

AN ASSESSMENT ON SITUATION OF MIGRANT LABOURERS

In North 24 Parganas District of West Bengal
Amid COVID-19 Lock Down Situation



AN INITIATIVE BY

PARTNERS FOR ANTI TRAFFICKING (PAT)

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BACKGROUND

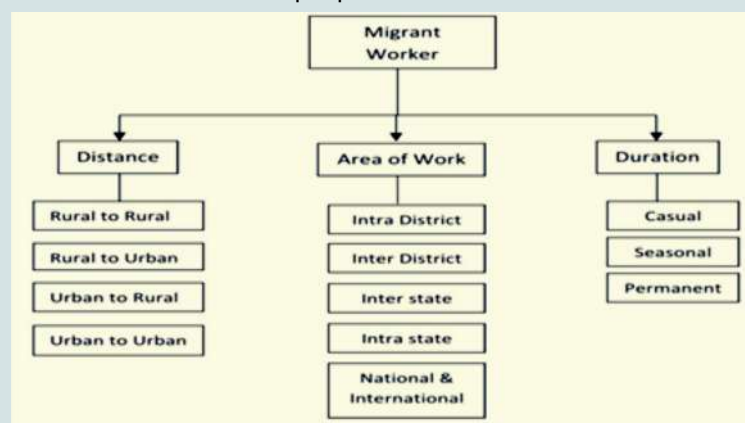
The outbreak of Corona virus across the globe has equally affected India. The pandemic has put the people of the country into severe trouble owing to the country wide lock down declared from the last week of March 2020. The worst affected are the daily wage earners and the migrant labourers. A large number of population lost their occupations out of the lock down. The migrant labourers could not manage to get back to their home as the lock down was declared all of a sudden. The employers and the land lords denied to allow them for staying back. Immediately after the lock down was declared, majority of the migrant labourers explored all means of transportation even by walking to their homes. Some arrangements were made from the Central and State Governments for their transportation but that was not enough for transportation of all the labourers and their family members. Several casualties took place in different parts of the country while the labourers were on the move by walk to their homes.

Significant number of migrant labourers are from West Bengal and had gone to different states of India and neighbouring countries in search of suitable livelihoods. They have been working on such locations over years and almost settled down. North 24 Parganas district in West Bengal is one of such district from where large number of people have migrated to different parts of the country and some of them have gone to neighbouring countries also. They have faced the similar situation while coming back to their home. The issue of migrant labours now getting more attention within the people after the several incidents.

State like West Bengal, always considered as destination point of many migrants workers over the several decades from its neighboring state like Bihar and Jharkhand are highest senders of seasonal migrants to West Bengal. As per the report published on various newspapers and journals, West Bengal mainly use as a Transit Point for Bangladeshi Migrant labours. It's alone carrying the burden of 40% of Bangladeshi Immigrant who usually crossed the border illegally. This workforce basically used in construction site and irrigation purpose. On the basis of survey of different research firms, Bangladeshi immigrants constitute around 2.7 percent of the labour force in West Bengal. In the last two three decades, migration patten also changed in west Bengal. At this time, percentage of Migration of people form less developed district like Murshidabad, Purulia and Medinipur to city like Kolkata and Howrah increased significantly.

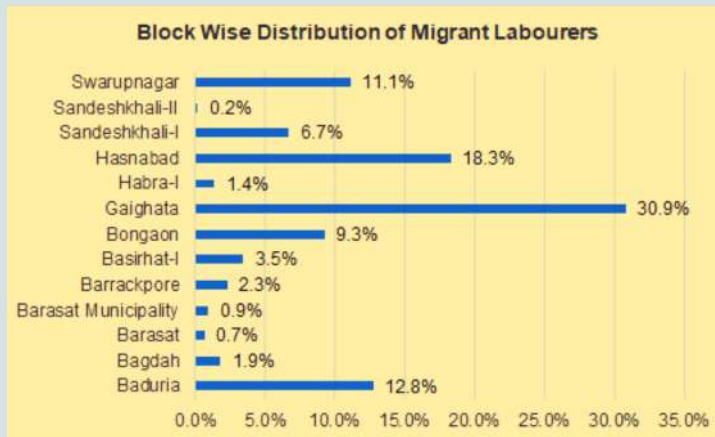
In fact, West Bengal ranks as the largest 'feeder state' of domestic helps in Delhi (Neetha 2004, Deshingkar, 2006b). This movement from the rural and semi-urban districts of West Bengal has been identified as 'poverty-induced' migration as per that article.

On the other side, over the last few decades, west Bengal has been going through a wave of outward migration toward the southern and northern part of India especially to the states like Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Chennai, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Delhi. Through it, West Bengal becomes one of highest sender States of migrant labourers following by Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. But in the recent times, the rate is coming down due to some factors like lack of skilled worker and lack of availability of strong policy of the state Government for migrant workers.

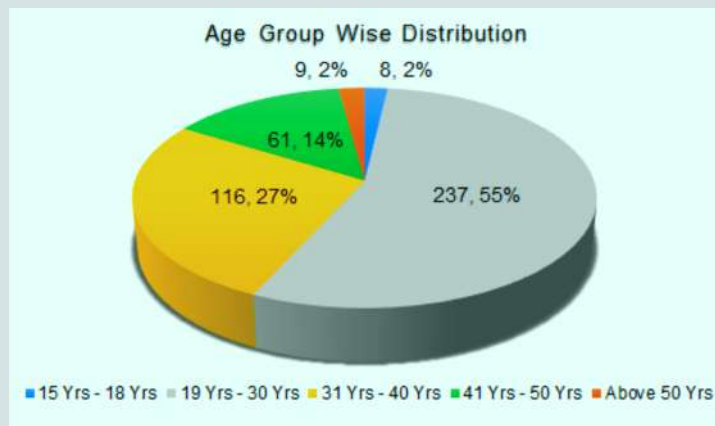


FINDINGS FROM RAPID ASSESSMENT

This rapid assessment has been done covering 431 migrant labourers. 13 Blocks have been covered in this assessment. It shows that out of the coverage blocks, majority (31%) labourers are from Gaighata Block. The next highest Block



is Hasnabad which covers about 18.3% of the total respondents. Baduria Block has around 13% respondents while Swarupnagar shows just over 11% respondents. Remaining other locations have less than 10% respondents who have been working outside West Bengal.



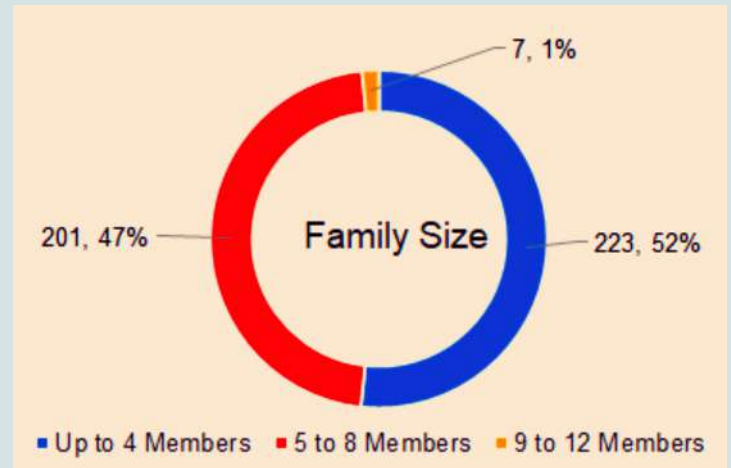
The above graph indicates that majority 55% of the respondents are in the 19 - 30 years age group, while 27% are in the 31 - 40 years age group. Significantly it also shows that just above 8% of the respondents are below the age of 18 years. These are basically the child labourers migrating to other state with adults for earning. 14% respondents are in the age group of 41 - 50 years while over 9% respondents are above 50 years age group.

The findings indicates that the majority of the migrant workers are leaving their localities in search of livelihood at an early age. This is also an indication about the scarcity of adequate livelihood opportunities at their local areas.

Respondents over 40 years have also opted for working outside their localities due to uncertainty and insecurity of income sources. They have left their earlier modes of occupations just because of earning more and living a life with much security of earning throughout the year.

The data indicates about the level of unemployment situations that are pushing these people to work outside their locations, leaving their families at home.

The findings shows that majority of these migrant labourers have significantly moderate to large family size, which is another important points for consideration about why these people are leaving their families back at home. The graph below indicates that 52% of the respondents have family



members up to 4 while 47% have family members between 5 to 8. Only 7 respondents have family members with over 8 and up to 12.

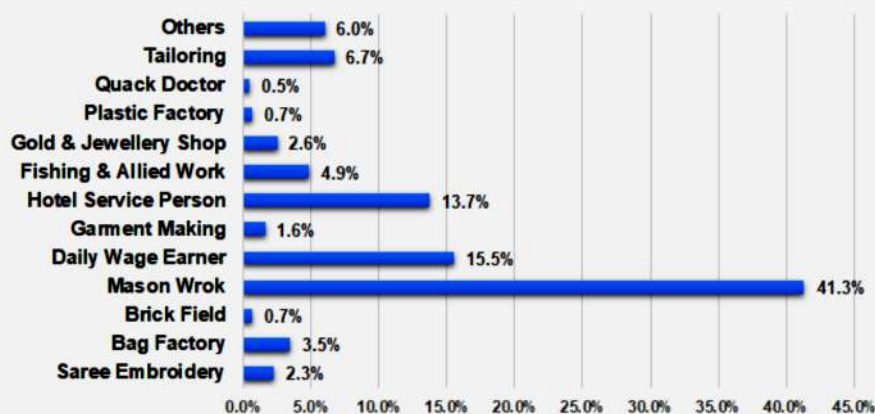
This is quite indicative that majority of the respondents have been compelled to leave the locality in search of better livelihood to run their families. They had no such options left to earn and support their families. The circumstances pushed them to work outside and it also indicates that measures from the local Panchayat and other Government schemes could not make ways for these migrant labourers to stay back. Having large family is one of major challenges for these labourers to search for alternative livelihood options.

The data also shows that 226 (52%) out of the 431 respondents have 2 to 4 children in their families. Remaining 205 (48%) respondents do not have children in their families.

The findings indicate that family size and not having appropriate opportunities are two major factors that push these people to leave their locality. Not all the labourers go out for work outside their families by their own choices but in majority cases they are compelled to leave. While the neighbouring persons go for work outside their locations, that also lure them to opt for such options.



Occupational Engagement of Migrant Labourers



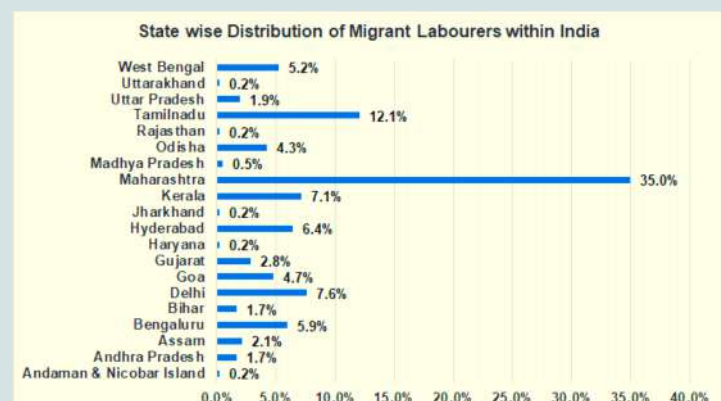
While the migrant labourers have been moving to different cities in search of better livelihoods, it is important to understand the nature of occupational pattern they are engaged in. The above graph indicates that majority 41.3% migrant labourers are engaged in masonry work. This include both adults and child labourers. There are several labourers who just have opted for any type of work and earn on a daily basis. 15.5% labourers are engaged in such daily wage earning occupations. Significant number of labourers, 13.7% are engaged as cooking and serving persons in different hotels. Over 14% labourers are engaged in tailoring, garments making, saree embroidery and bag factory. This indicates about the traditional skills of these people of stitching and embroidery. Remaining others are engaged in other types of occupations like jewellery work, brick field, fishing & allied work, shopping malls, rickshaw pulling, flower shop and fast food stalls.

It indicates that not all the labourers going out for alternative sources of income, get suitable occupations but one thing is important to note that they have occupational engagement throughout the year. This is the very reason for which large number of young populations are moving outside the state in search of continued work and decent earning. There are lot of challenges outside in terms of their stay, food, health and work place environment but even after that also they prefer to stay in there considering the consistent work and income.

Place of Work

Out of the 431 respondents, it indicates that 423 (98%) work within India while remaining other 2% work in neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, Kuwait, Dubai & Saudi Arab. Although the percentage is significantly low but it shows that some of the migrant labourers have opted for work in other countries. The local agencies hire these labourers from the communities and send them for work. They are mainly sent for working in construction sites and fisheries.

If we see the places where 98% labourers are working within India:



Majority of them have gone to Maharashtra for work and are engaged mainly in construction, embroidery and tailoring work. Some of them are engaged in jewellery making and as as hotel service persons.

Tamilnadu also shows a large number of migrant labourers working in that state. Over 12% labourers have migrated to

this state in search of better livelihood. Majority of them are working in hotels, helping in fishing and also as daily wage earners. Few of them are also working in some small factories. Hyderabad is another destination where over 6.4% labourers have been working. Kerala scores about 7.1%, Bengaluru 5.9%, Goa 4.7% and Odisha 4.3% respectively. It is also indicative that just over 5% labourers have migrated to other districts of West Bengal for better livelihood options.

This shows that out of the total 98% labourers working out of their locations, 93% are working in other states of India. It is also indicative that scope of earning sources is more in other states compared with West Bengal. Though there are several schemes have been initiated from Govt. of West Bengal but such schemes have not been able to keep these labourers in their localities. There are several reasons for which these schemes could not ensure sustained income sources for these people. Migrating to other states for work has been a long practice and it has intensified since last few years owing to limited scope of work in West Bengal.



GROUND REALITIES : LIFE AS MIGRANT LABOUR

Aslam Gazi used to stay in Basirhat-I Block along with his wife and 3 children. He used to work as daily wage earner but with the mere income he could not manage the expenses of the family. In the meantime he met one of the labour contractors and decided to move for Mumbai along with his entire family. It was in January 2020 when he moved to Mumbai and started working as daily wage earner in a construction site, while her wife also started working as domestic help. Life was quite good with the twin income as they could manage the expenses without having much problem. But the situation changed with the sudden lock down declared across the country during end of March 2020.

The crisis started immediately after the lock down was declared as they started suffering from scarcity of food. They had to starve owing to non-availability of food and it resulted in health problem for their 2 year old younger daughter. One of the local clubs helped them with food but that was only for 2 – 3 days. They faced police harassment and were brutally lathi charged on way to hospital for treatment of their daughter. The house owner also forced them to vacate the rented rooms. Leaving all hopes and dreams they decided to go back to their home in Basirhat.

On the way to their journey, they met different consequences, sometimes they faced lathi charged of police, sometimes they got food packets, water from local NGOs. But these supports were not adequate for them. After 2 days of constant journey, they gave up and collapsed on road. Their situation changed a little when they got shelter & work in a cowshed and in return they got vegetarian food for all.

But this also did not stay for long. After few days, two Corona positive cases were detected in that area & the employer started to pressurize them to left that area. However they could stay back till 19th May in that place after having negotiated with that employer. After when Lockdown was little relaxed, they got train ticket with the help of that employer and reached Howrah. Their journey came to an end when they took State bus to reach Basirhat, their locality. Immediately they were taken to local quarantine centre and stayed there for 7 days. In those days, they experienced lots of trouble. Without proper food, water, electricity, medicine & sanitization their life became miserable and that is the reason, they left the quarantine center and came to live in their own house.

In their locality, they faced social stigma, bullying and also faced non-cooperation from their relatives and even from their parents. They are getting only the govt rations and that is the only source of food to them. After Amphan, their situation has become worsen as their house has been affected due the storm. They got little support from local NGOs but nothing is adequate to overcome the situation.

While sharing this situation, Aslam literally cried and expressed that their desire to leave the world as life has become miserable owing to multiple non-negotiable circumstances.

Bikash Bose used to live at his in-laws house in Gobra and aged around 30 years. He went to Goa about eleven months age and started working in a hotel over there. With the sudden lock down declared across the country, he got worried and tried returning home. After having struggled with available transport and on walk he could manage to get back to his residence in Gobra. But the most unfortunate incident happened at that moment that his neighbours did not allow him to stay back. They started creating pressure on the family to keep him away from the locality. Before he had returned, the local Panchayat had made wide announcement for not allowing any external persons during the lock down. This resulted adversely on Bikash, however with repeated request, the neighbour allowed him to stay back but restricted him from any external movement. On one evening he went to a local shop and people immediately attacked him. The entire family was restricted from accessing drinking water from the tap and going to the local shops for purchasing daily needs.

The entire community went against the family. He could not access the free ration support from the Govt. for not having any ration card of any of the members in the family. He also could not avail the benefits of 'Prochesta' or 'Sneher Porosh'. The local Panchayat also did not cooperate with this family.

Her wife informed the entire story to Gokulpur Seva Sadan and immediately after that the team reached his house with drinking water, dry ration and other food items. The 'Bijoyini' survivors' collective members also extended some support to them. Bikash tried to get some work but till now he has not been able to get any job. The Amphan cyclone has damaged their house and for that also they did not receive any support from the local Panchayat. PAT network members arranged for tarpaulin for them.

The entire situation showed about the social stigmatization towards the migrant labourers and this is not an exception as several other such cases also took place in other parts of the district.



Support received during lock down:

Govt. of West Bengal has taken initiative to provide different types of support to the migrant labourers. Significant number of labourers have received such support, however not all of them could access the same due to several reasons.

One of the schemes launched from Govt. of West Bengal titled 'Sneher Porosh'. The findings shows that only 12 (2.8%) respondents could access the benefit of that scheme of INR 1000 one time support. Remaining others could not access the benefit of the same due to sudden discontinuation of the scheme.

On the other hand 109 (25.3%) families have received free ration through the public distribution system. About 10% respondents could not access the same as they were asked to stay at the quarantine centres. Remaining families could not access the service for not having ration card.

Only 2.3% respondents received medical support from Govt. hospitals at times of their illness. Quite interestingly, around 69% respondents have mentioned that they have not received any types of support from the local administration after their return from work and during the lock down situation.

The above situation indicates that significant number of migrant labourers do not have their required entitlement documents as a result they are unable to access the benefits from the government. This is an important issue to be taken care of from the local Panchayat so that these families are not deprived from accessing the services of the government.

Way Forward

In addressing the challenges being faced by the migrant labourers following are the measures that can be undertaken:

- Make provisions for regular ration for these families so that the families can survive without hunger.
- Provisions for low interest loan for them to start small businesses in their localities as quite a lot of them are not in a position to go back to their work locations.
- Arrangement of counselling support to them to overcome the trauma caused out of staying at the quarantine centres.
- Measures to link them to various schemes and programmes of the government.

Major Challenges:

Once the migrant labourers have returned home, several problems have compelled them to strive for alternative means of livelihood. The non availability of entitlement documents has also created problems for them to access the facilities of the government. They are facing challenges in terms of:

- Poor economic conditions to run their families.
- No such source of earning to support the expenses of the families in the lock down phase.
- Arrangement of daily food items has become a challenge for them owing to not having consistent source of income.
- Some of them are undergoing quarantine in different centres for which they are unable to go back to their home and arrange for the daily needs.
- Social stigmatization from the communities owing to their stay at quarantine centres.

OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY, HEALTH AND WORKING CONDITIONS CODE, 2019

July 2020: The revised bill is expected to be tabled in Lok Sabha in the Monsoon session of the parliament.

Criticism to the OSH Code Bill

- NO state accountability in coordination of migration
- NO safer migration support systems
- NEGLIGIBLE monitoring
- NO data maintenance on interstate migration
- NO coverage for unorganized sector workers
- EXEMPTIONS to government departments engaging contract labour whomay also be migrant workers
- UNCLEAR DEFINITIONS of worker and employee, of appropriate authority, of workplace and wages, of Contract Labour

Contributing PAT Network Partners

**Barasat Unnayan Prostuti || Teghoria Institute for Social Movement || Seth Bagan Mahila Sangha
Katakhali Empowerment of Youth Association || Choruigachhi Light House Society || Gokulpur Seba Sadan
North 24 Parganas Sammyo Sramajibi Society || Malipota Association for Transformation of Environment**

PAT SECRETARIAT

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