Balakrushna Padhi, Ph.D***

ABSTRACT

The unforeseen lockdowns across Indian states due to the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the labour forces involving millions of migrant workers, particularly engaged in the informal economy. The situation became complex when with ease in lockdown, migrant workers started returning to their source states. Odisha, an eastern state of India, witnessed a similar challenging situation when it had to receive thousands of desperate and distressed migrant workers who returned home amid the pandemic. The situation however revealed the inadequate knowledge about the migrant workers, despite their contribution to the state's economy with remittances and skills. The situation also tested our personal knowledge about migrant workers, with disappointment and ineptitude, both professionally and academically. The existing studies rarely acknowledge the complex lived realities of the migrants in their own voices. After conducting in-depth interviews with returnee migrant workers amid COVID-19 situation, this study, while limited in its generalizability, illustrates the multifaceted complexities of migration situation through a grounded perspective from migrants themselves.

Key words: *Migration, Vulnerability, COVID-19*

*   Social Policy SpecialistUNICEF, Odisha field office, IndiaMail-ID: sray@unicef.org
**   Chief of Field OfficeUNICEF, Odisha, IndiaMail-ID: monielsen@unicef.org
*** (Corresponding Author) Assistant Professor , Birla Institute of Technology and Science (BITS), Pilani, Rajasthan, India. Mail-ID: padhicds@gmail.com

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 global pandemic has impacted both lives and livelihoods of people and created an unprecedented economic effect on business and labour force involving millions of migrant workers across the globe. With the sudden declaration of countrywide shutdown across India on 24th March, 2020 due to COVID-19 outbreak, most of the economic activities came to a halt. The lockdown restricted people's movement, transport services and led to the closure of educational institutions, industrial establishments, and hospitality services, among others. Dueto this strict enforcement measure, there came uncertainties both in terms of lives and livelihoods of migrant workers and they had no alternative but to return to their villages. They started a harrowing journey to reach home, some even walking miles with infants, pregnant women, or older people. The lockdown led to a cessation of economic activities, rendering informal workers jobless. The impact was particularly severe among the circular labour migrants[1] working in the informal economy (Srivastava et al., 2020).Even after reaching home, they were refused entry in some cases because of worries of transmission of the disease. Most of them spent the required fourteen days of institutional quarantine before joining their families (The Economic Times, 2020).[2] With an increase in COVID-19 cases and with limited livelihood opportunities at source, their life and living became a major concern for the state. The plights of the returnee migrant workers across India intensely united civil societies, and strong public opinion was generated towards the government's handling of the situation for returnee migrants thereby pointing to an urgent need to revisit the overall policies for migrants. A few national media claimed that the sudden decision of lockdown without prior notice worsened the situation of migrant workers' crisis. Nevertheless, political commentators, advocacy groups, and intelligentsia have spent significant time commenting on the situation.

After the declaration of lockdowns, the Government of Odisha (a state in eastern India)sealed its border on 23rd March, 2020 to restrict the influx of people, including migrants returning to Odisha. However, due to joblessness, hunger, and the feeling of insecurity on the one hand and increasing number of corona cases in the urban peripheries on the other, millions of migrant workers started returning to Odisha in the first week of May 2020, when the number of

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1   Temporary and usually repetitive movement. In Odisha they are also called as seasonal migrants.

2   This is captured and documented widely in most of the national and regional print media in India. For example, refer Migrant workers in transit to be isolated for 14 days, https:// economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/migrant-workers-in-transit-to-be-isolated-for-14-days/articleshow/74904194.cms?utm_source=   contentofinterest&utm_ medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

COVID-19 cases in the State was only 160.[3] Within one month the state received more than five lakh migrants, who travelled back by trains, bus and other means, and the state's total case jumped to more than two thousand by the end of May, with 70 to 80 per cent cases identified as returnee migrants (Mishra, 2020). Within a few days, the state established more than fifteen thousand quarantine centres, known as Temporary Medical Centres at each 6,798 Gram Panchayats[4] (GPs), to keep the returnee migrants in fourteen-day quarantine before they could join their family.

As practitioners working with a different segment of the population, the issue of return of migrant workers and the stories of their grim journeys during the COVID-19 outbreak in Odisha, led us to revisit the age-old fundamental questions of livelihood and the state's capacity to handle such challenges. This also led us to extend the contemporary migrant debate with larger questions that has ignited social science research in the 20th century, including "how is the livelihood sector organized? How much control can people with limited livelihood opportunities exercise over household decisions? Whether distress migration is entirely livelihood based? How the migration stories unfold with time?"and so on. Towards this, we also drew from the growing research among social anthropologists and economists that assert human existence is irrevocably linked to migrations, which is complex and multidimensional, and it varies over time. However, post-careful study of the existing research, we realised that perspective literature and current political and media attention have not fully considered how COVID-19 has affected the migrants' lived experiences.

Based on the above observation, this study was undertaken in Odisha between May to December 2020. The main objective of this study is to further contribute to the existing knowledgebase on how COVID-19 has affected the migrants 'overall experiences and the possible impact of their journey post-lockdown on the future migration landscape in Odisha. Going through the existing literature supplemented by primary information from rural western Odisha, this paper puts forth the narratives of returnee migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the analysis of the context in which the respondents typically live in Odisha and their destination place and how that status quo has been disrupted by COVID-19, we present an illustrative case study that has relevance for broader debates within migration studies. We have also extended our discussion from the immediate impact of the COVID-19 situation on migrant workers to the inherent questions like their recruitment and coping mechanism at destinations focusing on how agency, resilience and risk affect the decision-making of internal migration in Odisha, and how

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3 Data as per Government of Odisha's dashboard on Covid-19: https://statedashboard.odisha.gov.in/

4 Gram Panchayats are the lowest level of governance structure in India and have elected members.

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these dynamics are affected by an extraordinary shock as the one caused due to COVID-19 pandemic.

2.   The Causal Pathway to Migration

Worldwide migrant workers amount to 164 million constituting 4.7 per cent of the global labour pool (ILO, 2020). Indians constitute the highest number of international migrants in the world with almost 6 per cent (17 million out of 272 million) of global immigrants (World Migration Report, 2020). Besides international migration, India has witnessed a large magnitude of internal mobility, particularly between the states, with the evolving urbanization on the one hand and rural distress on the other. Almost 450 million people in 2011 (excluding Jammu) were reported as migrants by the place of residence and the overall lifetime migration rate is 36 per cent in India (Census, 2011). Although, the quantum of internal migrations is quite large, it is only accounted through decadal census and periodic surveys, hence, the real-time picture of the migrant workers is difficult to acquire. Most of these migrants also belong to the rural informal workforce whose uninformed departures are difficult to account for.

There also exist discrepancies in migration data beyond what can be predicted from the usual variations in data and methodology. For example, the Census data on migration do not quite capture seasonal migration or provide an accurate number of migrants. Researchers have further raised their concerns on the comparability of the provisional 2011 data with earlier Census data (Kundu, 2018). Some other studies have also argued that current migration research in India has failed to consider seasonal migration, which is significant, growing, and predominantly inter-state (Srivastava, 2012).

Migration for employment, both permanent and temporal in the form of seasonal or circular, is one of the most common phenomena of human history. Rural-urban migration has also historically played a significant role in urbanization, particularly in India (Mitra and Murayama, 2011).Migrants support the Indian economy by filling the gap of human capital in the regions where it is needed and enabling the acquisition of new skills and a better standard of living (Korra, 2011). However, the economic, social, and political marginalization of the migrant workers at the destination site has been an area of serious concern. These individuals, known as distressed migrants, are compelled to move because of the socio-economic factors, including poverty, lack of employment prospects, limited access to social protection schemes, and due to adverse impacts of climate change.

The causal relationship of migrations is based on social, political, and economic advantages or disadvantages within the source and destination settings (Mishra and Rajan, 2018; Keshri and Bhagat, 2013). In our attempt to explore the drivers, we revisit the initial two dominant explanations of

migration -- methodological individualism, and structuralism-- which offer distinctly different descriptions of the origins and development of migration. Methodological individualism assumes that in their search for higher wages, individuals migrate "from areas of capital scarcity and labour abundance to areas of capital abundance and labour scarcity, or from rural to urban". Whereas structuralism examines the macro-phenomena in social structures and advocates that migration reflects the "exploitative political-economic relationship between sending and receiving societies" (Goss and Lindquist, 1995). While many individuals migrate out of choice, others migrate out of necessity (UN[5], 2020).

3. Methodology

The operative environments for empirical and ethnographic research during the COVID-19 outbreak have witnessed a paradigm shift, and the pandemic has also necessitated evidence-based immediate action to mitigate the emerging risk. Keeping in view the urgency of getting results from the research, volatile situation on the ground, and the limited possibility of running a questionnaire face-to-face, this research work was carried out carefully by maintaining a balance between holding into optimum use of technology, following ethical principles, and ensuring the quality of data against the basic need of research, and its timings. Within the restricted research-scope provided by the COVID-19 guidelines, we settled down for a small, qualitative study of rich, detailed interviews with returnee migrant workers for this illustrative study. We followed the purposive sampling with40 returnee migrant workers as our respondents, who were engaged throughout the interview. As the access to respondents depended on the existing guidelines, personal recommendations provided the only access to the respondent (Cammett, 2006). We took support of the local NGOs to reach out to these migrants. In-depth interview schedule was used as research tool and the interviews were conducted through telephonic conversation. Further, the discussion points were recorded and translated. No specific criteria for selection of these respondents were followed except that they have returned during COVID-19 outbreak. Also, all respondents may not come under the umbrella of distressed migrants, as the conceptualisation of "distressed" was not under the ambit of our analysis.

The empirical data are framed as a heuristic tool to conceptualise the processes that occurred during COVID-19 lockdowns. Moreover, the data presented below are not to generalize or estimate anything independently. We have mostly used the qualitative data to weave narratives of these returnee migrant workers' journeys, optimism, confidence, and resilience during a global pandemic. In addition, we have included insights from our discourse with civil society organisations, published media reports, and informal discussions with the state officials involved in determining the status of migrants, who has

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5 https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/migration/index.html

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returned during the COVID-19 situation as supporting evidence. However, to have a deeper empirical understanding of the issue, we have also described and analyzed the challenges faced by social scientists who wish to study the return of migrants amidst COVID-19 spread and the state's plan to accommodate their immediate livelihoods and other basic amenities.

4. Status of Migrant Workers in Odisha

According to Census 2011 data, Odisha has a total of 1.27 million migrants. Further, the net migration rate reflects that the state ranks bottom 5th in terms of out-migration (all duration), along with Uttar Pradesh (1st), Bihar (2nd), Rajasthan (3rd) and Kerala (4th). In contrast, states such as Maharashtra (1st), Delhi (2nd), Gujarat (3rd) and West Bengal (4th) are among the top four states in terms of preference for in-migration. Odisha has a negative net migration rate, which reflects fewer job opportunities in the state. As per Census population projections data, Odisha will have an estimated 1.69 million out-migrants (including those who migrate for business, work, education, etc. (Census, 2011). However, the Census survey only captures long- term migrants and not the seasonal migrants. Our calculation based on census data shows that the total migration has increased from 11 million to 15 million between 2001 and 2011. In 2020, the projected entire migration is expected to reach 20 million. The percentage share of reasons for out-migration is highest for marriage, followed by work, and move with household. The IHDS datasets reflect that 75.81 per cent of rural Odisha migrants migrated to urban India and 19.78 per cent to rural India (IHDS, 2011). Similarly, for urban Odisha migrants, 3.61 per cent of them migrated to urban India and 0.81 per cent to rural India.

According to official figures of the State's Department of Labour, as compared to 55 thousand workers migrating from Odisha in 2007, 146 thousand left the state in 2015. While 87,000 seasonal migrant workers left Odisha to other states in 2008, it rose to 1.05 lakh in 2012, 1.2 lakh in 2013 and 1.35 lakh in 2014.These figures are for registered migrant workers reported by the registered contractors under the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act (ISMW) and are known to be grossly underestimated (Pradhan, 2016). Further, a study of Bargarh district of Odisha found that inter-state migrants are usually engaged in the secondary or tertiary sectors (Majhi et al., 2014). A large study in coastal and Western Odisha, coordinated by the Centre of Labour and Migration Studies (CMLS, 2014) and carried by civil society organisations for 99, 523 households, observed that 30.83 per cent of the total households had one or more members migrating for work. This amounted to an estimated 1.53 million migrants from the region, 0.96 million for Coastal Odisha, and 0.58 million for Western Odisha.

Concerning the occupation of the migrant workers from Odisha, majority of the rural Odisha migrants are into the occupation of skilled agriculture (45.06

per cent) which ranked highest, followed by elementary occupation (44.51 per cent), blue-collar job (5.65 per cent), white-collar job (3.32 per cent) and pink-collar job (1.46 per cent). In the context of urban Odisha migrants, elementary occupation (62.42 per cent) holds the highest rank, followed by blue-collar job (24.1 per cent), white-collar job (5.32 per cent), pink collar job (4.89 per cent), and skilled agriculture (3.28 per cent). Worryingly, for both rural and urban (inter-state) migrant workers of Odisha, elementary occupation[6] is the main source of income.

5. Field Insights

5.1. Profile of the Respondents:

To begin with, we sought to understand the historical background of the region, the common livelihood patterns and the factors that lead them to migrate. The number of respondents in this study was40. We also attempted to gather additional information from Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) working in the district and triangulated with the observations of the respondents to build our arguments. Among the respondents, 20 were between the age of 20 and 30 years and 20 were between 30 and 45 years. 15 of our respondents were married, and the rest were unmarried. Further, 35 of our respondents were male and only five were female.

5.2. Pandemic Experience from a Migrant's Perspective:

Our respondents highlighted that the sudden announcement of lockdown created panic and anxiety among them in the hindsight. Along with the losses in income and livelihoods, they did not receive much assurance from their employers and the state. This environment of uncertainty and abandonment, and loss of livelihoods forced them to desperately return to their native place with the hope that all will be well there. The pandemic particularly snowballed into those migrants who had lesser experience, limited skills and even low job security. Our discussion with the respondents reflects that during the initial days of the pandemic they had a dual but mixed feeling. First, there is no way out from this pandemic and second, it is temporary in nature. However, all were pushed back from their destination place. The stories of misery, anguish, and helplessness of the migrant workers from across the country bothered them even more. However, the situation was not different for skilled young migrants.

It was realised only during the COVID-19 pandemic that there was no account of seasonal or permanent labour migration at any level of governance with real-time, including at the GPs. Further, with a huge and sudden influx of migrant workers into the state and the government having to respond to nearly

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6   Elementary employment comprises agriculture, mining, construction, fishery, street food vendor, shoe cleaning, domestic helper, hand laundering, guard, sweeper, forestry labour; or categorized as the informal economy.

a humanitarian emergency had to do rapid data collection through establishing a digital platform. However, without credible and disaggregated information, every tier of government handled the situation with agility and apprehensions.10 of our respondents who stayed in the Temporary Medical Centres on their return highlighted differential experiencesduringtheir14 day-quarantine period. While half of them were happy with the arrangement including provision of food and other basic amenities, half were not.

5.3. *Gender Constraints*:

Two of the women respondents expressed their dissatisfaction over this reverse migration caused by COVID-19 outbreak, as they had to return due to family pressure, leaving behind their jobs in private hospitals in another state with free accommodations and average pay packages. Both had received nursing training in the past under a scheme named, Deen Dayal Upadhaya Grameen KaushalyaYojna (DDU-GKY), which is tasked to train rural youths in India for employment. They narrated their arduous journey to their career path, starting from negotiating with family for undergoing the training in Bhubaneswar (the capital city of Odisha) and further pursuing to allow them to join their duty outside the state. Hailing from a comparatively less developed region of Odisha, and with a low knowledge level, it was hard for them to break the social barriers and join their job. However, despite need at their workplace, they had to return because of cultural factors. While the traditional livelihoods approach tells us about the condition of inequalities the households face and the activities they engage in, it tells us little about structural determinants within communities for interventions to be more effective (Green and Hulme, 2005). Such concerns have been fundamental to the growth of social anthropology in India, with a significant number of scholars basing their empirical work on this.

Our respondents mentioned that the cities are not women friendly. During COVID-19 pandemic, they observed that mostly women and children from a migrant worker's family have suffered without adequate and context-specific support. Though our motive was not to further prove their versions, yet we were told that mostly men do migrate, whereas women stay back in the source villages. Even though the enabling environment attempts to regularize and rationalize the differential influence of key actors, occasionally it falls apart. Both of our women respondents reflected that the "intermittent uncertainty" would pass by, and they were eager to return to their workplace, which was decent. They also had no desire to find remunerative work in their locality.

5.4.*Role of State in addressing Issues of Returnee Migrant Workers*:

Income inequality, class, ethnicity along with other socio-economic and demographic characteristics, combine to establish layers of overlaps and self-reinforcing limitations that restrict growth and negatively impact social mobility. We have highlighted the progressive step, i.e., the state's action in

the past towards addressing the issues of migrants. There exist several pro-poor social protection schemes of the government, under which the villagers receive cash and food. One of the significant outcomes of these schemes is that, by providing food security to the villagers, they have allowed the male population to migrate out. In discussion with our respondents, we could gather that with these increased supports, there has slowly developed a dependent economy. Still, the adequacy of support, except the food security schemes, have failed to hold back the migrants or bridge the livelihood gaps in the region.

More specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic, by acknowledging the challenges that loss of income, livelihoods and joblessness would happen in the lives of migrant labourers and their families, different departments of the state have expanded the scope of the existing welfare schemes to include returnee migrants. For example, the government has taken initiatives to include the migrant workers and their families returning to the state under the Public Distribution System.[7]The government has also promoted innovations under MGNREGA to engage the returnee migrant workers.

However, there were apprehensions that the wage rates payable under MGNREGA being abysmally low would make it less lucrative for the returnee migrants. While the skill mapping exercise was undertaken with the intent to support such migrants with employment opportunities suitable to their skills, it might not help in generating mass employment immediately. Our respondents claimed that there are limited work opportunities in the vicinity whereas migrating to a city provides ample opportunities. Most of our respondents have a family job-card for MGNREGA.[8] However, they claimed, with increased dependency on one job-card, it is difficult to sustain the family. Young respondents were also not keen to get employed under MGNREGA. They mostly have a graduate degree and were not interested in "*matikama*" (earthen work) in their locality. One of them mentioned that, once they move out of the state, people would look at them with more respect and dignity. One of our respondents particularly underscored that, had their employer supported them with basic income and assurance for the future, he would not have returned even during these days of pandemic.

Going through the narratives, we argue that, while the immediate cause of distress migration is to meet the livelihood challenges, with passing time, the choices that life offers in the urban clusters form a perfect ecology that embraces them with freedom and happiness. We also claim that migrants mostly achieve higher occupational levels than non-migrants and therefore engaging them in the schemes such as MGNREGA is not an appropriate option.

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7   Source:https://swachhindia.ndtv.com/odisha-fights-covid-19-cm-directs-administration-to-ensure-food-security-for-migrants-returning-home-44145/

8   Mahatma Gandhi Employment Guarantee Act 2005 is India's largest Social Protection scheme aimedatenhancingthelivelihood security and creating durable assets in rural areas.

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5.5 Migrant Worker: a never ending journey

We have particularly highlighted that migrants are not a homogeneous economic or social group. Our interface with the respondents reflects that the livelihood of their household at the rural blocks depends on rainfed agriculture. Unpredictable rainfall and its adverse impact on agriculture has been identified as one of the determining factors for these people to choose migration as an alternate livelihood option. However, from our interaction we categorized migrants into three major groups-- those having agricultural land but with limited investment ability or the agricultural lands are not productive enough; those who do not possess land or any other alternate livelihood options; and those who fall above both groups in terms of livelihood options but are strongly influenced by their migrant peers or have higher aspirations. It was indeed difficult to categorize our respondents into these three groups since we observed that both first and second category migrants have also been influenced by peers. It is evident that the person weighs the relative costs and benefits of undertaking a move. However, we see in our case that the personal assessment often remains biased or less informed. There remains little empirical work on the dynamic interplay between occupational mobility and migration in the context of Odisha.

The migrants having agricultural land send remittances mainly to manage households and further invest in the agricultural land. While in most places the remaining family members take care of agriculture, others also sublease them. Some of our respondents also highlighted that they return seasonally and contribute during agriculture, particularly during planting and harvesting time. However, many of the landless migrants do not have the necessary family labour. Though some of the migrant's family are keen to invest in agriculture, they do not do so due to its highly uncertain character, including rainfall. Yet, to a large extent, the remittances from the migrants help their family back home to sustain as well as create resources.

Most of our respondents did not avail benefits from the government schemes in their destination sites. Lack of time and limited documentary proof against residency further makes the situation complicated. However, none of them has ever witnessed issues like non-payment of wages, physical and sexual harassment at the workplace or inhuman working conditions. However, the living conditions of the migrant workers are often abysmal. To save on living expenses they usually stay in groups and avail the cheapest accommodations. While most of our respondents had comparatively better accommodations, they mentioned about the groups who live in shared, rented accommodation and in hostels. Several media news however captured the inhuman condition of the rented accommodations in overcrowded rooms without ventilation, kitchen, drinking water and proper toilets. Some of the migrant workers also live on a shift basis. During the COVID-19 outbreak, particularly this kind of living condition made it impossible to maintain social distancing or even to

continue within the same space for a more extended period without moving out. Our respondents echoed that as a practice, most of these migrants visit their relatives or peers on weekends. However, during the COVID-19period, they could not even do so, which became a significant reason for stress. Lack of quality education and primary health facilities, and nutritional deficiencies due to low-quality food intake make people even more vulnerable. These are system-based issues where the government has a significant stake. Already poor and vulnerable groups have a weak voice in influencing political choices that affect their lives and COVID-19 pandemic has further worsened the situation.

As Cummin et al. (2007) claim, the current measures of universally applied 'neighbourhood' exposures may severely underestimate the total effect of 'context', in its myriad forms and at multiple locations on Individuals. We also observed that the process of migration helps in building resilience as well as learning experience, it also let the individuals gather knowledge of how to fight adversities, capitalize on opportunities, and evaluate the situation. As we would have expected, expertise and knowledge of options available at alternative locations have generated differential occupational understandings between migrants with different educational background and years of experience. COVID-19 pandemic was another such opportunity that tested their ability and coping strength.

5.6. Recruitment Pattern and Migrant Workers:

It is widely understood that persistent poverty stems from the collective effects of inequality, insecurity and exclusion over the lifecycle and generations of individuals. However, there is a limited knowledge about the changing landscape of vulnerabilities for different population sub-groups to address the diverse set of risks and vulnerabilities effectively and adequately. Based on our observations of the sample we interviewed and on our wider programmatic experience working with this population, we consider that, while most of the migrants are from the low economic background, people from certain age group(mostly between 20 and 40 years) and with a particular background constitute most of them. This trend and assumption however need further probing and scrutiny because, with a small purposive sample, it was challenging to establish these further. However, we received several anecdotal pieces of evidence about the recruitment pattern and destination sites for the migrants having their correlation with returnee migrants.

One of our elderly respondents stressed that "the process of recruitment of the migrants follow a structured, but sometimes painful, process. People migrate through various means. First, there are recruitment agencies in urban areas, particularly in big cities. Initially, when people migrate to those metros, the agencies help them find a job. Several of these agencies get a cut from the salaries of the migrants every month. When these migrants visit their native

village during holidays, they are asked to bring back labourers from the vicinity. Accordingly, they get some percentage from the recruit's salary for the first month. So, these migrants, whenever they come to their village, encourage their friends and relatives to migrate with them. The second one is more regressive, where the legal and illegal agents or contractors play their part to ensure transport and employment of the migrant workers from the western Odisha across India. The process which usually starts during each autumn to seek work and ensures mass movement of people is known as the annual migration period, which lasts till the spring planting season. Members of the low-income families pursued and mostly duped into offering themselves for work as security against a loan or advance these agents usually provide during their need. They then spend the next several months working in those informal jobs, including brick kilns to pay it back. In most of the cases they are trafficked by the labour agents.. Many also continue in their workplace, however hazardous it may be. For these migrants, in most of the worksites, even the basic facilities do not exist and they usually arrange for their basic living only. Without stricter commitment on the part of the employers, they have limited legal status as the working population and become a part of economizing exercise of business houses. These labour contractors on the other hand are mostly local people known to the migrant families through their long years of association. Most of the migrant workers hired by these agents are the poorest of the poor. And, the third means has become more common during the last few years when migrants follow their peers while moving from "destinations to source". Most of our respondents also informed that they followed their friends or relatives while deciding the destination sites and workplace.

During our discussion with an NGO representative we were informed that The Inter-State Migrant Workers Act, 1979 directs contractors to obtain licenses from the state government for the recruitment of migrants. The state is mandated to outline the terms and conditions of the agreement between the employer and the worker, including the terms of recruitment, remuneration payable, hours of work, entitlement to basic amenities and wages. The contractors should accordingly furnish details of the movement of inter-state workers, issuing documents with all personal information. However, with a scale of migration Odisha witnesses, it is difficult if not impossible, to ensure adherence to these guidelines. However, during COVID-19period we did not see the network of legal or illegal contractors that are the pillar of inter-state migration of the rural poor to come forward as a facilitator during the arduous journey of migrants between the destinations and source. Although the relationship between the contractors and the migrant workers are purely economic, for many of the migrant workers they were the bridge between them and the employer.

5.7. Glimpses of Migrants' living condition at workplace:

We also learned that the migrants who are employed in bigger cities in the informal job sector often become permanent with better opportunity and optimism for a brighter future. But the other groups often return home either during a lean season or after spending a few years at the destination. Among them a few return home with a hope that they would start some productive activity with the money they had earned and the other just go back to their native villages without any alternate scope in the destination sites. Most of them fail to find a viable livelihood avenue in the locality and after the saved amount gets exhausted, they re-migrate. But those who stay back get merged with the larger crowd. All our respondents who have migrated to urban clusters have been mostly engaged in the industry of their need, if not of choice. Most of them highlighted that they were happy in their destination sites. The working atmosphere is convivial, and beyond office hour they have their own life. Many of them quoted going to malls, having urban street food delicacies, and occasionally watching movies in the theatre as a holiday routine to keep them going in these cities. Indian villages are way behind these urban clusters, and they offer far fewer amenities and avenues for entertainment and social activities of such dimensions.

Indian cities on the other hand are economic hubs and the source of livelihoods for millions of migrant youths, who travel thousands of miles in search of jobs and stable income. For most of them, with passing time, these free-time activities become symbols of development, happiness and freedom, which provide a unique eco-system for the youths to continue life beyond what they initially plan. Despite having adverse living conditions such as unhygienic living space, crime, congestion, and often pollution in the cities, it becomes the only choice for living for these migrant workers. Although for many, the day's indecisive journey begins and ends with balancing between economic prosperity and freedom, yet these cities remain their choice for living even in COVID-19 situation. As we bring back the voice of our respondents, we also see how Easterlin (1974) through his age-old study Easterlin Paradox observed "higher income was not systematically accompanied by greater happiness", without really looking at the differential meaning of happiness, subjective and objective (Frey and Stutzer, 2002).

While we do not contend their perception of living standard, the description of work-life also reflects the low expectations they have in the places of employment. With time, the phenomena of injudicious recruitment, failed system, hazardous journey, and the state of living conditions of the migrants has become a norm and often been generalised. COVID-19 outbreak has unfolded and initiated a broader debate about migrants and their welfare. Still, the study suggests that despite current adversity and bleakness, most of them will forget the humiliation and abandonment during the time of COVID-19 and return as migrants again.

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6. Conclusion

While the media and the broader political debate have maintained their position on the plight of the returnee migrant workers by considering them as a homogeneous entity, our reading of their viewsis relatively diverse in terms of their source and destinations, jobs, and skills. AsCOVID-19 pandemic has put migrants in India at the centre-stage of discussions, debates and decisions on both regulatory and wellbeing framework should contemplate the cause-and-effect relationship of numerous intricate issues which motivates or restricts the expeditions of these migrant workers -- mostly to the urban setups. Besides, a multi-pronged strategy by the state government is the need of the hour for these migrant workers to combat this humanitarian crisis.

As we have argued, the complexity of rural-urban migration in Odisha is linked to multifaceted drivers and the impact of a cross-cutting shock like COVID-19 on migrants' lives has just now begun to be understood. Despite taking one of the throbbing trips back home because of the COVID-19 pandemic, these returnee migrant workers will return to their place of work, many with a renewed expectation for freedom, happiness, and development. The task to decide between income and freedom will remain a paradox, but migration for basic livelihood will continue to grow. While most of our respondents could not come to harmony with what is the 'bare minimum' they need to lead a life in their place of origin, they were vocal on eliminating 'regularized unwarranted arrangements', that acts as a push factor towards their voyage as a migrant worker.

Our respondents' unwillingness to work under MGNREGA reflects the fact that freedom is not always about maximizing choices without considering the quality and people's values. The extensive surveys in India on migrants are subjective and not once capture the more significant questions about preferences, attitude, personality trait, skill sets or knowledge frame-- neither it is conceivable. The interpretations and information that our respondents provided us need to be captured at the grassroots level with a problem-solving outlook.

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