

Voices of the Invisible Citizens

A Rapid Assessment on the Impact of COVID-19 Lockdown
on Internal Migrant Workers

Recommendations for the State, Industry and Philanthropies



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Photo Credit

Press Trust of India, Reuters and Jan Sahas Team

Foreword

The 21-day lockdown has inadvertently exposed the extreme vulnerability of migrant workers in India. The construction sector contributes to around 9% of the country's GDP and employs the highest number of migrant workers across India with 55 million daily-wage workers. Every year around nine million workers move from rural areas to urban cities in search of work within construction sites and factories. This report is the result of telephonic interviews with 3,196 migrant construction workers from North and Central India. The data paints a dismal picture of negligence and apathy.

55% of the workers we reached out to reported that they earned between ₹200- ₹400 per day to support an average family size of four persons. 42% of the workers mentioned that they had no ration left even for the day, let alone for the duration of the lockdown. 33% of the respondents we interviewed are still stuck in destination cities due to the lockdown with little or no access to food, water and money. A staggering 94% of the workers do not have the Building and Construction Workers identity card, which rules out the possibility of availing any of the benefits that the State has declared from its ₹32,000 crore BOCW fund. This report also highlights the structural flaws in the beneficiary identification systems that are probably going to get in the way of the subsidy and relief reaching migrant workers.

Even after the landmark judgement issued by Justice M B Lokur in the National Campaign Committee for Central Legislation on Construction Labour (NCC-CL) vs Union of India judgement in March, 2018, we have failed to provide migrant workers basic rights to protect their life and dignity enshrined in the law. The decision of these workers to walk from their place of labour back to their homes, despite the possibility of violence, thirst and hunger, pose before the Indian public a huge moral question. In combatting the COVID-19 epidemic, are we going to let migrant workers still stuck in cities, in transit and back in their homes face extreme hunger, thirst and poverty?

If the answer to that question is a clear no, then the need of the hour is a synergy between the State, Industry and Philanthropic institutions and individuals – i.e. to dynamically work together and also work with civil society organizations to find these workers and their families and ensure that they have food that is required to keep them alive in the next six

months, have access to health infrastructure to keep them safe, and provide opportunities to this workforce to help stimulate our distressed economy. More details of our recommendations are provided in the report.

Along with my 40-member team at Jan Sahas, I pay my gratitude to the 3196 migrant workers who shared their trauma, anxiety and fear with us. I am also thankful to Shankar Venkateswaran (ex. chief of Tata Sustainability Group), Mamta Kohli (Social Development Advisor for DFID India), Naghma Mulla and Ahmad Bari (Edilgive Foundation), Aditya Dhar (Assistant Professor of Economics at the Indian School of Business, Hyderabad), Amit Garg (Country Director of GFEMS), Sameer Taware (Laudes Foundation), Svati Chakravarty Bhatkal (Film Director), and Seema B Nair (Independent Consultant) for their guidance and review of the report. We will endeavour to continue to work with the 1,20,000 migrant workers that Jan Sahas has been connected with, to ensure that they live a life of basic human dignity, not just in this moment of crisis, but also in the long run.

Ashif Shaikh

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Key Findings and Recommendations

COVID-19 crisis is manifesting into an unprecedented catastrophe - one that has left all countries of the world in disarray. Countries across the globe are rapidly evolving measures to tackle this crisis. The Indian Government has been one of the first to announce and enforce a total countrywide 21-day lockdown to prevent the spread of the virus, making it the world's largest lockdown.



Source: Jan Sahas Team

This move while necessary unfortunately triggered a reverse exodus of migrant labourers, the magnitude of which has not been witnessed in our times. Thousands of migrant labourers, abandoned by their employers and contractors, found themselves in a desperate situation where basic necessities of food and shelter were taken away from them. This forced them to leave the very cities they had built with their sweat, toil and hard work.

Various national and state level immediate support schemes have been announced; however, for these to materialise on ground, the government needs to strengthen its existing contingency plan. This includes employing all resources at its disposal and partnering with various organisations that have ground level reach with the target communities, in order to cover the last mile gap.

Following are our recommendations:

- Central government should take the lead in coordinating with all states to ensure that there is parity in the economic relief measures that are being announced at State level and the disparities do not create new hierarchies of poverty and discrimination.
- Centre must ensure that essential ration provision is uniformly enforced across states: Unconditional support for rice, dal/pulses and salt. Our survey demonstrates 14% labourers do not have ration cards. Immediate measures must be taken by the Centre and States to provide them ration to prevent hunger deaths.
- Our database shows that around 94% of labourers do not have BOCW cards making them ineligible for any BOCW related benefit transfer. The status of these unregistered labourers remains precarious – if our dataset is representative of the 55 million labourers currently employed in the construction sector then more than 51 million labourers will not have access to



any benefits. There must be immediate measures taken to bring the unregistered workers under the ambit of the Board, and to ensure they receive the benefit.

- Our research demonstrates that 17% of labourers do not have bank accounts: Immediately explore multiple options of ensuring economic benefits reach migrants on time – probably through flexibility in options of availing economic relief either through Jan Dhan accounts, Aadhar identification and cash payment at doorstep using Gram Panchayat and postal offices.

- Our survey shows that a staggering 42% of labourers mentioned that they had no ration left even for the day, let alone for the duration of the lockdown. PM CARES fund must be immediately utilised for income assistance to labourers taking into account the real loss in wages and the stipulated monthly minimum wages, for at least the next 3-6 months to prevent indebtedness or debt bondages, and consequent bonded/forced labour.



Source: Jan Sahas Team

- 31% of workers mentioned they have loans and they will find it difficult to repay it without employment: Directives to be issued to banks to waive off loans of migrant labourers and to reschedule or waive off Self Help Group loans. Another directive addressing moneylenders, contractors and recruiters should be released asking them not to harass workers to repay debt and defer payments for the next 2-3 months.

- Unemployment allowance: Under both MNREGA as well as BOCW laws, there are provisions that allow for the state to pay for unemployment allowance MNREGA. Increase allocations from the Centre for the states to activate these respective provisions in the law, and announce these measures including detailed provisions of payment transfers from Centre to State to ensure that there is no delay in payments.

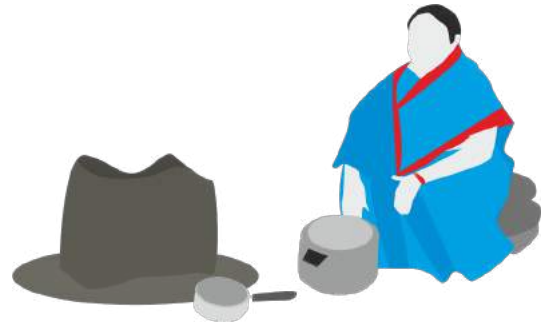
- The directive of the Central Ministry of Labour and Employment advised all public and private establishments to not terminate their employees, especially the casual or contractual labourers or reduce their wages: Our surveys demonstrate 90% labourers (approx.) have already lost their source of income in the last 3 weeks. Centre should immediately institute a mechanism that monitors the job status or change in wages of the employees.



- Immediately, engage frontline health workers to identify and provide emergency support to pregnant women: In our survey, 328 workers mentioned that one of their immediate family members is pregnant. Further, half of these workers asked for immediate material support

because they didn't have enough ration to sustain for the week. Immediate support should be provided to them in the form of prenatal checks, medicines and appropriate nutrition.

- Our survey shows that 62% workers did not have any information about emergency welfare measures provided by the government and 37% workers did not know how to access the existing schemes. This is an important measure to mitigate the current status of fear and confusion: Reach out using online tools like Google Forms for surveys, social media communication and creation of credible IEC material for digital and physical circulation.
- The general practise of considering the male member of the family as the sole and default breadwinner, render female labourers belonging to the household invisible. It must be ensured that women labourers do not lose assistance they are entitled to, due to gender bias in counting.



Introduction

A staggering 77% of India's workforce (3 out of 4 workers) falls under the category of vulnerable employment (World Bank, 2019). One of the largest and most vulnerable workforces of India are seasonal migrants – workers who migrate temporarily. Providing informed assessments or drawing strong conclusions about migrant workers is difficult because of data constraints. Figures for seasonal migrants vary from 15.2 million¹ to 55 million².



The increase in migration globally has been traced back to the widening gap between agriculture and non-agriculture sectors along with the growth in unequal distribution of resources and economic opportunities across regions. The scenario is not different in India, as seasonal migration is largely distress driven - geographically, they are from rain-fed agriculture areas and majority of them are landless or small/marginal farmers who have no livelihood opportunities available post the kharif crop harvest. Seasonal migration is often a response strategy to this crisis of lack of job opportunities and the need to earn basic income for subsistence. These migrants are more likely to be socially deprived and poor while having obtained little to no education, with minimal or no assets. Seasonal migrants, thereby, are placed in a situation where they become extremely desperate to find employment and migration provides them with greater economic prospects, which in turn provides sustenance to the workers and their families. However, it exposes these individuals to harsh and vulnerable situations where work and living conditions are extremely poor³. The vulnerability of migrants is compounded by their caste identity with majority of them belonging to categories such as Other Backward Castes, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribe, as caste determines ability to accumulate wealth, income and remittance level.

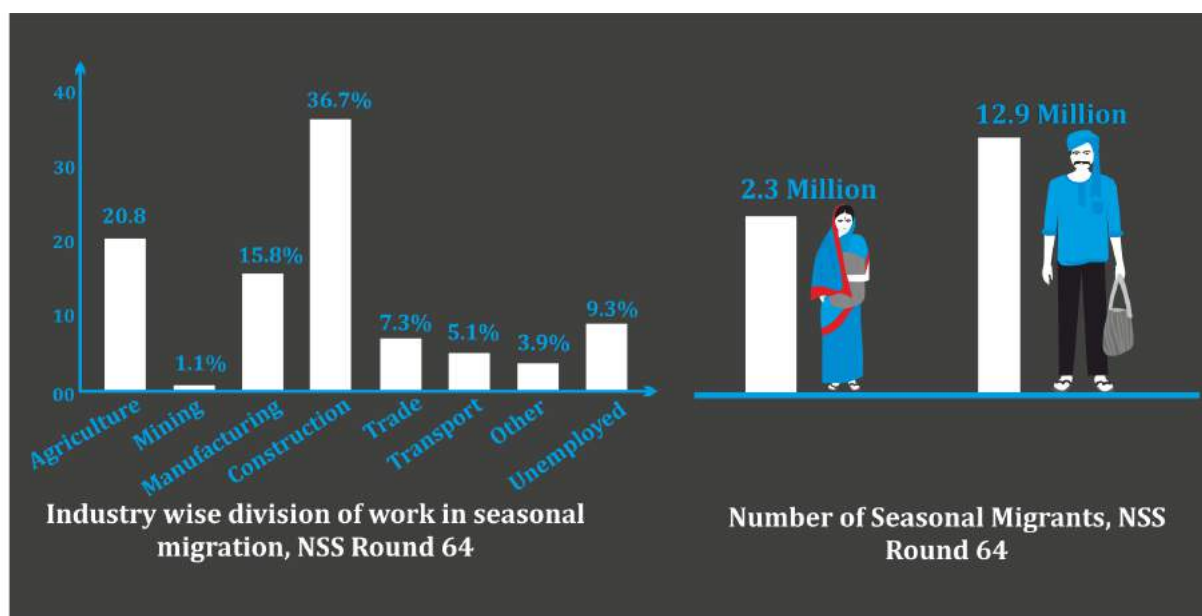
¹ N. S. S. O., 2010. *NSS 64th ROUND (July 2007 – June 2008)*. [Online] Available at: http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/533_final.pdf

² Internal migration in India: A very moving story. [Online] Available at: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/blogs/et-commentary/internal-migration-in-india-a-very-moving-story/>

³ Srivastava, R., 2012. *National Workshop on Internal Migration and Human Development*. [Online] Available at: http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/FIELD/New_Delhi/pdf/Internal_Migration_Workshop_-_Vol_2_07.pdf

In the case of seasonal migration, it is seen that most often the whole family migrates along with the labourer. These families are likely to be deprived of social security benefits that are provided by the state. The non-portability of entitlements and lack of a centralised system in India means that migrants have to forgo the facilities of the public distribution system (PDS) in destination states. In this entire process, the lives of migrant workers' children are most adversely affected. They often have no access to continual education due to the constant movement between source and destination locations – which is a disturbing lacuna given the linearity between out-of-school status and instance of child labour⁴. Furthermore, short-term migrants also face issues in effectively engaging in politics and there is suggestive evidence that voter turnout is lower in states with higher rates of migrations⁵.

The aforementioned challenges that migrant workers and their families confront are comparable across sectors that employ them. A major section of seasonal migrants is involved in construction (37%), agriculture (21%), and manufacturing (16%) work. Construction sector employs the highest number of migrant workers across India with 55 million daily-wage workers and contributes around 9% to the country's GDP. Every year around nine million workers move from rural areas to urban cities in search of work within construction sites and factories alone⁶. Therefore, the focus of this report will be migrant workers engaged in the construction industry given the industry absorbs a significant share of the country's internal migrants, and thereby play an important role in determining the trends of seasonal migration.



⁴ Srivastava, R., 2012. *National Workshop on Internal Migration and Human Development*. [Online] Available at: http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/FIELD/New_Delhi/pdf/Internal_Migration_Workshop_-_Vol_2_07.pdf
⁵ TISS (2015) *Inclusive Elections in India: A Study on Domestic Migration and Issues in Electoral Participation*. Available online http://www.shram.org/reports_pdf/eci_report.pdf
⁶ Westcott, B. & Sur, P., 2020. *Indian migrant workers could undermine the world's largest lockdown*. [Online] Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/27/india/coronavirus-covid-19-india-2703-intl-hnk/index.html>

Migrant Labourers under COVID-19



Source: REUTERS

The whole world is reeling under the pressures of complete lockdowns or severe restriction on movement enforced to halt the spread of COVID-19, which has led to over seven lakh individuals being infected and caused more than 33,000 deaths across the world⁷. In order to contain this fast spreading pandemic, on 24 March 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a nationwide lockdown

as a combative measure, bringing the country to a standstill, giving no time for people to adjust to these stringent conditions, necessary as they may have been. The effect of COVID-19 on the nation's economy and the lives of its citizens is becoming clearer by the day. While every section of the society is affected by the current crisis, it has terribly impacted the unorganised sector where employment is largely contractual.

The effect of the countrywide lockdown on daily wageworkers has been catastrophic in the short term and as time passes, we will learn further about the long-term effects it will have on them. Industry shutdown has rendered workers unemployed across the country. The sudden announcement of the lockdown denied migrant workers particularly the opportunity to collect their wages or make arrangements for leaving cities. During this crisis, transportation facilities have also been locked down as a result of which migrants are now trapped in destination cities with not enough resources to tide over the situation without the ability to pay rent and maintain physical distances since they typically live in very small rooms which they share with several others. Migrant households currently face the risk of hunger, poor or no access to hygiene and consequent health issues.

Rationale of the study

Given migrant families are marked by distress and poverty, which are important causal factors for seasonal migration, it is imperative that we understand the impact that a country-wide lockdown will have on seasonal migrants in both the short and long term. Public intellectuals, academics and civil society



⁷ Data last updated on 31 March 2020 (<https://www.who.int/>)

organisations have repeatedly questioned the inadequate preparation by the State and sudden announcement of extreme measures without consideration for socio-economically weaker sections. It is understood that the vulnerability and marginalisation of this population will only worsen as the lockdown progresses, if they are not provided direct assistance.



Source: Press Trust of India

Since the lockdown, the central government has announced several welfare measures for those whose lives have been severely impacted by the lockdown. Although the welfare measures taken have been a welcome step towards the right direction, the true effectiveness of these schemes in responding to the crisis can only be witnessed over time. However, it is important to note here that the announced measures still largely fail to address the concerns of the many

daily wage migrant labourers who are either stuck in destination sites without employment or access to PDS entitlements in cities or labourers who do not have adequate ration in their own villages. Media reports from across India have highlighted the loss of livelihoods and income of seasonal migrants.

In these challenging times, a rapid assessment of the impact of COVID-19 lockdown measures and the consequent loss of livelihood on seasonal migrants become further more important to ensure their needs and concerns are heard.

Jan Sahas has been closely working with more than 1,20,000 migrant workers, particularly construction workers and other vulnerable communities. This active community helped us in reaching out to 3196 migrant families from the construction sector.

Study objectives

To understand the immediate impact of COVID-19 lockdown and needs of migrant workers and their families.

- To analyse the economic impact of the sudden loss of employment on migrant families.
- To understand access to essential services such as healthcare, public distribution systems (ration), banking, etc.
- To document their self-assessment of the long-term impact of the shutdown, their strategies to cope with the same and expectations from the State.

- To analyse the effectiveness of the current schemes and measures taken by Central and State governments of Delhi, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh to aid migrant labourers.
- To provide strategies and recommendations on the way forward.

Methodology

Rapid assessment has included both primary and secondary sources of information.

Secondary review: Completed a rapid desk research of both existing and the newly-announced schemes as a response to the impact of COVID-19, which is of relevance to migrant families.

Primary research: We utilized a mixed-method approach for this study.

1. Quantitative Research: We carried out a phone-based quantitative survey between 27-29 March 2020. Our 40-member surveyor team reached out to workers through phone calls and entered data using Google forms. Since we were unable to reach workers directly because of the lockdown, we decided to use technology in reaching them. Our existing database of approximately 60,000 workers helped in carrying out this exercise seamlessly. This dataset is part of an ongoing study on longitudinal migration tracking (January 2019 to October 2020)

- **Sample Size:** 3,196 workers (target sample size 5,000 workers)
- **Sampling methodology:** The survey team was provided a sample of 6000 workers (we have often observed in the past that phone numbers are sometimes unreachable or barred, hence we provided a much larger dataset to surveyors). This sample of 6000 respondents was randomly selected from a subset of our dataset of 60,000 workers - in which workers had informed us that they had recently migrated (in the last 1-2 months).
- **Demographic details:** All respondents of this survey are engaged in the construction industry.
 - a) **Age:**
 - 18-30 years: 1749 workers (54.7%)
 - 31-60 years: 1428 workers (44.7%)
 - Above 60 years: 19 workers (0.6%)
 - b) **Gender:**
 - Men: 3038 (95% approx.)
 - Women: 157 (4.9% approx.)
 - Transgender: 1
 - c) **State:**
 - Madhya Pradesh: 1974 workers (68% approx.)
 - Uttar Pradesh: 1169 workers (36% approx.)
 - Delhi: 8 workers (.25%)
 - Other States: 45 workers (1.4% approx.)

d) Number of dependents: 362 workers had 1-2 dependents (11.3%)

1739 workers had 3-5 dependents (55.4%)

1049 workers had more than 5 dependents (32.8%)

46 workers mentioned they did not have dependents (1.43%)

2. Qualitative Research: We carried out brief telephonic interviews with 5 workers and their families, who had called into the Jan Sahas helpline or had requested us for help during the survey. We also interviewed our helpline and response team who provided their inputs regarding the situation on ground. There were two main reasons to carry out these interviews:

- Firstly, we felt the need to qualitatively capture the fears, apprehensions and sense of devastation of workers in the innumerable calls that we received.
- Secondly, given the fast-changing dynamics on the ground, many of the survey questions quickly became redundant and the need was felt to understand a few important aspects in detail, for instance, the situation of workers stranded in transit.

Findings and Discussion

Anguish, helplessness and desperation – largely define the distress calls we received in the Jan Sahas helpline (about 12000 cases from 20-31 March 2020) and during the rapid assessment survey (more than 300 cases from 27-29 March).

A majority of the labourers were trying to return to their homes walking hundreds of kilometres, as they had little to no cash or food supplies left with them combined with an uncertainty of when they will be able to earn something for their sustenance. Labourers with dependents back in the villages expressed their worry about children, pregnant women, sick, elderly, and disabled members of the household who would be most affected, as they have been unable to send any form of remittances to the dependents back home. We also received multiple calls from villages in the Bundelkhand area about not having access to ration.



Source: Press Trust of India



Source: Jan Sahas Team

This also is reflective of the extent of how much migrant workers are excluded from the social mainstream and deprived of the means of living during such times of crisis. Although state authorities, civil society organizations and collectives are attempting to provide immediate relief to migrants stranded with little to no resources in the destination sites and source locations, we cannot overlook the long-term impact of the crisis.

This analysis attempts to provide a rapid assessment of the ground realities to better inform policies and provide action-oriented steps towards mitigating the crisis. In this chapter, we have attempted to analyse measures taken across three major themes: Income, Ration and Support.

The first theme deals with the impact of loss of wages due to sudden unemployment on the already impoverished migrant households, and discusses critically the existing and newly announced schemes that provide financial assistance to the poor. The second theme seeks to explore the

implications of the lockdown on the labourers' food security, specifically in relation to their current unemployment, potentially for the next 3 to 4 weeks. Additionally, this section sheds light on the existing schemes and the newly announced schemes that ensure supply of ration to the beneficiaries. The third theme of support services examines the immediate government directives and state welfare measures taken to address the problems of shelter, transport, health, and sanitation that migrant workers are facing under a nation-wide lockdown.

The following findings are from a combination of critical analysis of government schemes and two different sources of data:

- Existing Jan Sahas database (about 60,000) of migrant workers in the construction sector.
- Rapid assessment survey conducted – 3,196 migrant workers.
- Brief interviews with 5 migrant workers and their families.

“How long can volunteers and charity groups sustain us?”

-Saurabh, a migrant worker from Madhya Pradesh

1. Income

As part of our survey, one of the workers we reached out to was Saurabh. Along with a group of 16 people (including 5 women and 6 children), he was stranded and starving near Badshahpur (Haryana), which is around 15 kilometres from Gurugram, without any food or essentials. All of them were construction workers from Madhya Pradesh, who have been without work since 22 March, 2020. Usually paid on a weekly basis, none of them were paid wages for their last week's work which was abruptly interrupted by the lockdown. Left with no money or food, Saurabh was requesting for any possible help. At the time of writing this report, Saurabh's group has received some rations through the intervention of a citizen volunteer group and a kind-hearted policeman at Badshahpur. The question he posed to us as we ended the call was, *“How long can volunteers and charity groups sustain us?”*

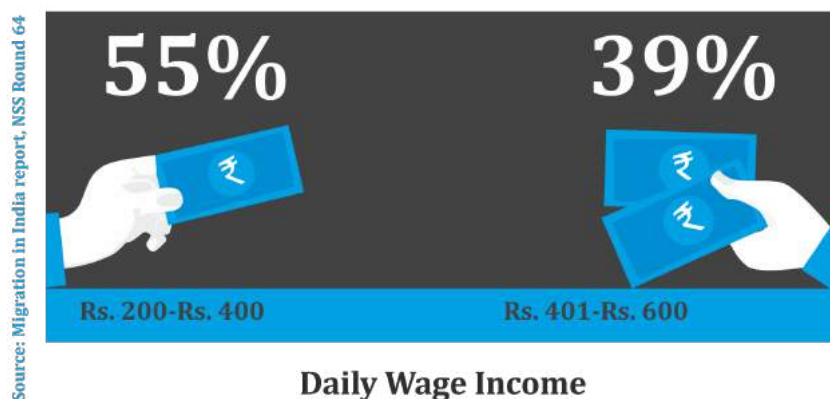
Saurabh's experience is reflective of the current condition of most workers in the construction sector. Having to find sustenance by working in one of the most exploitative and informal sectors, the sudden lockdown will push these workers further to the margins. **Saurabh's question urges us to take a look at how a large number of citizens of this country are being denied their right to live with dignity and instead depend on charity to stay alive.**

I. General Findings

It is a known fact that migrant labourers in the construction sector mostly lead a hand to mouth existence. Owing to the highly informal and exploitative nature of the sector, labourers are most often paid much below the minimum wage rates prescribed by the local administration. Delay in wage payment, non-payment of wages and arbitrary wage fixing are common practices, which marks the precarity of every labourer who depends on the sector.

The prescribed minimum wages for Delhi are ₹692, ₹629 and ₹571 for skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers, respectively⁸. A simple comparison to the current survey demonstrates that at least 55% of migrant workers are severely underpaid - about 55% labourers we

reached out to reported that they earned anything between ₹200- ₹400 on days they worked while 39% labourers earned between ₹400-₹600, and about 4% reported earnings above ₹600 (per day). A positive trend is that a significantly small number of labourers reported that they earned less than ₹200 in a day.



An estimation and cross-comparison of average wage and number of days of work lost demonstrates that the estimated loss of income is between ₹4,000 to ₹10,000 per labourer. **A significantly disturbing data point that emerged from the rapid assessment survey is that 92.5% of labourers have already lost work ranging from one week to three weeks.** In a few calls we received, workers reported that they were evicted from their informal settlements or labour camps, and have been either unpaid or abandoned by their contractors, leaving them with no means for sustenance. Each day of unemployment means absolute loss of wages for every labourer and given the abrupt disruption of employment and the exclusion of migrants from social security measures provided by the state, the migrant households, if they have not already managed to return to their native regions, would have little means to survive the 21 days.

A related point to note is the number of dependents the breadwinner has to support. The rapid assessment survey reveals that around 54% support 3-5 people while 32% support more than 5

⁸ A guide to minimum wage in India in 2020. [Online] Available at: <https://www.india-briefing.com/news/guide-minimum-wage-india-2020-19406.html/>

people. This is further reinforced by Jan Sahas' existing database of migrant labourers in Delhi that places the average number of dependents per worker at 4. If we are to read the data on the number of dependents and wage level together, we can estimate the gravity of the economic burden borne by each labourer.



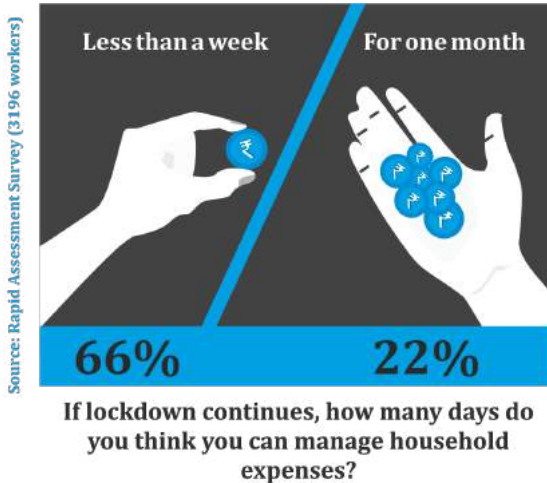
Our survey also tried to understand the burden of debt on each labourer. However, taking into account our learning that most often migrants are not comfortable disclosing details about debt, and that severity of debt bondage and related issues is lesser in the construction sector when compared to the agriculture sector, this was not a compulsory probe⁹. Even then, around 984 labourers (about 31%) confirmed that they had taken loans from either banks, moneylenders, contractors or other sources, out of which 84 (about 8%) labourers mentioned they had loans from multiple entities. Although the amount of debt varies from a few thousands to more than Rs 50000, in the current situation of loss of wages for an indefinite period, the repayment of debt will turn out to be an added burden on the household.

More than 79% (774 out of 984) of the total labourers believed that they would not be able to pay off their debts in the recent future and around 146 mentioned that they didn't know how it would affect them. A disturbing fact is



that close to 50% of the labourers who had taken debt fear that their inability to pay can put them in danger of some kind of violence. This further emphasises the need for the government to ensure its income support schemes urgently reach those eligible.

⁹ Anti Slavery International., 2017. *Slavery in India's Brick Kilns & the Payment System*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.antislavery.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Slavery-In-Indias-Brick-Kilns-The-Payment-System.pdf>



Further, we also wanted to understand workers' plight in the case of a potential extension of the lockdown and when asked how long they would be able to sustain themselves and their families if the lockdown continued beyond 21-days, a significant 66% mentioned they will not be able to manage beyond a week and 22% households mentioned they can manage for a month.

In the absence of any alternate means to earn a livelihood or provision of accessible welfare/supportive schemes, these households will face a major crisis that will inevitably lead to starvation, malnutrition, illnesses, debt bondage or inability to admit children in schools in the subsequent academic year.

II. Government Schemes Analysis

Multiple schemes and directives have been issued by various Central Ministries and State Governments to respond to the crisis. On 25 March, the Finance Minister of India announced a ₹1.7 lakh crore Gareeb Kalyan Yojana which aims to provide ration through Public Distribution System (PDS) and financial assistance through direct benefit transfer (DBT), all of which are to be made available from 1 April 2020. The Gareeb Kalyan Yojana has provisions for fund transfer through DBT to farmers, widow, elderly and disabled pensioners, women Jan Dhan account holders, and to increase the MNREGA wages by ₹20¹⁰.

Direct Benefit Transfer

Currently, pensioners (widows, elderly and disabled) are to be paid ₹1000 for three months in two instalments, which essentially implies a monthly provision of ₹333 per month, which is too meagre to survive during such a situation where employment opportunities are close to zero if one is a daily wage labourer or is dependent on one.



These monetary benefits will be accessible only to the section of the population who have functional bank accounts, or are linked to pre-existing social security schemes. Jan Sahas database of approximately 60,000 workers, suggests that 17% of workers do not have a bank account, hence will

¹⁰ P. I. B., 2020. Finance Minister announces Rs 1.70 Lakh Crore relief package under Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana for the poor to help them fight the battle against Corona Virus. [Online] Available at: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=1608345>

be excluded from gaining any benefit from the financial package announced. Through our extensive experience of working with migrant labourers we have also come to learn that these bank accounts are inactive for at least 30-40% of labourers who have accounts.

Further, as of August 2018, 440 schemes have been implemented in DBT mode, however only 23% Jan Dhan accounts have received such transfers¹¹. The effectiveness of the announced schemes in providing relief to the needy, even if they do have bank accounts, is doubtful. The required linkages with Aadhar also often leads to failed DBT due to technical glitches and bureaucratic issues, which further poses serious concern over the ability of the state schemes to reach the poor¹²¹³.



MNREGA

Considering the reverse exodus from major migration hubs, and the consequent mass unemployment, it is safe to assume that the dependence on MNREGA to ensure sustenance is going to increase manifold. Although the current scheme increases the daily wage by a margin of ₹20 starting from April 2020, the fact that **the government is yet to clear about ₹1830 crore wages pending under the scheme besides the unemployment allowance need to be taken into account¹⁴**. Hence, priority should be given to ensuring that the pending wages and additional missed wages reach the pre-registered labourers during the lockdown period and to increase the acceptance rate of households looking to register for the scheme. It also needs to be noted that often the worker does not receive the wage s/he is entitled to, due to the issues related to DBT mentioned earlier, or corrupt practises of the locally powerful groups in villages who link their own accounts with the card and provide a pittance to the labourer. However, it is also important to note that the coverage of MNREGA has been low due to several reasons, most prominent one being huge number of households being denied job cards. **Our existing database shows that only 30% labourers actually possess job cards, which makes the rest 70% extremely vulnerable during this crisis.** This low rate of job cards could be an indicator of loss of trust in the system that is ridden with corruption, delays in payment release or the low wages.

¹¹Financial Inclusion low despite 356 million Jan Dhan accounts. [Online] Available at: <https://www.factchecker.in/financial-inclusion-low-despite-356-mn-jan-dhan-accounts/>

¹² Dreze, J., 2018. *Hollowing out a Promise*. [Online]

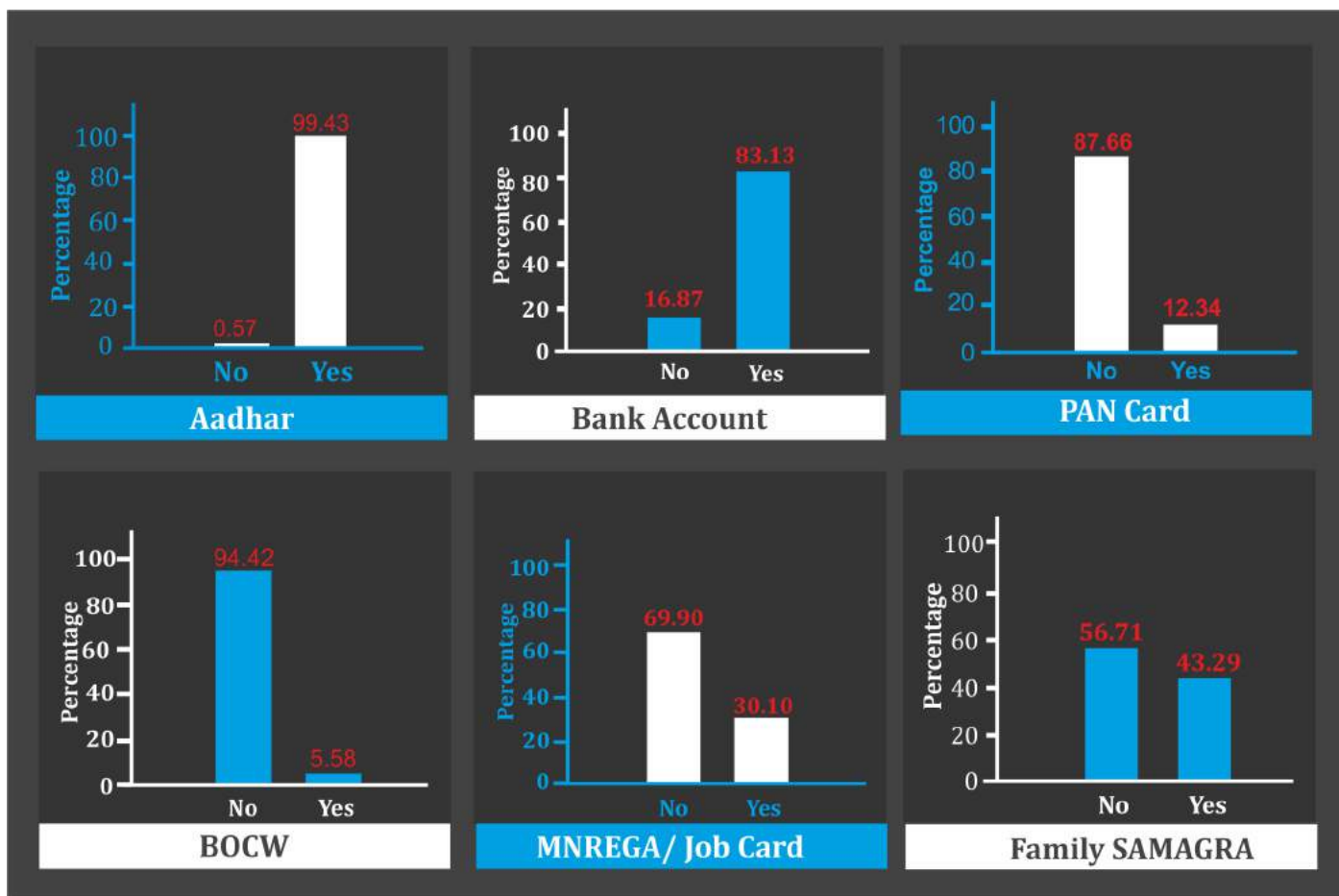
Available at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/nrega-scheme-rural-employment-wages-fare-crisis-modi-govt-5257239/>

¹³ Abraham, N., 2019. *Financial Inclusion Low Despite 356 Mn Jan Dhan Accounts*. [Online]

Available at: <https://www.factchecker.in/financial-inclusion-low-despite-356-mn-jan-dhan-accounts/>

¹⁴ M, 2020. *Financial Statement (2019-2020 As on 31-Mar-2020)*. [Online]

Available at: http://mnregaweb4.nic.in/netnrega/Citizen_html/financialstatement.aspx?lflag=eng&fin_year=2019-2020&source=national&labels=labels&Digest=cN96LBEGlHkRAwn+MUntcQ



Source: Jan Sahas Database of Construction workers (approx.60,000 workers)

Building and Other Construction Workers (BOCW) Welfare Fund

On 24 March 2020, a directive issued by the Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India advised State Governments/ Union Territories to transfer funds to the accounts of construction labourers through DBT from the cess fund collected by the Labour Welfare Boards under the BOCW Cess Act. About ₹52,000 crore is available as cess fund and about ₹3.5 crore construction labourers are claimed to be registered with these Construction Welfare Boards¹⁵. However, only ₹31,000 crore will be available to be spent for this purpose as the rest of the cess fund had been already earmarked by respective state governments to use for expenditure and welfare of construction labourers as per the BOCW rules¹⁶. **Since the transfer of funds under BOCW is a directive, it has limited power and is upon state governments to decide the amount of income support to be provided to labourers.** The construction industry in the country currently employs around 55 million people, in addition to which 45 million people are engaged in related jobs. The number of unregistered labourers is very high, which implies a huge number of labourers would not be eligible for the income support.

¹⁵ P. I. B., 2020. Finance Minister announces Rs 1.70 Lakh Crore relief package under Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana for the poor to help them fight the battle against Corona Virus. [Online] <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=1608345>

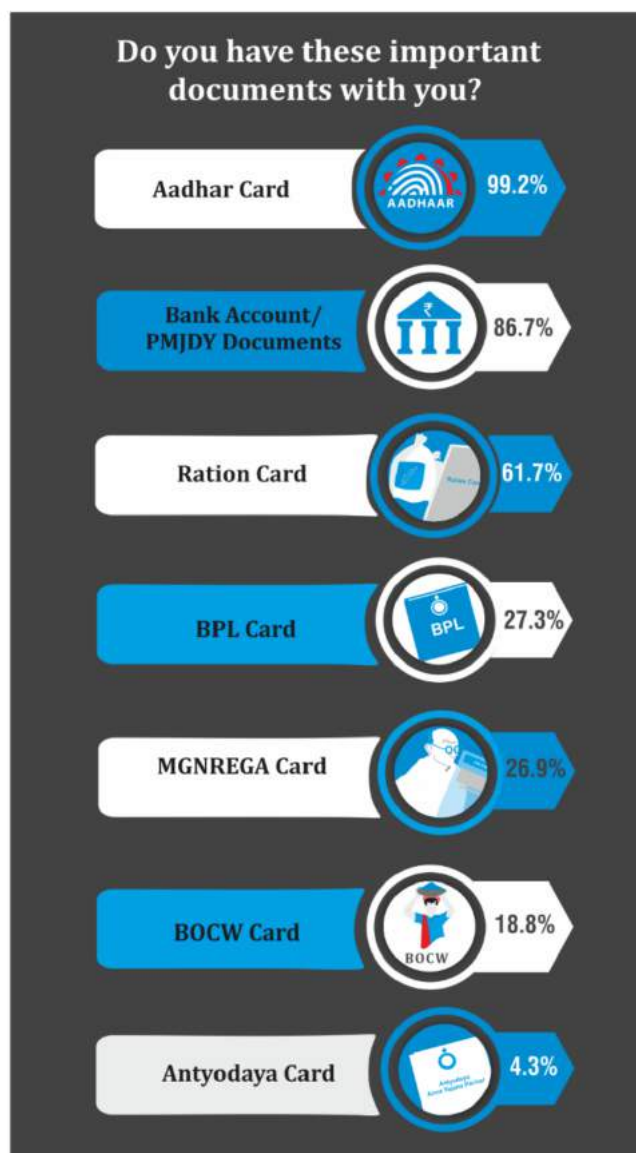
¹⁶ ENS Economic Bureau., 2020. Coronavirus: States asked to use Rs 31,000 crore balance from building and construction workers' fund. [Online] Available at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/business/coronavirus-states-asked-to-use-rs-31000-crore-balance-from-building-and-construction-workers-fund-6333506/>

Following the directive, the Delhi government announced for providing the labourers an amount of ₹5,000, while Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh Governments have announced to provide ₹1,000 each to the labourers. **The state assessment conducted to facilitate the process of the fund disbursal found that currently 20.37 lakh labourers in U.P. are BOCW card holders, although the Board had access to the bank account details of only 5.97 lakh labourers (29% workers). This implies that unless the government conducts a drive to open bank accounts through expedited processes, more than 70% of the registered labourers would not receive the income support they are entitled to.** Further, Uttar Pradesh BOCW board has also sanctioned the disaster relief and help plan, under which the beneficiaries need not provide any application for availing benefits. Under this plan, subsidies would be provided for ensuring the maintenance of registered daily wage labourers¹⁷.

Our database shows that around 94% of labourers do not have BOCW cards, which means they would be ineligible for any benefit transfer. The status of these unregistered labourers remains precarious – if considering our data set is representative of the 55 million labourers then more than 51 million labourers will not have access to any benefits around BOCW.

No Termination

Further, the directive also advised all public and private establishments to not terminate their employees, especially the casual or contractual labourers or reduce their wages. Even if the place of employment is deemed non-operational, the employees are to be considered on duty and paid without any deduction of wages. **However, there is no mechanism that monitors the job status or change in wages of the employees,**



Source: Rapid Assessment Survey (3196 workers)

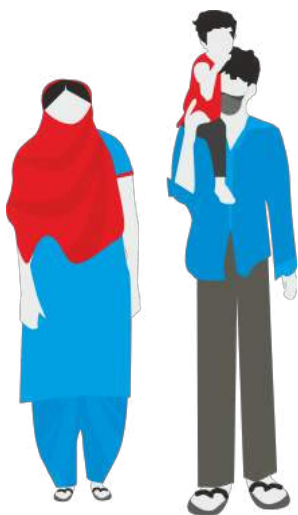
¹⁷ P. I. B., 2020. *Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Information Document - Relief*. [Online] Available at: <http://information.up.nic.in/attachments/files/5e79f792-b32c-4a88-8688-2e530af72573.pdf>

especially of casual and contractual labourers, which is evident by the overwhelming figure 90% labourers (approx.) have already lost their source of income in the last 3 weeks.

2. Ration

“Yahan ruk kar kya hoga? Hum bhookey mar jayengey. Hum log paidal nikal jayengey.” (What will happen if we stay here? We’ll die of hunger. So we will walk home.), said Dilip, one of the many workers who reached out to us through our helpline number. Dilip, along with 30 others, has been stranded at the Gurgaon railway station for the past few days, with very little amount of food and water.

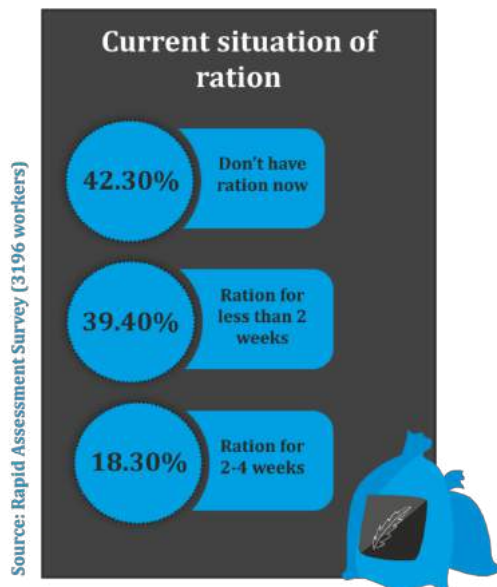
“Hum bhookey hain, bachchey bhookey hain. Hum bohot pareshaan hain. Kya hoga humara? Kuch bhi ho jayey, hum inhey akeyla chhodkar nahi jayengey.” (We are hungry, our children are hungry. We are very worried. What will happen to us? Whatever happens, we cannot leave them alone (these people alone) and go), said a tearful Veeraj over the phone to a Jan Sahas correspondent.



These are not isolated cases of workers looking starvation in the eye, with absolutely no money left to buy the most basic necessity of their existence - food and water. A massive majority of workers who reached out to Jan Sahas through the survey and the helpline pleaded for ration support, more than anything, so that they do not die from hunger. The plight of the workers represents the existing inhuman conditions that led to lakhs of migrants deciding to walk to their homes without any certainty of making it home. This is symptomatic of the crores of migrants and their families being left out of the food safety net in India, whose conditions worsened in the wake of COVID 19.

I. General Findings

In an effort to understand the current condition in terms of having sufficient ration - close to 40% mentioned that they can sustain themselves for the next 2 weeks and 18% stated that they can sustain for the next 2-4 weeks. However, it is important to note that an alarming number of workers – 1,352 workers – that is **42.3% workers stated that they do not have any ration left for the day, let alone for the next few days.** Further, we asked our workers the main obstacles they faced in not being able to buy or access ration - about 33% workers mentioned they did not have the money to buy it, **14% mentioned that they did not have ration cards and about 12% mentioned that they could not access it in their current location as they were migrants.**



The aforementioned conditions reveal the existing precarity that daily-wage labourers and their families experienced after the abrupt lockdown that has clearly put the lives of millions of workers in jeopardy. As mentioned in the previous section, lack of livelihood for more than 3 weeks along with an average of 3-5 dependents to feed has led to genuine fears of dying from starvation before the virus can potentially harm them. According to labourers' own accounts, there is a sheer absence of basic resources - food and water-for them to survive even for another day.

Workers state that while they are aware of the dangerous implications of their actions in the event of a lockdown, they are forced to make a choice between their safety and hunger. Based on reports from media articles, labourers were stranded on borders with no water or food. **Labourers who were working at a construction site stated that they have resorted to consuming water that is used for construction at their site for drinking purposes.**¹⁸ According to a report by Centre for Policy Research on the impact of the lockdown on daily wage labourers in Delhi, even the shutdown of informal safety nets such as religious institutions and street food donation drives for urban poor has been a disadvantage for these individuals.¹⁹

Fear of the implications of the virus on their health, insensitivity of the public, exploitative contractors, police brutality, and government apathy have compounded the already precarious existence of the migrant community in India.

II. Government Schemes Analysis

Studies indicate that poor urban migrants, who are more undernourished than the rest of the country's population, find it difficult to access food at subsidised rates through India's Public Distribution System (PDS) - one of its largest welfare schemes aimed at ensuring food security for its beneficiaries under the National Food Security Act (NFSA).²⁰

¹⁸ Frontline-The Hindu, 2020. Report highlights workers' suffering during lockdown (Online) Available at <https://frontline.thehindu.com/dispatches/article31183768.ece>

¹⁹ Center for Policy Research, 2020. A Crisis of Hunger: A ground report on the repercussions of COVID-19 related lockdown on Delhi's vulnerable populations (Online)

Available at <https://www.cprindia.org/research/reports/crisis-hunger-ground-report-repercussions-covid-19-related-lockdown-delhi%E2%80%99s-0>

²⁰ Department of Food and Public Distribution, 2013 . National Food Security Act,2013 (Online) Available at <https://dfpd.gov.in/nfsa-act.htm>

The allocation of ration to each family is dependent on the number of members and is marked in the ration card issued by the state government to the head of the family. This card is digitally linked to Aadhaar, a 12-digit unique identification number, in line with the efforts towards achieving a 'Digital India'. What was envisioned to revolutionise the idea of welfare of the poor, turned out to be a massive bane, pushing them further towards the margins of the society, and causing multiple starvation deaths across the country. Based on data published by Right to Food Campaign (RTF), in the wake of 14 starvation deaths in Jharkhand between 2017-2018, complications in the government mandates regarding the compulsory linkage of Aadhar and ration cards, resulted in poor families being denied their access to ration through the PDS. Glitches in the biometric system, ignorance by the authorities, government apathy are some of the factors that led to the death of many from the poorest of poor households.²¹

The ₹1.7 lakh crore relief announced by the Central Government through the Gareeb Kalyan Yojana which aims to provide ration through PDS will be made available from 1 April 2020.²² Currently, under the NFSA, the Central Government distributes ration to the Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) households and Priority Households (PHH), which covers over 800 million people, at subsidized rates through 500,000 fair price shops. The AAY and PHH beneficiaries are eligible to receive 35 kilogram (Kg) of food grains per family per month, and 5 Kg of food grains per person per month respectively, at the rate of ₹3/Kg for rice, ₹2/Kg for wheat and ₹1/Kg of coarse cereals.²³ Under the Gareeb Kalyan Yojana, beneficiaries under NFSA would be provided 5Kg wheat or rice per person, along with 1 Kg of preferred pulses per household (per month) free of cost for the next 3 months. A positive note to mention is that this quantum is additional to what the card holder is already entitled to.



Source: Jan Sahas Team

Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY)

Under this plan, the government will also facilitate provision of three LPG cylinders for free to the eight crore beneficiaries of PMUY between April and June 2020. This is aimed at benefiting

²¹ Saha, D., 2018. Did Aadhaar Glitches Cause Half of 14 Recent Jharkhand Starvation Deaths. [Online]

Available at: <https://www.indiaspend.com/did-aadhaar-glitches-cause-half-of-14-recent-jharkhand-starvation-deaths-73702/>

²² Press Information Bureau Government of India, 2020. Finance Minister announces Rs 1.70 Lakh Crore relief package under Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana for the poor to help them fight the battle against Corona Virus (online)

Available at <https://www.mohfw.gov.in/pdf/MoFPMGaribKalyanYojanaPackage.pdf>

²³ Department of Food and Public Distribution, 2013. National Food Security Act (online)

Available at

https://dfpd.gov.in/fgAvAHcAcgBpAHQAZQByAGUAYQBkAGQAYQB0AGEALwBQAG8AcgB0AGEAbAAvAE0AYQBnAGEAgBpAG4AZQAvAEQAbwBjAHUAbQBIAG4AdAAvAA=/1_405_1_NFSA_ACT.pdf

particularly the rural and urban poor, farmers, health workers, migrant workers, disabled, senior citizens and other vulnerable sections of the society.



Source: Press Trust of India

PMUY was introduced in 2016 to distribute 50 million LPG connections to women of BPL families.²⁴ The PMUY hit roadblocks after its initial success, after the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) submitted an audit report which indicated several anomalies with the scheme, one of which is the distribution of LPG cylinders to unintended beneficiaries, as a result of failure to identify the real beneficiaries.²⁵ Furthermore,

obtaining BPL cards is a difficult task due to lack of clarity in the application process. BPL cards are very limited in number, and hence very few urban migrants stand to acquire one²⁶. Owing to the aforementioned factors serving as real obstacles in having access to the benefits under the scheme even in crisis-free circumstances, we cannot rule out potential exclusion that migrant labourers are likely to face in the wake of COVID crisis.

State Schemes

Importantly, the subsidised rates at which the ration is distributed to the beneficiaries is set by the states, hence making any central directives mere guidelines without any enforcing power. Several states have announced various measures to protect the most marginalized from the harsh impacts of the shutdown. Delhi government has declared that every priority card holder would be entitled to a 50% free increase in ration allotment in the subsequent month, starting from 30th March, 2020. Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal also announced that the government would be serving lunch and dinner to nearly 4 lakh people in over 224 night shelters, 325 schools, along with other locations.²⁷ UP government has declared that they would provide free ration for all daily wage labourers' households for one month. This includes the families of 1.65 crore Antyodaya labourers, construction labourers, MNREGA Card holders, who would be provided with 20Kg wheat and 15Kg rice for free through the

²⁴ Government of India, 2016. Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana(online)
Available at <https://pmuy.gov.in/about.html>

²⁵ Financial Express, 2020. After early success Modi gov't's Ujjwala scheme hits roadblock; beneficiaries not refilling cylinders (online)
Available at
<https://www.financialexpress.com/economy/after-early-success-modi-govts-ujwala-scheme-hits-roadblock-beneficiaries-not-refilling-cylinders/1810361/>

²⁶ Srivastava, R. 2020. Vulnerable Internal Migrants in India and Portability of Social Security and Entitlements(online)
Available at http://www.ihindia.org/Working%20Ppaers/2020/IHD-CES_WP_02_2020.pdf

²⁷ India Today, 2020. Delhi Govt. pushes delivery of ration to tide over crisis (online)

Available at <https://www.indiatoday.in/mail-today/story/coronavirus-in-india-delhi-govt-pushes-delivery-of-ration-to-tide-over-crisis-1661139-2020-03-30>

state's PDS shops. Additionally, the state has set up 527 community kitchens across various districts, and has activated delivery systems as an attempt to adhere to the parameters of quarantining, and social distancing²⁸. Similarly, MP government has announced that they would provide free ration for one month for all BPL households.²⁹

However, it is important to understand that free supply of the total quota of ration for a month is not sufficient for the families to sustain, especially in times of crisis like a global pandemic. **Our survey indicates that a majority of the workers do not have sufficient ration to sustain this week. They have already lost between 1 to 3 weeks of work and will further be out of jobs for the next three weeks. Owing to the precarity in finding jobs, and difficulties in starting over, it is important on the governments' part to ensure that free ration is provided for a minimum of 3 months, up to 6 months.**

It becomes relevant to also note that the relief schemes announced currently aim to benefit only those who are ration card holders. As previously mentioned, 14% of workers in our survey did not have a ration card.

Further, even if we were to assume that most workers are ration card holders, the schemes do not adequately address the problem of non-portability of ration cards, especially in the context of migrant labourers stranded in destination states. **In the case of migrant labourers who are often on the move in search of jobs, the non-portability of the ration card poses a severe disadvantage for them and their families, often leaving them out of the food safety net.** When inquired about the kind of support that is expected at this juncture, 80% of labourers stated the access to ration would be of most help to them.

While the migrant community by and large, in usual circumstances, stands to lose out on their ostensible eligibility, it is only the need of the hour that better mechanisms be put in place to ensure food security of all workers and their families. As mentioned earlier, states have considerable autonomy in determining the operation of PDS, which means that migration patterns must be taken into account by the destination states and source states, by actively engaging with civil society organizations working with inter-state migrants.

²⁸ Livemint, 2020. Yogi govt.to give aid to daily wagers in Uttar Pradesh (online)
Available at <https://www.livemint.com/politics/policy/coronavirus-yogi-govt-to-give-aid-to-daily-wagers-in-uttar-pradesh-11584502871769.html>

²⁹ The Hindu, 2020. Madhya Pradesh Government to give BPL families free ration for a month (online)
Available at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/madhya-pradesh-govt-to-give-bpl-families-free-ration-for-a-month/article31168585.ece>



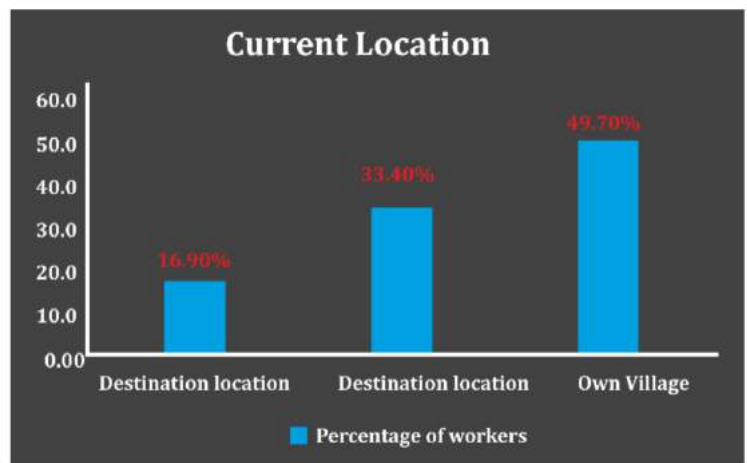
3. Support Services

Since the nationwide lockdown, reports have been pouring in about scores of individuals, mainly seasonal migrants, walking back home. As mentioned earlier, many labourers have reported non-payment of wages, being removed from their jobs, inability to pay rent, facing evictions from both rented rooms and worksites. This inevitably has led to the mass reverse exodus that was covered extensively by the media³⁰.

The announcement of the central and state economic relief packages/ schemes to support labourers didn't help in stopping this mass movement of workers walking back home. According to our survey, more than 33% labourers were stuck in destination cities due to the lockdown. Close to 50% of migrant labourers were already in their villages, but face different challenges such as no income and accessibility to ration.

Transportation and Shelter

The lack of a place to stay combined with genuine fears of going hungry has led these migrant households' unabated efforts to go back to their home states. However, with transport facilities being unavailable, migrants in large numbers have been travelling long distances on foot to reach their villages. With no means of subsistence within cities, these migrants see this return as the only viable option even if it means facing hardships on the way.



According to a distress call that we received on our helpline, Mohan Das along with a group of ten workers had been walking for three days from Delhi to Jhansi with little food and water. After walking day and night, they lost their way in Agra. Fortunately, Mohan Das and his group managed to reach Jhansi safely the next day, however they had to walk most of the way. On the other hand, Geeta, a daily wage labourer in Surat, could not return to her village in Banswara district in Rajasthan due to her

³⁰ The Wire, 2020. *How the Lockdown Drove a Workforce on the Margins to Further Alienation*. [Online] Available at: <https://thewire.in/labour/lockdown-charter-of-demands-internal-migrant-workers>

age and inability to walk long distances. In Surat, with most shops being shut and no income, she was fortunate to have found a government run shelter for food.³¹

Migrant workers are travelling for long distances without any food or water while many have complained of harassment by police officials during their journey. According to Rajeev Khandelwal of Ajeevika Bureau, *“a large number of migrants are travelling back home but its prevention by state authorities has further worsened the situation. They are being denied entry at the borders of their home states. The reasons for them to stay back in cities are now limited with no jobs and limited ration. They should be allowed to go back home otherwise these restrictions could have a major humanitarian crisis kind of effect”*³².

Considering the mass movement of migrant labourers from destination sites, the directive of the Union Home Ministry on 29 March 2020 instructed governments of all states and UTs to curtail the movement of migrants and make arrangements for providing them food and shelter. They instructed all state governments to immediately set up relief camps for migrant workers who are trying to return to their native regions, and disseminate information about the location of relief camps and facilities that are being made available, by enlisting the service of NGOs and volunteers. It was also ordered that all district and state borders be sealed along with ensuring proper thermal screening and quarantine of migrants. The states have been advised to utilize the State Disaster Response Fund for implementing these measures.



After these directives, many states have swung into action such as Uttar Pradesh, which has started making arrangements to establish quarantine facilities for migrant workers at lodges and hostels. The task for ensuring thermal screening and quarantine of migrants returning to the state has been placed upon district magistrates³³. However, as a measure to disinfect migrants entering Bareilly district of Uttar Pradesh, they were showered with sanitiser solutions. To justify this deplorable act, the district administration has viewed it as a *“necessary step towards eradication of any possible spread of the*

³¹ Lalwani, V., 2020. *Coronavirus: ‘Why has Modi done this?’ Rajasthan workers walk back home from Gujarat.* [Online] Available at: <https://scroll.in/article/957245/coronavirus-after-lockdown-migrant-workers-take-a-long-walk-home-from-gujarat-to-rajasthan>

³² Shroff, K., 2020. *“We are deserted”: Migrant workers forced to walk hundreds of kilometres due to lockdown.* [Online] Available at: <https://caravanmagazine.in/news/we-are-deserted-migrant-workers-forced-to-walk-hundreds-of-kilometres-due-to-lockdown>

³³ Gaur, V., 2020. *UP faces uphill task of monitoring each returnee for Covid-19 symptoms* Read more at: https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/up-faces-uphill-task-of-monitoring-each-returnee-for-covid-19-symptoms/articleshow/74878828.cms?utm_source= [Online] Available at: https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/up-faces-uphill-task-of-monitoring-each-returnee-for-covid-19-symptoms/articleshow/74878828.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

disease". This dehumanisation of migrants and their children has led to criticism by the public. The chemicals used for sanitisation could lead to health problems rather than ensuring their safety.³⁴

The Madhya Pradesh government has also assured migrants from the state that they have spoken to six other state officials to ensure relief arrangements for them in destination cities, appealing to them to not make the journey back home.³⁵

Even before the directives were issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs, there were some states taking direct relief measures towards curbing the movement of migrants. For example, Delhi government on 28 March had appealed to migrant labourers to stay where they were to limit the spread of the pandemic. The CM of Delhi also added "*if tenants are unable to pay their rent for one-two months, the government will pay on their behalf*". In his statement, Mr Kejriwal also mentioned that additional arrangements were being made in schools for lodging purposes along with the emptying of stadiums for people to stay in if the situation arises³⁶.

Additional arrangements come as a welcome step as it was doubtful whether the existing mechanism would be able to cater to the large and constantly increasing numbers of people in need of food and shelter in the city, while also following necessary precautions to avoid transmission of any diseases, given that the night occupancy capacity of the existing 234 shelters was just 8084³⁷. The shelters are also under-resourced to deal with the sudden surge in the inflow of people and are overcrowded.

The extensive media coverage of the mass movement of migrants, media reports along with concerns by activists and public has ensured that the centre and state move towards direct action now in addressing this issue. Across media reports, a similar statement is heard "*Forget COVID, we will die of hunger first*". Migrants even before the spread of the pandemic have often been at risk of facing poor and unsafe living conditions especially within destination cities. The different factors which make their living conditions often vulnerable include overcrowding which could lead to transmission of infectious diseases, poor nutrition, quality of water, poor sanitation which could include

³⁴ Rashid, O., 2020. *Coronavirus: In Bareilly, migrants returning home sprayed with 'disinfectant'*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/coronavirus-in-bareilly-migrants-forced-to-take-bath-in-the-open-with-sanitiser/article31204430.ece>

³⁵ Sharma, R., 2020. *Madhya Pradesh lockdown: To stall migration, CM appeals work workers to stay*. [Online] Available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bhopal/madhya-pradesh-lockdown-to-stall-migration-cm-appeals-workers-to-stay/articleshow/74878125.cms>

³⁶ News18, 2020. *Kejriwal Urges Migrant Workers to Stay in Delhi to Prevent Spread of Virus, Says Govt Will Pay Their Rent*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.news18.com/news/india/if-we-dont-follow-lockdown-we-will-fail-as-a-country-to-contain-covid-19-says-delhi-cm-kejriwal-2556177.html>

³⁷ News18, 2020. *Night Shelters Providing Food to Over 20,000 People in Delhi Amid COVID-19 Lockdown*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.news18.com/news/india/night-shelters-providing-food-to-over-20000-people-in-delhi-amid-covid-19-lockdown-2552597.html>

accommodations lacking proper sanitation facilities³⁸. In a country where public toilet coverage is dismal and poorly maintained, it is apparent that the ones on the move have no option than resorting to open defecation, and no means to follow the hygiene practises that would protect them from COVID infection.

Rent

Another major concern among this vulnerable section, especially for those at the destination, is their inability to pay rent for their accommodation in the coming month that approximately 900 (about 28%) workers voiced during the survey. About 73 of these workers (8%) lived in the fear of being expelled from their rented rooms, as they will not be able to pay the rent for the subsequent month. However, a large portion of our sample, about 68%, reported that they did not pay any rent. A possible explanation to this is that rent is not a concern to more than approximately half of the sample who are already in their villages.

The lockdown has led many landlords to abruptly evict or threaten to evict tenants across the country such as in the case of Ranjini, whose biggest challenge is the threat of eviction by her landlady due to her inability to pay rent. If that happens, Ranjini, her husband, her brother, along with her little baby will be forced to try and walk to Chhatarpur, Madhya Pradesh. Her husband and brother are labourers while she works as a domestic worker in Gurugram. The work on the '*kothi*' (bungalow) where the men were employed stopped since the lockdown and the contractor has not paid them any pending wages. Following this, the Home Ministry under the disaster management act issued directives³⁹ stating that rent for a period of one month shall not be demanded by landlords from poor workers and migrant labourers. They added that if there were any forceful evictions, then those landlords would face action.

Healthcare

The COVID-19 outbreak further poses a severe risk to our healthcare system. In 2017, it was estimated that 23,582 government hospitals were available in India out of which 84% were in rural areas. But even with most hospitals within rural areas, **only 39% of total government beds across India were present in these hospitals⁴⁰. Even without a pandemic, the ability to provide proper healthcare in rural areas has been challenging.**

³⁸ Borhade, A., 2011. *Migrant's (Denied) access to health care in Ind.* [Online]

Available at: <http://www.dishafoundation.ngo/projects/research-pdf/migration-and-health-in-india.pdf>

³⁹ Ministry of Home Affairs., 2020. *MHA Order restricting movement of migrants and strict enforcement of lockdown measures.* [Online]

Available at:

<https://mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/MHA%20Order%20restricting%20movement%20of%20migrants%20and%20strict%20enforcement%20of%20lockdown%20measures%20-%202020.03.2020.pdf>

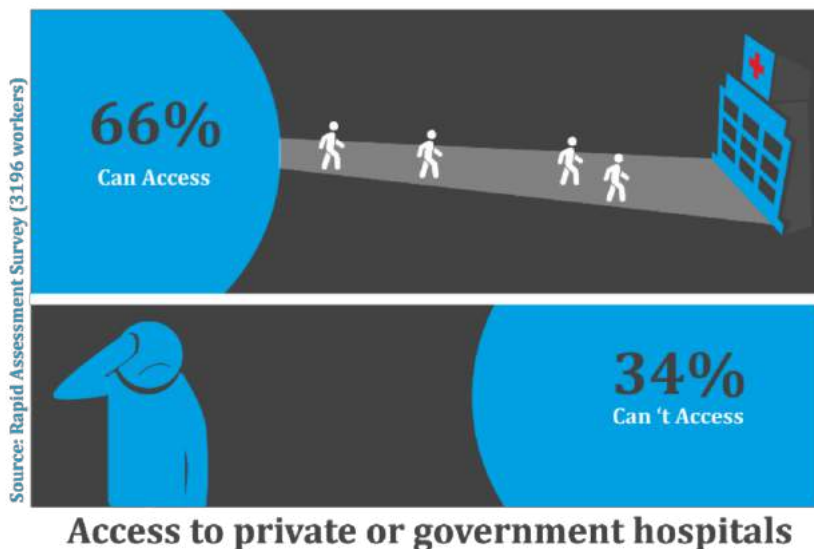
⁴⁰ Borhade, A., 2011. *Migrant's (Denied) access to health care in Ind.* [Online]

Available at: <http://www.dishafoundation.ngo/projects/research-pdf/migration-and-health-in-india.pdf>

Additionally, with the healthcare system already being burdened across India to contain the pandemic, for those individuals with pre-existing/ other diseases can be a serious challenge to access hospitals. Seasonal migrants with lack of monetary resources usually turn to government hospitals or clinics for their medical needs. Out of this more than 200 labourers stated that they themselves or their family members would face problems if hospitals were not accessible (for those who have prior medical conditions) and 15% felt that this 21-day lockdown would cause them problems due to illness. Further according to our survey, more than **1,100 labourers (about 34%) mentioned they can't access government or private hospitals when required.**

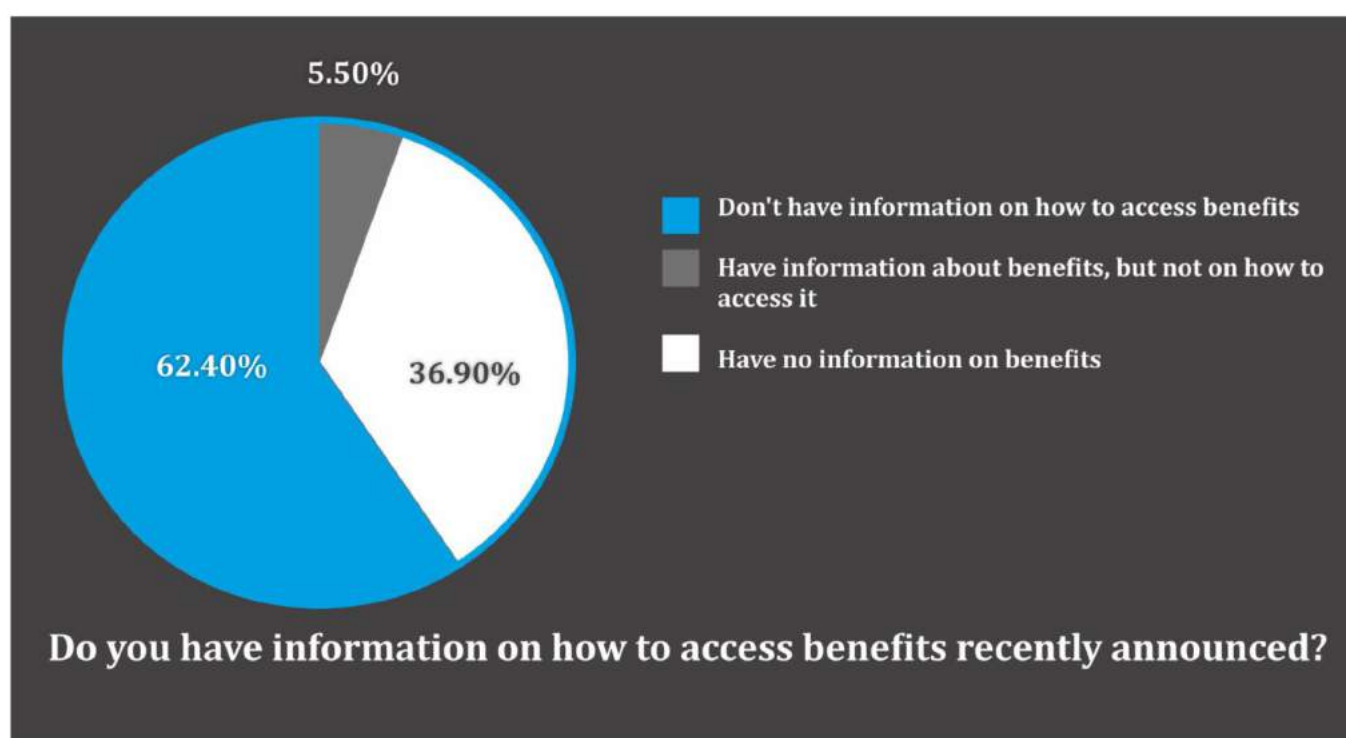
It also needs to be noted that from our survey, 328 labourers (10% approx.) confirmed that their households included someone who was pregnant, out of which, 143 labourers mentioned that they don't have ration available to sustain themselves or their families for this week. Even in the case of

distress calls we responded to, often the workers were in groups of 5-40 that included infants, children and pregnant women, who have been walking, trying to get back home, without water or food supplies, or in need of medical attention. Such is the case of Maya, a migrant worker from Panna in Madhya Pradesh. She currently works in Gurugram at a construction site. Maya's younger sister, Savitri, is pregnant and due to deliver in 20 days. The announcement of a lockdown created panic in her settlement leading to many workers packing up and leaving for their villages by foot and buses. But Maya could not leave as she needed to take care of her sister. Maya had reached out to our helpline for assistance in organising a vehicle for transport back to Panna. Travel during the lockdown is a great risk but for Maya staying back with no support system is equally dangerous. Maya further stated, *"Gaon pahunch jayengey to humey madad mil jayeygi. Yahan hum kisiko nahi jantey. Humarey sarey log chaley gayey. Hum akeley hain yahan. Paisey khatam ho gaye hain, ration nahin hai. Agar Savitri ko kuch ho gaya, mai kyaa karungi?"* (We will be able to receive help once we reach the village. Over here we are all alone, as the people we know have left. All our money is over and neither do we have any ration left. If something happens to Savitri, what will I do?). With Savitri's due date inching closer, Maya's major worry is their accessibility to a hospital and transport presently.



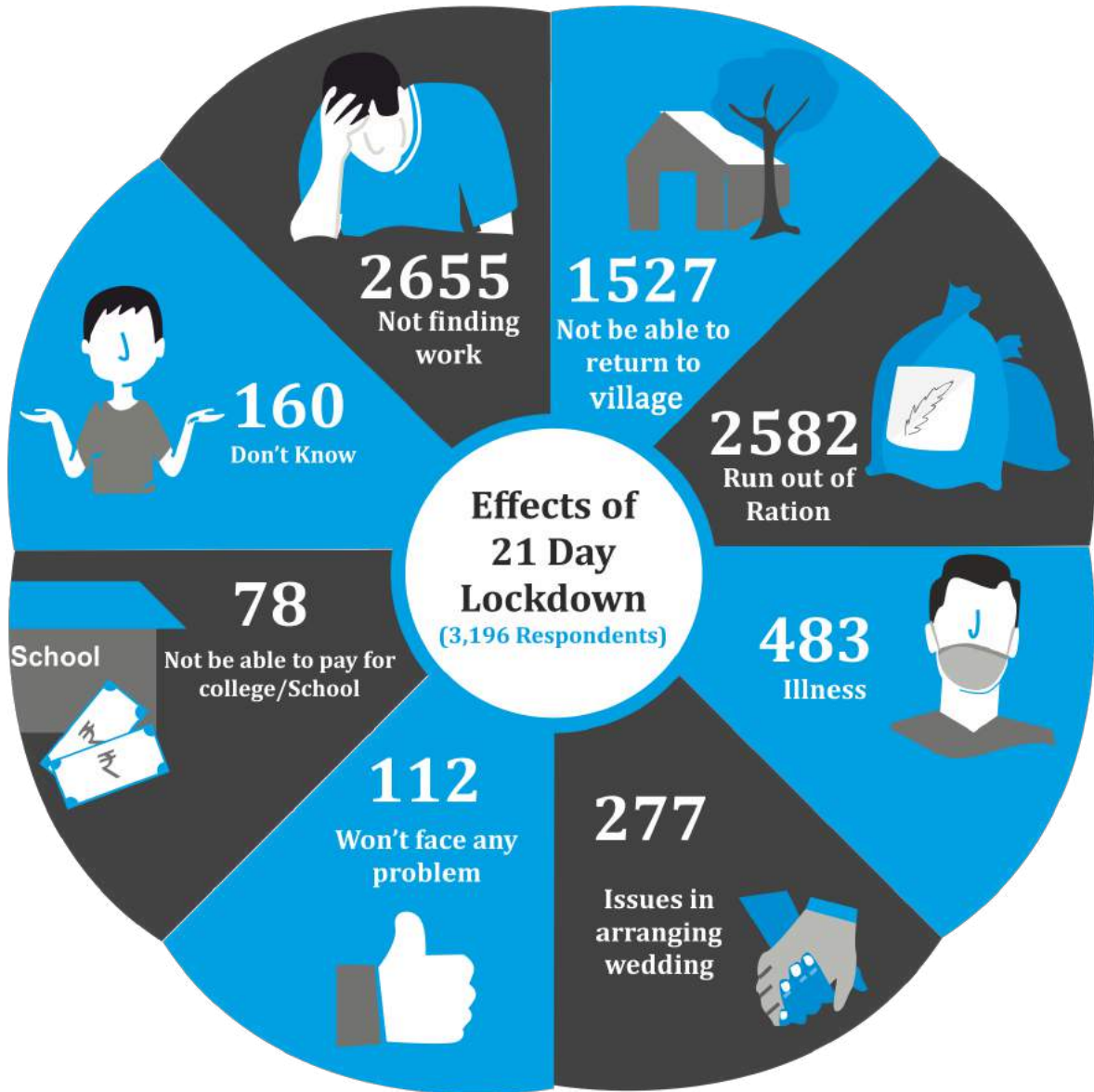
Conclusion - Apprehension and Hope for Future

All citizens today are being asked to quarantine and protect themselves and others from infection, while elected representatives and the governance machinery is being instructed to direct all its resources and energy towards containing and mitigating the threat of COVID-19 to public health. Ever since the declaration of the nation-wide lockdown, migrants have been walking in large groups through highways, crossing jungles and gathering around bus stations in the hope to be able to return home.



Source: Rapid Assessment Survey (3196 workers)

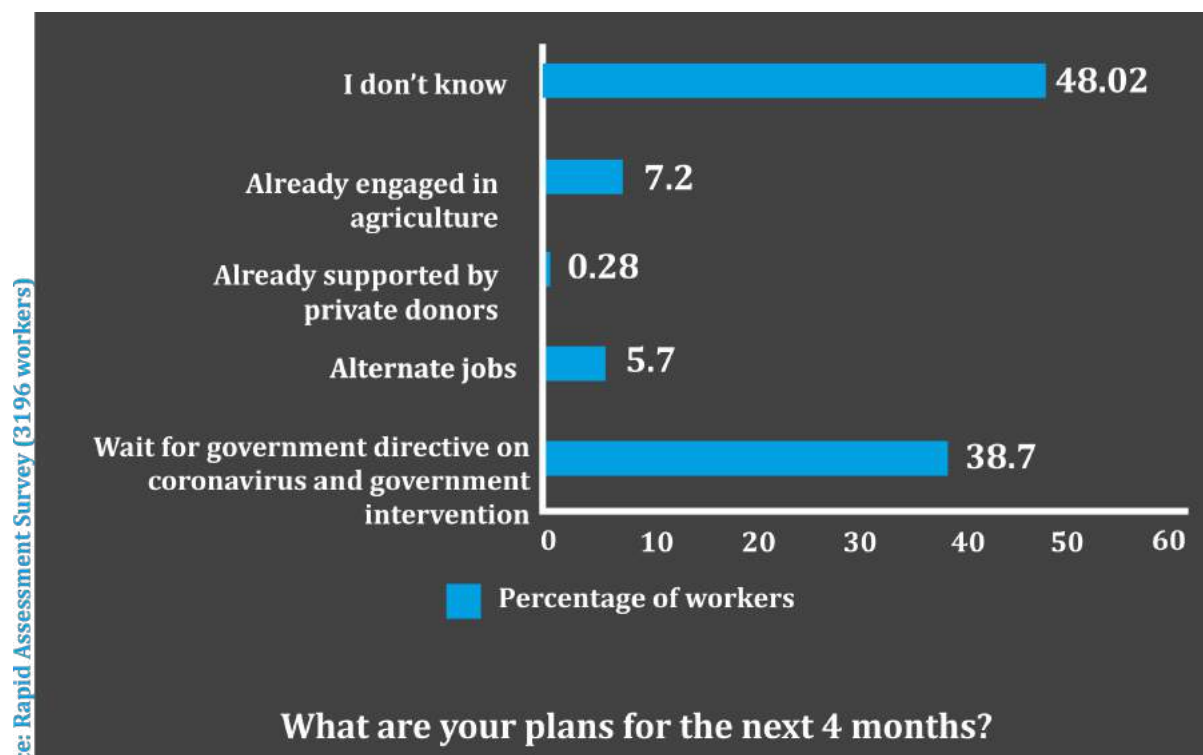
It is no secret that our cities are built on the labour of millions of migrant labourers. The mass reverse exodus proves that if unable to work, then there is nothing left for a migrant in a city. This shows how in cities, **migrants are being reduced merely to their labour power, not considered equal citizens** by either the civil society or the state, and thereby denied any social community to fall back on. It is also symptomatic of the exclusion of the migrant population from all social safety mechanisms. It is further unacceptable that the welfare of migrants was not mentioned even once in any of the directives issued by state agencies until it became impossible to avoid the videos and pictures of large groups of migrants walking in deplorable conditions flooded the media.



Source: Rapid Assessment Survey (3196 workers)

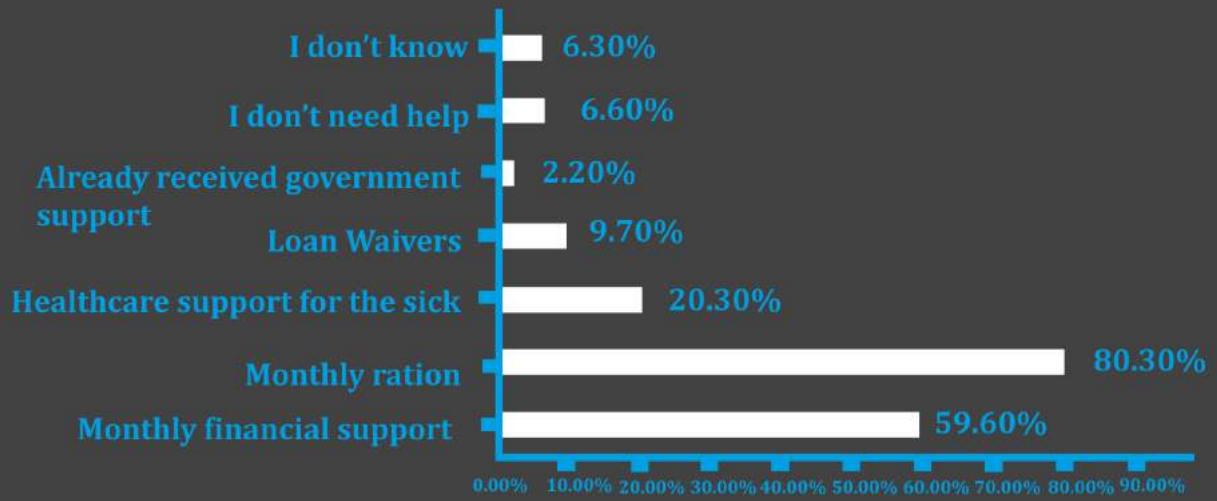
What do you think will be the impact of the 21 days lockdown on you and your family?

As of today, there are multiple schemes and directives that have been issued by various Central Ministries and State Governments to respond to the crisis consequent to COVID-19 related lockdown. **However, this critical information has not yet reached 62% of the labourers we reached out to.** Only a mere 5% confirmed that they were aware of the provisions and knew how to access them, while 37% of them were aware of the provisions, but did not know how they would be able to access it. This information gap may prove critical in the effectiveness of the schemes announced in ensuring welfare of these labourers and their households. **Efforts must be directed to ensure that migrants receive information.**



Our survey shows that only 13% of the labourers have alternative livelihood options to depend on, while 48% of them are uncertain what their immediate future would look like. Only 39% among the workers we reached out to said that they were looking forward to the state to intervene. This is reflective of the low levels of trust one of the most vulnerable communities of the country places on its government – therefore, immediate measures must be taken to reach out to migrant workers and their families to re-build trust and build confidence.

As we asked what their demands were at this time of crisis, a majority of the labourers we reached out to responded that they needed the government to step in to provide them ration and income assistance for at least a few months. Several of them also demanded free provision of healthcare services. **As we listen and respond to the distress faced by the migrant population today, it is imperative that we move beyond providing immediate relief measures, and reimagine ways in which we perceive development by foregrounding these voices.**



What help do you wish you are provided with in this moment of crisis?

Source: Rapid Assessment Survey (3196 workers)

Detailed Recommendations

Key Recommendations for the Central Government

1. The Indian public, charity organizations, and innovations by the private sector and individuals have demonstrated an incredible capacity to meet the climate of fear and restrictions with actions resounding of hope, generosity and empathy. From every corner of India there are stories of assistance, volunteering and collective action that needs to be recognised by the media, public administration and political class. This kind of public recognition will not only award and incentivise positive behaviour and actions, but also motivate persons who are still not participating to think and contribute constructively.
2. Take the lead in coordinating with all states to ensure that there is parity in the economic relief measures that are being announced at State level and the disparities do not create newer hierarchies of poverty and discrimination.
3. Devise mechanisms in consultation with researchers and experts on multiple options of ensuring that economic benefits reach the intended beneficiaries in a time sensitive manner. This involves flexibility in options of availing economic relief either through Jan Dhan accounts, Aadhar identification and cash payment at doorstep using Gram Panchayat and postal offices.
4. Our survey shows that a staggering 42% migrant labourers mentioned that they had no ration left even for the day, let alone for the duration of the lockdown. This calls for an urgent provisioning of financial assistance to every labourer, to help them cater to their immediate needs. Given that there is no certainty in terms of when a labourer would be gainfully employed again, income assistance must be provided to labourers taking into account the real loss in wages and the stipulated monthly minimum wages, for at least next 3-6 months.
5. Increase existing assistance amount: Given the intensity of loss borne by each household, the pension amounts announced (₹1,000 payment for all pensioners and ₹1,500 for women beneficiaries of Jan Dhan Yojana for 3 months) is insufficient. This adds up to a meagre ₹333 and ₹500 in a month. In this crisis phase - this amount needs to be immediately increased to a minimum of ₹1,000-₹1500 per month for the next 6 months.
6. Widen bank account access through Bank Mitras: Our existing database of 60000 workers suggests that 17% of workers do not have a bank account, and will hence be excluded from

gaining any benefit from the financial package announced. Through our extensive experience of working with migrant labourers we have also come to learn that bank accounts are inactive for a vast majority of labourers who have accounts. Considering all benefits are facilitated through direct benefit transfer mode, urgent measures must be taken to increase banking access through an increase in the number of Bank Mitras and expanding the reach of banks.

7. Debt waiver: During such a crisis, it is highly probable that the burden of pre-existing debts might increase and pressure to repay it might lead to further debt, pushing households in a vicious cycle of debt bondage. Directives should be issued to banks to waive off loans of migrant labourers and to reschedule or waive off Self Help Group loans.
8. MNREGA wages: Although the Centre has raised the wages under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) by ₹20, from ₹182 to ₹202 a day, labourers would not be able to gain benefits from this since the worksites will not be functional due to the lockdown. The scheme has 128 million active labourers and it must be ensured all of them are paid full wages for lost days.
9. Pending MNREGA wages: The government is yet to clear about ₹1,830 crore wages pending under the scheme besides the unemployment allowance. This due must be cleared immediately and it must be ensured that wages reach the workers. Preliminary assessment of the number of workers who have wage pending and reasons for the delay or non-payment, need to be facilitated to rectify their issues.
10. Lack of job opportunities under MNREGA: Our existing database shows that only 30% labourers actually possess job cards, which makes the rest 70% extremely vulnerable during this crisis. Efforts must be taken to increase the coverage of the scheme.
11. Unemployment allowance: Under both MNREGA as well as BOCW laws, there are provisions that allow for the state to pay for unemployment allowance. Increase allocations from the Centre for the states to activate these respective provisions in the law, and announce these measures including detailed provisions of payment transfers from Centre to State to ensure that there is no delay in payments.

12. The general practise of considering the male member of the family as the sole and default breadwinner, render female labourers belonging to the household invisible. It must be ensured that women labourers do not lose assistance they are entitled to, due to gender bias in counting.
13. Government of India must waive FCRA conditions that currently restrict NGOs from investing in health and relief work, and assist the voluntary sector to proactively reach out to most vulnerable sections across India. This includes upcoming deadlines for renewal of FCRA permits, and tax exemptions.
14. The directive of the Central Ministry of Labour and Employment advised all public and private establishments to not terminate their employees, especially the casual or contractual labourers or reduce their wages. However, there is no mechanism that monitors the job status or change in wages of the employees, especially of casual and contractual labourers, which is evident by the overwhelming figure 90% labourers (approx.) have already lost their source of income in the last 3 weeks.
 - (a) Measures must be taken to monitor the infrastructure development companies, and other similar companies/contracting agencies and ensure they comply with the directive and retain labourers and pay them full wages for the lockdown period.
 - (b) Those companies that have maintained labour camps must be advised to continue with all facilities (food, water, sanitation, hygiene, etc.) during lockdown.
 - (c) This should be monitored by the Labour department (as implemented in Kerala).
 - (d) A helpline should also be available for this purpose to report possible cases of landlords evicting tenants.
15. The Ministry of Home Affairs directives (29th March 2020) must be implemented on an immediate basis by the states. Specific attention must be paid to the following:
 - (a) Shelter/Lodging for migrant workers in destination cities which adhere to prescribed guidelines for sanitation and health on the basis of hygiene and social distancing parameters.
 - (b) Relief camps or quarantine centres set up near highways should have adequate sanitation facilities. As per Factories Act guidelines, one toilet per 15 people should be available in these centres. These toilets should be regularly maintained and cleaned.
 - (c) Transport should be arranged to and from testing centres for migrant labourers in by state- and privately-owned bus operated in collaboration.

16. Strict following of protocols and orders: It must be ensured that directives issued by the Centre and State officials should be implemented by district and block nodal officers especially in the case of quarantine and sanitation measures. Centre and states must ensure strict monitoring. In cases where officials do not follow directives, they must face direct action.
17. We recommend that NITI Aayog diversify and expand its civil society task force to include participation of representatives who have deep experience and knowledge in relevant areas of planning and implementation, and understand the complexities of the Indian administrative system to be able to devise realistic and relevant solutions for the problems at hand. Incentivise state funded research and premier academic institutions to undertake research studies that can inform policy makers about the realities on the ground and allow for a people centric policymaking process to emerge in the midst of this epidemic.

Key Recommendations for State Government

1. In consultation with the Centre, implement the National Disaster Management Plan that in spirit and action which allows for decentralised planning and response with clear channels of communication and responsibility, allowing for the cultural and regional diversities to be accommodated as opposed to a one size fit all solution.
2. Decentralised implementation: Foreseeing the possibility of community transmission, activate all available state machinery at village level and develop mechanisms of empowering the Gram Panchayat to be the nodal institutions working in close coordination with District Collectorate and Magistrate offices for implementation and monitoring of health and relief measures initiated by the State.
3. At state/district and Taluk level, convene meetings with civil society and charity organizations (unions, NGOs, CBOs, mass associations and religious institutions) to help identify vulnerable populations (migrant workers, disabled persons, single women headed households) with improving the planning, outreach and monitoring of all initiatives undertaken by the state. WhatsApp groups created by the State officers can help in improving the efficiency of the relief and health operations. Provide transport and individual passes as necessary so that civil society organizations are not penalised by police and armed forces for movement.

4. Collaborate with private and not-for-profit sector to avail of existing services and infrastructure like helplines, delivery services, value chain consolidation, etc instead of beginning new lines of operations.
5. It is recommended that the different levels of the state administration collaborate with TV channels, radio stations, online digital platforms and newspapers to create communication in local languages (as well as languages of major migrant workers) that inform the public not only about safety measures but also bridge information gaps that lead to rumour mongering and fake news. Regular state and national level bulletins and digital press conferences can also help improve the communication between the public and the governments.
6. In the agriculture and brick kiln sector, family is considered as a unit: There is a need to ensure female migrant workers specifically are targeted through income assistance with an intense focus on creation of separate bank accounts.
7. Issue of unregistered workers - BOCW: Our database shows that around 94% of labourers do not have BOCW cards, which means they would be ineligible for any BOCW related benefit transfer. The status of these unregistered labourers remains precarious – if our dataset is representative of the 55 million labourers currently employed in the construction section then more than 51 million labourers will not have access to any benefits. There must be immediate measures taken to bring the unregistered workers under the ambit of the Board, and to ensure they receive the benefit.
8. Expedite Supreme Court BOCW Directive: Given the crisis situation, efforts must be made to expedite the implementation of the Model Welfare Scheme for Building and Other Construction Workers and Action Plan for Strengthening Implementation Machinery, which came into being in 2018 following the Supreme Court directives to strengthen the implementation machinery of the BOCW Act, 1996.
 - (a) It includes important provisions for inclusion of migrant labourers, and increasing the coverage of the scheme, along with social security measures including life and disability cover, health and maternity cover, education, housing, skill development, awareness programmes, and pension.
 - (b) It also lays down important guidelines regarding the usage of the cess fund to ensure welfare of the labourers.

9. Concrete efforts to tackle the problems associated with linking Aadhaar to ration cards:
- (a) The mandatory linking of Aadhar card to ration card, has proven to be disadvantageous to the vulnerable populations, more than a pro-welfare measure. Possibility of multiple bank accounts being linked to Aadhar card, denial on the parts of authorities to issue ration cards, non-portability of ration cards further jeopardise the conditions of workers, especially those who are registered in their states of domicile.
 - (b) Based on the directives issued by the Central Government, the current supply of free ration will only be made available to those holders of ration cards. Concrete efforts must be taken to ensure that those without ration cards must also be provided with necessary supply of ration for the next three to six months.
 - (c) In cases of workers stranded in destination states, who are holders of ration cards in their source states, efforts must be made by state authorities to ensure a seamless delivery of ration, owing to non-portability of ration card being a key obstacle for workers in accessing the PDS.
 - (d) Increase the number of months of free ration being provided by states of Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh: Findings from our survey indicate that a majority of the workers do not have sufficient ration currently. They have been out of jobs for the last 2-3 weeks and will continue to be for the next 3 weeks, with no possibilities of work opportunities in the near future. Owing to the precarity in finding jobs, and starting over, it is important on the governments' part to ensure that free ration is provided for a minimum of 3 months, up to 6 months.
 - (e) Proper dissemination of information about the availability of essential services like fair price shops, stricter guidelines to be implemented on accessing fair price shops, particularly in line with social distancing as essential practice during COVID- 19: It has been stated by government authorities that during the lockdown period essential services such as ration will be accessible to the public. However, there have been cases of police harassment and brutality that have emerged as people venture out to buy these essential goods. Reports surfaced from Chandigarh where police officials were spotted beating people who ventured out of their homes for buying ration. Proper guidelines must be issued on the no. of people per household who can go to the fair price shops to procure ration. Additionally, this information must be disseminated clearly to the public, to avoid a situation of frenzy and fear.

10. Generating greater awareness among the migrant population for ensuring protection from COVID and equipping them with necessary safety gear - masks, soaps, sanitisers, etc.
11. Engage Asha and ANM workers to identify and provide emergency support to pregnant women: In our survey, half of all workers who mentioned their wife, daughter or daughter-in-law were pregnant asked for immediate material support, as they didn't have enough ration to sustain for this week. Immediate support should be provided to them in the form of prenatal checks, medicines and appropriate nutrition.
12. With women migrant labourers also being put into relief camps at destination, menstrual hygiene products should be included as an essential good to be provided to them.
13. Mental health during this period of uncertainty with loss of income, unemployment, inability to purchase essential goods for survival along with fears of contracting the virus can be extremely fragile.
 - (a) Helplines run by NGOs to provide psycho-social assistance to migrant labourers should be established. Taking Kerala's example where a free government helpline DISHA established in 2013 has been working round the clock since the COVID pandemic. They have not only been answering questions on symptoms of COVID, but also counselling a number of frightened and confused people.

Key Recommendations for Civil Society/Funders

1. Improve outreach mechanisms to your constituencies using online tools like Google Forms for surveys, social media communication and creation of credible IEC material for digital and physical circulation.
2. Invest in security gear and health insurance of your frontline workers. Urge your funders to move from project to general support to meet your institutional and community needs.
3. Pay special attention to the needs of the people who are poor and whose voices and needs are not visible (women, children, disabled, old, transgender persons).
4. Philanthropy organizations and corporate social responsibility departments should operationalise mechanisms that allow for quick decision-making and disbursement of funds. It is advised to provide core/ general support to organizations without much restrictions on spending areas, so that investments can be made in situations which are changing dynamically on the ground.

Challenges and Learnings

- 1. Time constraint:** This assessment went through the usual stages of conducting research, however on a rapid mode within a span of one week: preliminary research, questionnaire building, pilot, surveyor training, carrying out phone survey, data analysis and report writing. Therefore, the findings and recommendations of the report needs to be considered as preliminary analysis. We plan to carry out a more in-depth analysis of the dataset of 3,196 workers.
- 2. Rapid assessment survey reach:** Although the dataset consists of 3,196 workers, it was observed that often the respondent was in a group of 5-20 workers (and their families) or sometimes larger groups, all of whom were in similar conditions. This implies that the situation presented in the report is true for more that 20,000 to 30,000 workers.
- 3. Rapidly evolving situation:** Ground reality and responses are changing by the hour. Hence, following and capturing the moving elements affected the report in two ways –
 - Firstly, some of the questions included in the survey quickly became irrelevant or in other cases we felt the need to add more questions. However, we refrained from adding or deleting questions to maintain data continuity.
 - Secondly, while we attempted to stay as attuned as possible to the large inflow of information, keeping up with constant updates meant that writing the analysis section became difficult for the research team.
- 4. Survey training:** Training and mentoring a 40-member team through phone calls and WhatsApp groups was difficult, but it was also extremely enriching to see the power of technology in staying connected in times of a crisis.
- 5. Surveyor's experience:** Our field officers donned two hats simultaneously, of a surveyor and a social worker. They remarkably managed to handle both, by staying on course to complete the surveys while also dealing with extremely urgent and desperate calls by workers.
- 6. Creation of a response team:** Within hours of the survey we started receiving call backs from labourers asking for help. We were quick to action by forming a response team to support them.