

## **IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON MIGRANTS AND MIGRANT FAMILIES IN SIWAN DISTRICT OF BIHAR**

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### **Abstract:**

Whilst pandemics and its associated impact on the communities may not be new, there were many more pandemics in history (like Spanish Flu in 1918, HIV/AIDS from 2005-2012, etc) which have caused higher death toll than the SARS-CoV-2 which is also known as Coronavirus or COVID-19. COVID-19 pandemic is undoubtedly having gargantuan affect on human's social, economic, health and cultural aspects across the world especially fragile countries like India and poorest states like Bihar. This paper focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on international migrants and their families in Siwan district of Bihar.

Increased international migration especially in rural Bihar has been a kind of new phenomena. Whilst its resilience was tested during 2008 recession, it is further tested during COVID-19 times with its unprecedented impact. COVID-19 has caused migrants and migrant families (whether internal or international) the biggest grief in migration history where people and governments have blamed migrants for being 'COVID-19 Carriers'. The ostracism experienced by a few returned migrants and their families were beyond imagination where a few migrants in Siwan district of Bihar have made to sleep under trees and in makeshift tents whilst being refused to enter into villages and from joining their families.

Whilst COVID-19 and its impact has been on many fronts of humanity, this has resulted in a significant returned migration whereas lack of government policies to bank on these migrants' skills (brain gain), underemployment at source areas, continued discrimination in the villages, increased burden of debts with no source of income has propagated many of these returned migrants to re-migrate to their destination places as a few of these places have still shown similar kind of prospects to pre COVID-19.

This paper consist of analysis of primary source information where 120 responses were obtained from international migrants, their families and a few Focused Group Discussions (FGDs); secondary data analysis provide a critical insight into issues and challenges with possible ways forward to support these migrants and their families.

### **1. Introduction:**

Coronavirus is the testimony of how intertwined the world has become and symbiotic globalisation is. In the past a connotation became famous that, 'if west sneezes, east gets cold', but now 'when east (China to start with) sneezed the whole world not only got cold but continued to shiver. There was no pandemic in the past which is as prevalent as coronavirus almost touching every nook of the planet earth. Yet its origin remains a mystery and consensus among scientists yet to be established how to tackle this menace which continues to spread its tentacles / waves after waves without giving any sign of easing or slowing down.

As of 05<sup>th</sup> January 2022 World Health Organisation (WHO) updated that, there are 2.9 billion confirmed cases in the world with 54,46,753 recorded deaths whereas India has 35 million confirmed cases and 4,82,017 reported deaths. Bihar has 72,900 confirmed cases and 12,096 deaths. Whilst the arguments have been made that, lockdowns imposed since the onset of COVID-19, community transmission is still continues with the advent of new variants like Delta and Omicron etc. In May 2021 when the lockdown was imposed scores of internal migrants returned to their respective villages in states like Uttar Pradesh (UP), Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, West Bengal and Bihar etc. This has caught world's media attention depicting internal / seasonal migrants' plethora of walking on foot or cycling for hundreds of kilometres to almost 400 migrants got killed between March to May 2020 due to various causes including starvation, exhaustion, lack of medical care and accidents (road and train).

World Migration Report, 2020 reported 272 million international migrants whereas almost 6 percent (17 million) of them are Indians. This figure also includes students, workers and their family members such as spouses, parents etc. Half of the Indian international migrants are in six Gulf countries such as Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, UAE, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Prof D M Diwakar informed that, the world economy which has been brought back on track after 2008 global meltdown is witnessing a major setback following lockdowns imposed by many countries.

Dilip Ratha, Lead Economist, Migration and Remittances, World Bank argued that, the coronavirus crisis is going to produce unprecedented levels of effects on the migrant economy. Because of social distancing and the lockdown, businesses are mostly shut and a lot of people are stranded. Significant decline in demand for oil has been an additional pressure on the economy of the Gulf countries. This could also lead to international migrants not being able to work and send remittances to home or even may be eventual return to their home countries as they cannot afford to stay in destination country.

At the juncture of world swamped with coronavirus whereas COVID-19 has been labelled as 'disease of migrants'. This notion is having rippling effects on migrant population whether they are internal or external (international) migrants. Sporadic media reports have been received that migrants are subjected to discrimination and ostracism in local areas especially in villages where awareness about this pandemic is low and surrounded by fears and distrust.

Although it is a general conception that, Southern Indian states likes Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh that may be at risk due to return migration from the Gulf, e-Migrate portal managed by Ministry of External Affairs shows that in 2019, 14 of the top 20 emigrating districts were in Uttar Pradesh (11) and Bihar (3), with the popular destination countries being UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, and Bahrain. Migration expert Professor Chinmay Tumble, Indian Institute of Management (IIM) – Ahmedabad was of the view that, a few of these are possible future red zones for the spread of coronavirus when these migrants will make their eventual return journeys to their homelands.

## 1. Bihar scenario with a special focus on Siwan district:

The Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) has almost 8.8 million Indian workforces. When the oil boom started in 1970s there has been a demand for skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled labour. Although Southern states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh (prior to Telangana bifurcation) set precedence to migrate to GCC; this trend is now expanded to states like UP, Bihar and Telangana. Having said that, there are hardly any studies capturing international migrants' role in the local economy, which has been a lost opportunity for policy makers in Bihar.

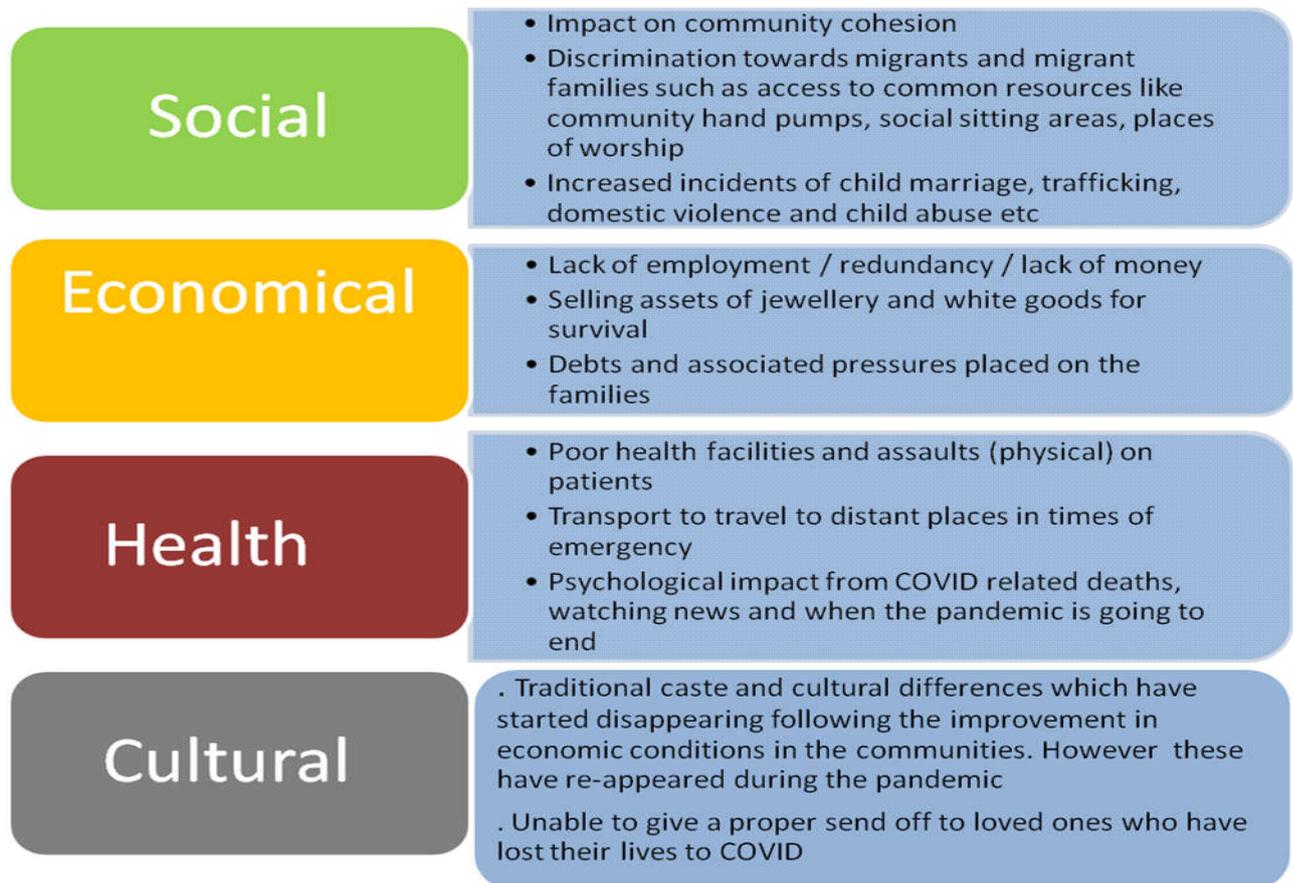
Due to lockdowns when the movements were hampered and media may not have much freedom in GCC countries compared to many other nations, reports about how many international migrants got stranded in GCC area; how many have lost jobs during coronavirus period; how many are forced to work; how many are unpaid; how many are on reduced wages; how many are deported or waiting to be deported and how many have been asked to leave the country was not available. Although international migration in Bihar has been a known trend for the past few decades, number of Community Based Organisations (CBOs) / Civil Society Groups working for the welfare of this cohort is almost non-existent, which results in information gap and lack of advocacy with relevant government agencies.

Most villagers in source area think that anyone who has come from outside especially if they are returning from overseas is a 'carrier of coronavirus'. These fears around migrants are not specific to rural areas as the same being reported by the media from cities, urban and semi-urban areas. Whilst this is impacting the very social fabric of these intrinsic communities, government authorities need to assure people by providing right information and create open communication platforms which can prevent migrants being targeted or discriminated.

It is believed that, in March 2020 around 16,000 overseas migrants have returned to Bihar whereas the data on how many Biharis have been brought by the Government of India under the auspices repatriation flagship programme like Vande Bharat and Samudra Setu is not available.

Bihar is Agri-based economy. Although COVID-19 had hit Bihar during the yielding time of wheat and pulses in 2020 / 2021, overall its impact on Bihar's economy is not known fully. In the midst of COVID-19 political parties were busy strategising to lure migrants to remain at the villages until Bihar assembly elections in November 2020 so that their votes can be obtained. Then the ruling party even said that, Biharis no need to migrate as this is filled with many pains where it promised creating employment within the state. But there has been no sight of required economic, industrial or labour policy which could evidence these false promises made in thin air inspite of the party regained the power.

What sort of COVID-19 impacts we are looking on these local communities especially in states like Bihar where the overseas migration mostly to GCC has been a new phenomenon for the past decade or so. The below mentioned multi-fold economic, social, health and cultural impacts have been learnt from the brief analysis of research undertaken based on 120 responses obtained from Siwan district of Bihar.

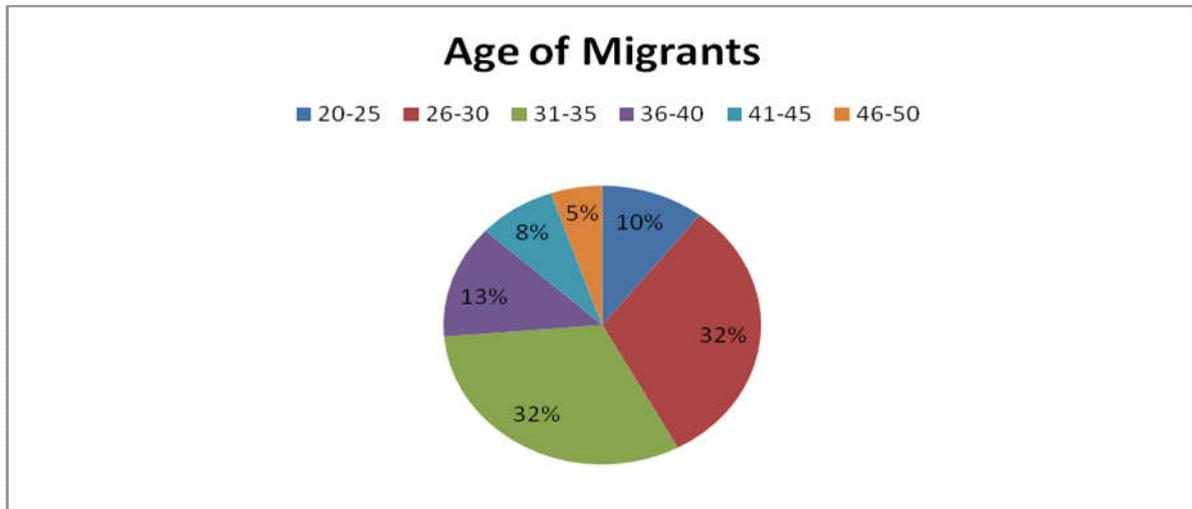


## 2. Methodology:

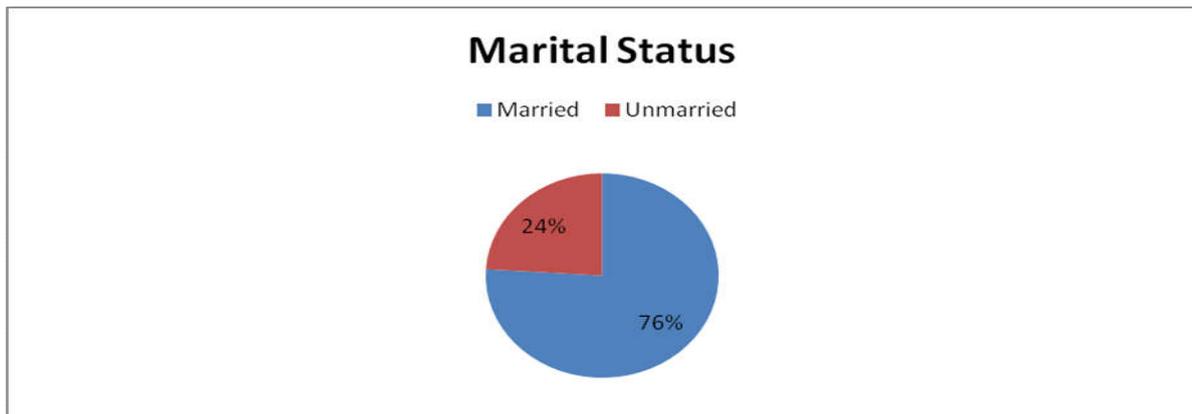
One hundred and twenty respondents who have participated in this study have been selected from Raghunathpur and Barharia blocks of Siwan district of Bihar. According to e-Migrate portal of the Ministry of External Affairs, Siwan has the highest international migrants followed by Gopalganj, Patna etc. The respondents were selected using the purposive random sampling method. Semi-structured schedule and Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) have been part of this study.

Limitations of this study were – Difficulties in obtaining primary data when movements were restricted; No accurate data from the Government in regard to returned migrants via Vande Bharat Mission (VBM) and Samudra Sethu.

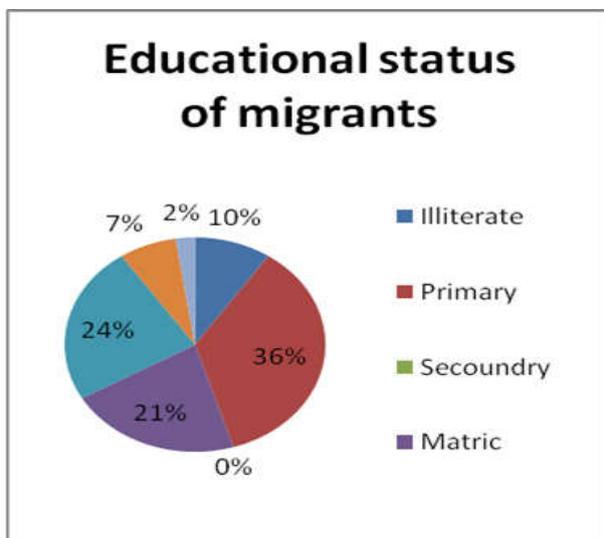
3. Analysis of the primary data as follows:



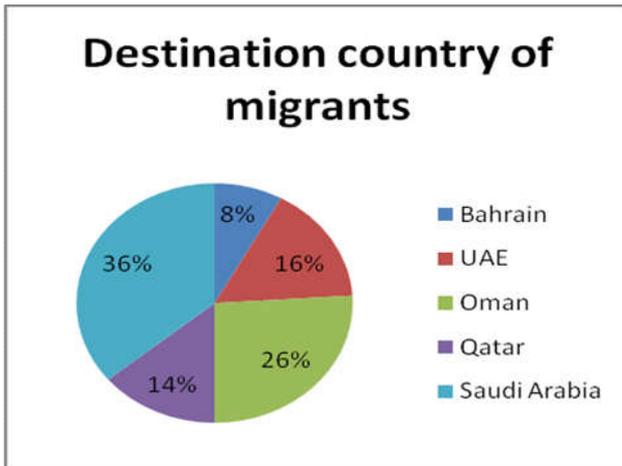
More than half of the respondents were falling within the age group of 26-35 years which is the most productive age and India is banking on this demographic dividend as it has one of the youngest populations in the world.



76% of respondents are married which means that they leave their families behind and make lone migration. Emotional impact of this trend is yet to be explored by academicians and understood by policymakers.

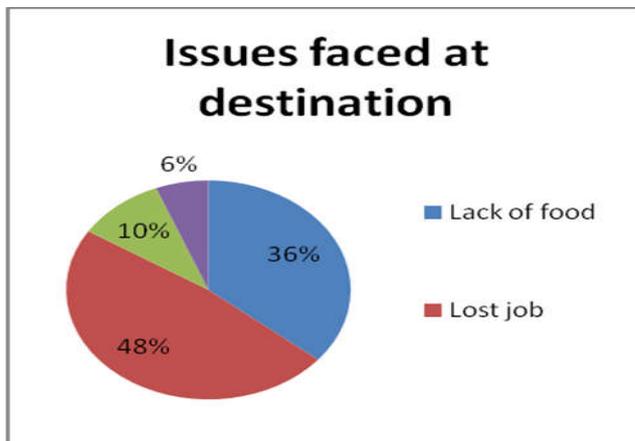
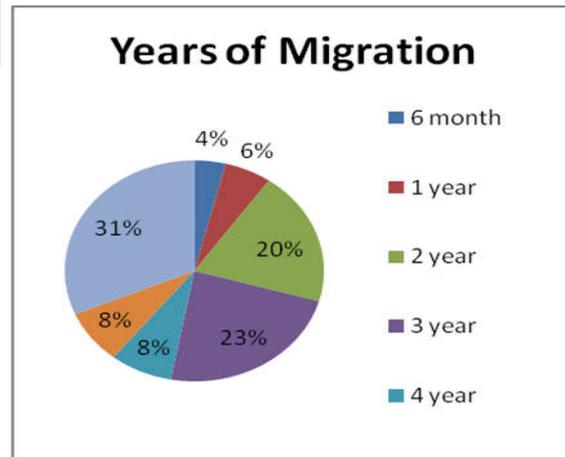


36% of respondents have primary education which is the reason why Bihar’s migrants occupy low-skilled or semi-skilled jobs. This also results in them have lesser income compare to their peers from states like Kerala and Karnataka. Lack of education leads to further vulnerabilities of exploitation from recruitment agents to employers in the host countries as these migrants can’t understand the contractual obligations or terms and conditions attached with their employment.



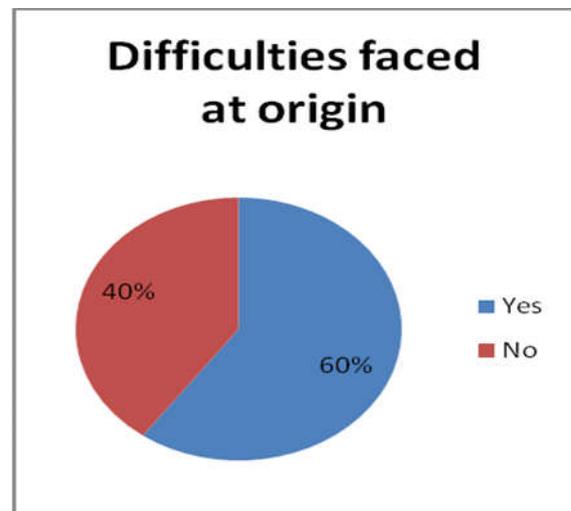
Saudi Arabia appears to be the frequenting destination followed by Oman and UAE. Almost all GCC areas have no employment welfare policies for overseas migrants that could ensure their access to social security system, decent healthcare, prevention of abuse, protection from unplanned redundancies and illegal deportations etc.

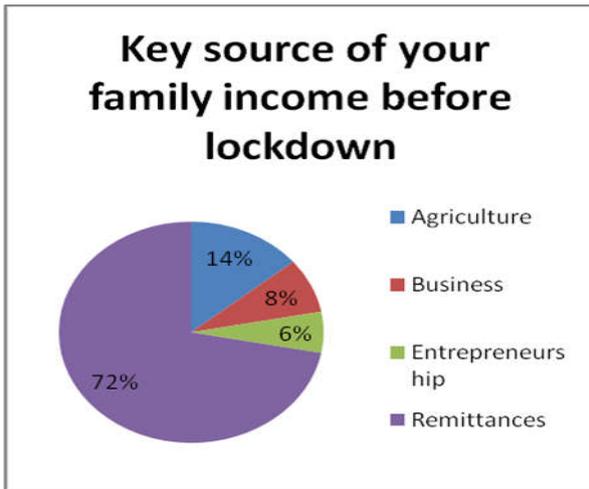
31% of the respondents informed that, they have been working overseas for over 5 years or so. This means that, irrespective of global economy slowdown post recession in 2008-09, demand for labour continued in GCC area which is providing a regular employment for Bihari migrants. This also demonstrates the heavy reliance on overseas migration in source villages of Bihar.



Whilst 48% of the respondents have informed that, they have lost job during coronavirus period, 36% of them also reported lack of food whilst they got stuck in destination country. This also demonstrated the poor accommodation facilities and lack of access to health systems during the period of COVID-19.

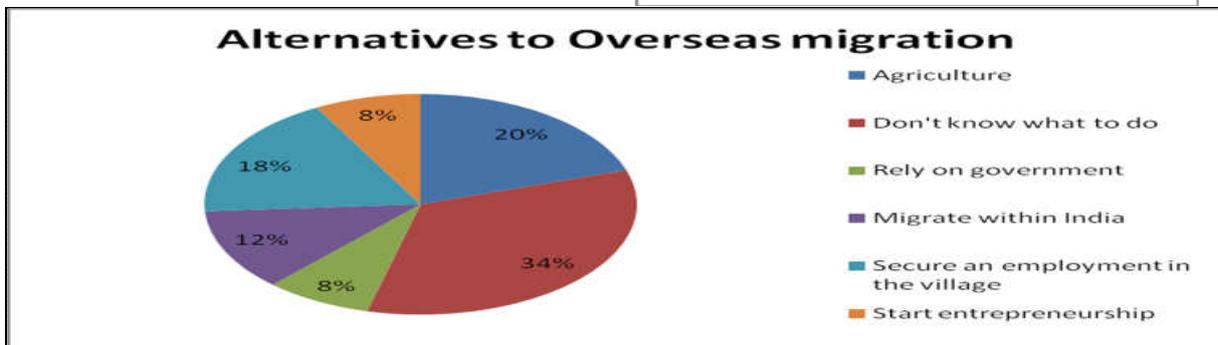
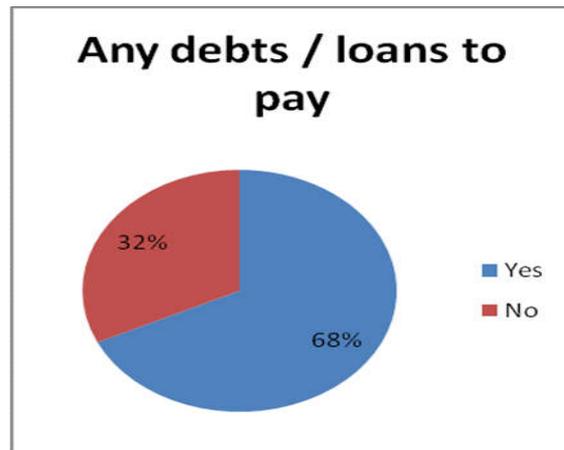
Whilst there were a few return migrants in our respondents, 60% of them have informed that, they have faced difficulties from source communities. It has been brought to our attention that, most of these migrants and their families were subject to discrimination as they were perceived as ‘carriers of disease’. Sporadic reports of Police involvement were also noted in a few places following the complaints of migrants have arrived into their villages.





This is a clear indication of how heavily remittances reliant these migrant families (72%) are. The biggest economic impact of COVID-19 has been on employment in destination resulted in job loss. This also resulted in their return to source areas and subsequent impact on their families as they will have no other source of income. A few respondents have informed of selling assets like jewellery or white goods to raise money to meet the family needs.

Overwhelmingly 68% of respondents informed that, they have had debts (taken from money lenders) or loans (availed from banks etc). It was also learnt that, they have had no savings which resulted in them borrowing the money as the migrants in destination aren't able to send remittances. Instead a few families reported transferring money overseas to their loved ones for their essential expenses.



Majority of respondents (34%) weren't aware of what they are going to do; 20% said agriculture is a way forward whilst 12% thought to migrate within India whereas 18% of them hoped to secure an employment within the village. 8% hoped Government Schemes like MGNREGA, Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY) will support them. 8% hoped to start entrepreneurship which was a positive sign but these families needed some guidance and also some financial help to make them established in the market whilst many small, medium and large scale industries as well as family based industries got affected due to COVID-19.

Having said that, corruption in certain compartments of Bihar administration was a worry for many migrant families that, officials will create blockades for them from accessing these well-intended provisions for their welfare.

### ***3.1 Other than the above analysis the following pertinent points being noted during this study:***

In the case of Gulf countries, migrants have paid recruitment agencies huge amounts of money. Our research showed that a migrant to the Gulf region often pays more than a year's worth of expected wages as a fee to the recruitment agent before migrating. This varies from place to place depends on their level of education and the connections they have with migrants who are already migrated. There are occasions they have taken high interest loan from money lenders, but they are stranded and in a way bonded as they can't repay these debts due to loss of employment. There are chances of harassment and hardship that might increase the risk of abuse of migrant families especially if they have younger girls (child marriage, child sexual abuse) or boys (child labour) etc.

It has been a worry for many migrant families that, economic activities in the Gulf countries and probably worldwide are going to be impacted for a while. Whilst the investment into mega construction projects remains a limbo, this would mean overseas migration continued to be impacted. The majority of people in villages whom we met will not be able to find jobs for and it's not clear what will happen to them whilst they cannot think of alternatives and government is not coming up with any decisive strategic plans to assist them.

Like the core of social fabric, mental health is another aspect which got affected during coronavirus times. The understanding of stress, depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) etc is almost non-existent in these villages, which also contributed to a few suicide deaths. But the casual factors surrounding people mental health remains unexplored.

There has been significant number of deaths being reported at quarantine centres as the conditions in a few of them were known to be inhumane. But there is no available authentic data and obtaining the same from the government proven to be a difficult task.

Unplanned nationwide lockdown resulted in scores of internal migrants undertaking arduous journeys on foot, tri cycles, bicycles and various other means of transport. Whilst waiting for authentic figure, we have calculated that, around 50-60 Bihar migrants have died during this period. Although Bihar government announced Rs 4,00,000 exgratia money for COVID-19 deaths, it is not clear what these migrant families will be offered for their loss. There has been no specific package of support announced for international migrants, which also demonstrates that, they haven't been given due recognition in the community.

Discrimination towards certain lower castes and climate change induced conditions has been a few underlying push factors for the cause of migration. Following COVID-19 returned migrants are worried that, they will be subject to such discrimination since they have returned to villages now and climate change continue to affect their farm based activities, which will make them to re-migrate by force.

#### **4. Conclusion:**

Coronavirus turned out to be a crisis within a crisis as the pandemic has injected an unprecedented amount of uncertainty into the global economy. Modern humanity has two facets like a coin – lives and livelihoods, whereas this pandemic has come to close proximity of eroding both these facets urging people to think ‘live or die’ which also termed in local language as ‘Jaan hai to Jahaan hain’. This has resulted in many international migrants wanted to return to their homeland coupled with the similar pressures being placed on them by their families in source areas.

Coronavirus is attacking societies at their core, claiming lives and people’s livelihoods, the potential longer-term effects on the world economy and individual countries are dire. As stated by, António Guterres, Secretary - General of United Nations in March 2020 “This human crisis demands coordinated, decisive, inclusive and innovative policy action from the world’s leading economies and maximum financial and technical support for the poorest and most vulnerable people and countries”.

COVID-19 has resulted in re-migration whereas lack of government policies to bank on these migrants’ skills (brain gain), underemployment at source areas, continued discrimination in the villages, increased burden of debts with no source of income has propagated many of these returned migrants to re-migrate to their destination as a few of these places have still shown similar kind of prospects to pre COVID-19.

#### **5. Recommendations:**

State and national government to maintain accurate and viable migrants’ data in source and destination areas so that they can be extended required support during pandemic times. Indian Government to ensure the migration channels are safe whereas recruitment agents can be made responsible for migrants’ safety and well-being in destination countries when unforeseen circumstances arise.

Central / State Government has to recognise the contribution being made by migrants to the national / local economy by conducting more research and raise awareness about the same so that, migrants and migrant families don’t become subject to discrimination in their community especially during pandemic times.

As recommended by the UN’s report, the key activities to be undertaken at these strange yet unprecedented times are - suppressing the transmission of the virus to control the pandemic; safeguarding people’s lives and their livelihoods; learning from this human crisis to build back better. We hope that, we will be able to build resilience to fight and cope with this pandemic so that, we can leave a mark for future generations to learn from it.

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