

## **Perspectives on Return Migration and Rural Society during COVID-19 in Bhojpur District in Bihar**

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### **Introduction**

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in India, the government announced a nationwide lockdown on 24 March 2020 to control the spread of the virus which resulted in the closure of factories, shops, malls, and other enterprises, leading to loss of jobs and livelihood for millions of labourers. The informal sector was hit hard by the lockdown and saw an unprecedented fall in its economic activities. The pandemic turned out to be more disastrous for the migrants. The precarity of the situation can be ascertained further by the fact that economic migrants constitute 18.24 per cent of the total population of the country (Census 2011). A large number of these migrants are daily-wagers working in the informal sector who lost their jobs and other means of livelihood with the imposition of lockdown.

As per reports in various newspapers, most of the migrants and their families were left unattended by their employers. In the absence of any local identity or a formal registration at the destination, they were bereft of any social security schemes announced by the government during the lockdown. According to a survey conducted during the lockdown in April 2020 by the Stranded Workers Action Network, 90 per cent of migrant workers in the country did not get paid by their employers, 96 per cent received no ration from the government, and 70 per cent did not get any cooked food, during the lockdown.<sup>1</sup> The rickshaw pullers, plumbers, construction workers, and other daily wagers, who are otherwise considered the backbone of the country's informal economy, suddenly became burdensome and unwelcome at the place of their livelihood. Loss of job, shortage of food and basic means of subsistence, and complete neglect by employers and the government, on the one hand, and the closure of all means of transportation on the other, condemned the workers to hunger and other hardships in the cities where they had been working. Such were the circumstances that forced them to set out for their native states. During their return journey, several migrant labourers and their family members, including children, lost their lives either out of hunger and exhaustion or in road and rail accidents.<sup>2</sup>

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In the above context, this study aims to offer insights on the impact of labourers' return on rural society and the economy. The paper discusses the long-term and short-term socio-economic linkages of reverse-migration. The condition of these reverse-migrant labourers and their problems at their native place are also analysed in the paper. This study was carried out in two villages of Bhojpur district in Bihar – Khanet and Bathani Tola. Though the villages were selected for convenience, their importance lies in the fact that both the villages witnessed a massacre in 1996<sup>3</sup>. Data were collected through interviews of the return migrants and detailed telephonic discussions with the key persons of the villages between Mid-April and May 2020. The telephonic interviews were held with the help of a few local acquaintances. A total of eighty persons—fifty from Khanet and thirty from Bathani Tola—were surveyed for this purpose. The survey was designed to elicit information about return migrants' — their socio-economic profile, experiences during the lockdown at the destination, the impact of their return migration on livelihood, family ties, access to employment and government welfare schemes, inter-community relations and immediate needs.

## **Background**

Migration from Bihar in pursuit of job and survival started in the early 19th century. Thousands of indentured labourers, popularly known as *Girmitiya*, from the Bhojpuri-speaking regions migrated to British colonies in the Caribbean Islands, Africa, and Southeast Asia, where they worked in sugar, tea plantation, cotton, and rail construction. The conditions – widespread poverty, lack of opportunities, underdevelopment, and unemployment – that had led to the first wave of migration almost two centuries ago exist even today and have led to a 'culture of migration' in the middle Gangetic plains<sup>4</sup>. The study further pointed out that around 50 per cent of Bihar's households have family members who have migrated due to economic reasons. At the cost of stating the obvious, we must mention that Bihar's trend is led by compulsion rather than choice. One may also note that the majority of people in Bihar still depend on the primary/agricultural sector for livelihood. However, agriculture productivity in the state is low and unable to provide meaningful work to all eligible workers (World Bank 2005).

Moreover, industrial development in the state is negligible; the industrial sector is incapable of generating enough jobs for the workers. As a result, a large number of working-class people have moved out of the state for productive employment. The state has thus become a key supplier of labour to industrial or economic hubs across the country. Migrants from Bihar usually find employment in low-skilled sectors such as the construction sector or as street vendors, rickshaw pullers, head-loaders, domestic help or manual scavengers. Some of them also move towards the north-western states like Punjab and Haryana to work as agricultural labourers (Roy 2016).

Under the given circumstances, the COVID-19 crises were bound further to exacerbate the precarious condition of Bihar's migrant workers. Print and electronic media reports suggest that by the end of May 2020, around 26 lakh workers had returned to their villages in Bihar.<sup>5</sup> Predictably, such a massive influx of labourers resulted in a surplus of hands in the already-labour-burdened state. According to the unemployment survey conducted by the Centre for

Monitoring Indian Economy (2020), the state's unemployment rate increased to 46.6 per cent in April 2020, which was 20 per cent higher than the national average. In such circumstances, it is highly likely that the excess supply of labour in the area will result in a change in labour employment, wage pattern, and relationship among different social groups. Most labourers have experienced a better life, socio-cultural changes, education, and prosperity before the lockdown. They might have grown out of the feudal mentality endemic to their native places and become open to new thoughts and ideas (Priyadarshini and Chaudhary 2020). After their return, their changed attitude and behaviour would also have significantly impact on the socio-economic balances at their native place.

## The Study Area

### *Bhojpur district*

The district of Bhojpur, which was carved out of Shahabad district in 1972, is in south Bihar plains. Bhojpur had specific socio-economic dynamics and history of clashes between landlords and labourers. The Communist Party of India (CPI) had a history of organising agricultural labourers against the landlords. The district was one of the earliest hotbeds of Naxal movement in Bihar in late sixties and early seventies. In 1980s, it became one of the strongholds of Bihar Pradesh Kisan Sabha, the peasant organisation of CPI (ML), popularly known as *Maale*. Large parts of the district witnessed huge peasant mobilisations and agitations on a number of issues—wages, land, dignity, denial of rights, and violence being the most prominent ones. The district sent the party's first member of Lok Sabha (the lower house of the Indian Parliament) and has also sent the party's candidates as people's representatives in the state assembly several times. It also witnessed a series of massacres during the 1980s and 1990s starting with Danwar-Bihta where 22 agricultural labourers belonging to Dalit community were killed by the upper caste landlords in 1984. The decade of 1990s witnessed more than a dozen cases of massacre of Dalits by upper caste landlords, the biggest being the case of Bathani Tola where 22 Dalits were killed. The cases of massacre saw a spurt with the formation of Ranvir Sena, a private army of upper-caste, Bhumihar landlords in 1994. Massacres of Dalits and poor landless labourers in several villages of Bhojpur — Bathani Tola, Khanet, Sarathua, Nadhi, Nagri, Nanaur and Ekwari, to name a few, hit the national headlines. Several reasons have been put forward for the massacres. In a few instances, Dalits and lower caste people had raised their voice against disrespect and humiliation by the upper castes and demanded better wages. These massacres were also viewed as retaliatory actions by the upper-caste landlords against the Naxalite movement (Kumar 2010). Poor law and order and support for the warring groups by political parties on both sides of the ideological spectrum had further aggravated the situation (Louis 1998).

However, respondents of the present study had their own views on this issue. They opined that apart from caste and class politics, the main reason behind such incidents was the rise in unemployment among youths in rural areas during the 1990s. This, combined with massacres and the poor law and order situation, acted as the major driving force behind the migration of people from the region. In the last fifteen years, massacres have stopped, Ranveer Sena has almost disbanded, and the CPI (Maoist) has also lost hold over the region. But the region

continues to suffer from the ravages of the past, which have created a cascading effect on its socio-economic environment. In view of the historical faultlines in this region, the return of migrant labourers has raised the apprehension not only of massive unemployment and the rise in caste/class conflicts in the region.

### ***The study villages***

Bathani Tola is a small *tola* (hamlet) of the Badki Khadaon village in Sahar block. The other *tolas* of the village are Tandi, Chotki Ajholia and Gulabchak. Badki Khadaon has 481 households with a total population of 2,681. It has a sizeable Bhumihar and Rajput population who dominate the village. The Scheduled Castes comprise less than 20 per cent of the total population. Chotki Ajholia has mainly Brahmin households, but Bathani Tola, Tandi and Gulabchak do not have any upper-castes. Bathani Tola has around sixty households, mainly belonging to Dalits and lower-caste Muslims working as agricultural labourers. More than 70 per cent of the land of Badki Kadaon village is owned by a dozen upper-caste households. In Bathani Tola, only a few households own land, but they have less than one bigha of land. According to villagers, after the 1996 massacre, most of the young labourers migrated outside the village, even the state, searching for livelihood and peaceful life.

Khanet, the other village in the study, is in Agiaon block. It is a village of 291 households, one-third of which belong to the Bhumihar community. Other major castes in the village are Yadav, Chamar, Teli and Musahar, who live in separate *tolas*. Most of the land belongs to Bhumihars. However, very few Bhumihar households possess landholdings of more than 15 bighas. In the last two decades or so, there have been evident changes in the land ownership pattern. While many households from the Yadav community are increasingly purchasing land, many upper-caste people have sold their land to either finance their children's education or move to another town or start small businesses within the state and even outside. Most Scheduled Caste people, owning less than one bigha land, work either as marginal or casual workers. The Yadav community have gradually gained ascendancy in the village. With the increase in dominance, they have become arrogant and rude towards Dalits and other lower castes. As told by most of the respondents, Yadavs use abusive language and delay wage payment and sometimes make undue wage cut on some pretexts.

### **Who were Return Migrants?**

While people from all castes migrate outside the state searching for employment and better living conditions, during the COVID-19 pandemic, mostly labourers belonging to the lower castes had returned following the lockdown. In Khanet, out of all return migrants, 82% belonged to lower castes, e.g., 24 per cent were Chamars, 16 per cent were Kahars, and 14 per cent belonged to Kanu community. In Bathani Tola, the three major communities/castes that witnessed the overwhelming number of return migrants were backward Muslims (27%), Chamars (24%) and Kahars (20%) (Table 1). Delhi, Punjab, Pune, and Hyderabad were some of the top destinations amongst these workers. Most of them reported that they had migrated out and secured a job with relatives or friends' help.

**Table 1: Caste profile of return migrants**

Khanet		Bathani Tola	
Caste	Number	Caste	Number
Barhai	2	Backward Muslim	8
Bhumihar	5	Chamar	7
Brahmin	2	Gosai	4
Chamar	12	kahar	6
Dhobi	1	kanu	1
Kahar	8	Mallah	2
Kanu	7	Paasi	2
Mushar	1	<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>
Nai	2		
Rajput	2		
Teli	1		
Yadav	7		
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>		

The level of formal schooling varies with caste and religion in the villages. Around 80 per cent of the Scheduled Caste people, particularly people from the Musahar community are illiterate. Even labourers belonging to the upper castes have a better education level in comparison to labourers from the lower castes in the same village. Most upper-caste workers are educated up to matriculation (60%). Among return migrants, not a single respondent from the upper caste was illiterate whereas among the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), 29 per cent of returnees were matriculate, and 32 per cent had studied till class VIII.

Similarly, in terms of attaining skills, the trend is highly skewed in favour of the upper castes. Our data suggest that 95 per cent of workers from the upper castes have had some sort of skill training, acquired mostly as part of their job training. In contrast, more than 50 per cent of workers from Other Backward Castes and more than 90 per cent of workers from the Schedule Castes are unskilled. However, there is a strong desire amongst labourers of all categories to give their children a proper education. During the interview, most of them expressed their concerns over disruption in their wards' learning process during the lockdown. The situation is worse for the children who migrated with their parents to their native village. They are no longer part of any school system and worried about losing an entire school year due to COVID-19. Regarding government initiatives about online education, one of the respondents said, "These are all tricks of the government to fool us. We are not able to arrange two square meals for our family; how can we arrange smartphones for children?"

There is a correlation between a migrant's occupation and her/his caste. Due to the historical advantage of education, most migrants from the upper castes have access to superior and

relatively high paying jobs. The socially-deprived communities/castes work in the lower segments of the labour market (Jain and Sharma 2018). It is generally presumed that migration breaks the chain of caste-identifiable occupations at the destination. Many people from the lower castes move to their destinations with a desire to work in occupations not linked to their caste. However, it was reported by most respondents that they were still in caste-identifiable occupations. Table 2 shows that more than half of the upper caste migrants work in supervisory positions and another large group as security guards. In contrast, none of the respondents from the Scheduled Castes worked in the supervisory or superior positions. While Muslim OBC migrants were engaged in tailoring or embroidery work, OBC migrants worked mostly as workers in diverse occupations, and only a small section of them worked in a supervisory capacity. A majority of migrants reported that they were hired informally by their employer, without any formal contract.

**Table 2: Caste-disaggregated Occupational Profile of Migrants at their destination (%) (Sample size = 80)**

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Upper Castes</b>	<b>OBCs</b>	<b>SCs/ STs/ Mahadalits</b>	<b>Backward Muslims</b>
Agriculture work	0	12	30	0
Factory				
<i>as Supervisor/manager/contractor</i>	22	8	0	0
<i>as labour</i>	0	9	0	0
Brick kiln				
<i>as Supervisor/manager/contractor</i>	13	2	0	0
<i>as labour</i>	0	1	26	14
Construction sector				
<i>as Supervisor/manager/contractor</i>	18	3	0	0
<i>as labour</i>	0	13	20	0
Hotel/Restaurant	2	32	8	0
Rickshaw puller	0	0	3	13
Security Guard	30	2	0	0
Plumber	0	0	2	28
Garments Manufacturing	10	5	0	35
Shop Assistant	5	0	0	10
Domestic helper	0	13	11	0
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100	100

### **How were Return Migrants Treated?**

Respondents stated that they faced discrimination from the villagers on reaching the village. Most respondents were unhappy with the treatment they received from the people of their native place. The fear about COVID-19 amongst villagers was visible on their faces and in

their behaviour. Having arrived after completing a long and taxing journey during the lockdown, these migrants were shocked by their relatives and friends' unwelcome manner. A 40-year-old return migrant said, "Due to fear of coronavirus, villagers are behaving strangely and looking at every return migrant with suspicion". This type of reaction of fellow villagers towards the return labourers was mainly due to the panic induced by the lockdown and the fear of contracting the coronavirus (Priyadarshini and Chaudhary 2020). A few return-migrants had to spend a few days in quarantine in a government school designated as a quarantine centre before entering the village. Most of the quarantine centres were mismanaged and in pathetic condition. One can imagine quarantine centres' condition from the fact that the migrants were getting food and other essential items from their families and relatives. The influx of migrants gradually stopped only after more than two months since the first lockdown.

### **The Loss of Remittances**

Remittances from migrant workers are an integral part of the village economy. Bihar is one of the largest remittances-receiving states in the country (Bhagat et al. 2020). Money transferred by migrant labourers to their families in villages translates into the consumption of essential as well as lifestyle items. In a few families, daily expenses were solely dependent on the money received from migrant family members. Many shopkeepers would sell household items on credit, which would be paid when the remittance was received. Following the nationwide lockdown, loss of jobs and income forced the migrant workers to return to their villages. Consequently, the regular inflow of money stopped. The impact was both financial as well as a psychological and for the migrants and their families alike. A few respondents reported that the sudden discontinuation of income had become a reason for rifts and discontent in their families. Their distress can be gauged by the fact that they freely voiced these feelings in formal conversations. Almost all of them shared their fears and anxieties regarding their capacity to continue affording food and other essential daily items.

### **Impact on Family Ties**

Our findings from the study strongly indicate that gender-based violence occurred at an unprecedented scale during the lockdown. Most female respondents reported an increase in domestic violence; they also talked about the added burden of maintaining extra hygiene due to the pandemic while taking care of children who were not going to school. It is likely that frustration due to the loss of employment and the resulting financial strains led to an increase in such incidents in the family. Moreover, domestic violence-related cases are likely to have been under-reported as women helpline numbers, women police stations, and other similar institutions were not functioning properly during the lockdown. A few female respondents also shared instances where the female members abused male family members for not fulfilling their duties as breadwinners of the family.

Apart from domestic violence, the study also shows an increase in property-related intra-family disputes triggered by the sudden lockdown. Most of the return migrants are either



landless or small and marginal landholders. Before the COVID-19 crisis, there was some semblance of harmony in the family. Some of the members worked and earned in cities, and those left in the village managed their livelihoods through the small piece of land they owned. With the return of the migrants, the burden on the limited landholding increased and thus created unrest within families.

### **Abundant Labour, Wage Bargaining, and Confrontations**

As already mentioned, the return of a large number of labourers created the problem of excess supply of labour. More labourers were available for the same kind of work. Hence, competition amongst labourers increased, and a sense of insecurity about livelihood gripped them. Caste politics further complicated the situation. Some respondents reported that the dominant community among the backward caste labourers used their influence to get job contracts. In Khanet, there was a case of a contract for transporting and unloading bricks for house construction. The job contract was initially given to labourers belonging to the Chamar caste. But labourers belonging to the Yadav caste negotiated with the employer at a lower rate and immediately started the work. The work was almost over by the time labourers from the Chamar caste arrived the next morning. This incident resulted in a heated argument and tension between the two communities. As most labourers face a cash crunch, a competition of this nature may end up in clashes amongst the labourer community. This has already resulted in contractors negotiating with labourers to lower wage rates and given rise to a hidden competition for 'getting the job first' among labourers. Wage depression and several other forms of exploitation might, over a longer period, create social unrest between the landowners and workers and also conflicts within the labouring classes. At the time of this study, many people were engaged in farming activities since it was the sowing season. Once the sowing season ended and farming activities were no longer available, many people would be rendered unemployed, and MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) work would also not be available due to the rainy season. Hence, workers struggle for survival will exacerbate, forcing them to search for new migration opportunities under more vulnerable conditions. One cannot rule out the possibility of a rise in social unrest.

### **Lack of Access to Welfare Schemes**

Facilitating migrants' access to welfare schemes has been an issue of debate and discussion in the academic as well as policy domains. The lack of access emerged as a serious issue during the pandemic, both at destination and source areas, when migrants needed strong state support. Usually, long-term migrants and even regular circular migrants visited their native place infrequently or periodically. Their prolonged absence or irregular stay at the native place resulted in their non-inclusion in the various government schemes despite being eligible for them. Most labourers working outside the state could not submit the documents required to avail the benefits of these schemes. Due to the lack of portability of benefits under most of the schemes, workers remained deprived of welfare schemes at destination before returning to the village. A few labourers had not made efforts to enrol under some



schemes before the pandemic crisis occurred. No new enrolment was allowed under the Building Construction and Other Workers' Welfare Board after the pandemic struck though many return migrants were related to construction works. The workers lamented that the governments, at destination states and the home state, did not do enough to address the bottlenecks in their access to welfare measures. Thus, they hardly benefitted from any welfare schemes announced by the government. It turned out that only two migrant respondents had individually received support from any of the government packages announced after the lockdown.

### **Land-labour Conflict**

As mentioned elsewhere, one of the aims of the study was to understand the implications of the abundance of labour supply during COVID-19, particularly with respect to caste-class violence that once ravaged these villages. The views of both labourers and landlords were recorded. Neither the landowners nor the labourers foresaw any possibility of the return of landlord-labourer conflicts. The relationship between the two has changed over time. Upper caste landlords have lost the commanding power that their forefathers once enjoyed. Their landholding size has dwindled due to partition within the family. Many landlords have sold their land over the years to people from the backward castes, mainly Yadavs. The study also suggests that due to their smaller landholdings, the upper-caste people are no longer able to provide work to labourers regularly and have thus lost control over labourers. Due to income from migration, labourers no longer depend on the landlords for work, credit, and other requirements. The majority of upper-caste youths have been moving out of the village for education and employment. This is also true for a section of backward castes and a tiny proportion of other lower caste households. In our respondents' opinion, education has also helped in changing villagers' attitude towards each other.

One must also give credit to the social engineering done by Lalu Yadav, whose party was in power in the state during 1990–2005. In general, the lower castes benefitted both socially as well as economically. A few castes like Yadav and Baniya in the OBC category have gained social status as well as higher positions in Panchayats and jobs because of education, increased landholdings, and better living conditions. Hence, the administration and the government machinery can no longer ignore or neglect their interests.

### **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 impacted the lives of migrants in the selected villages in significant ways. A large number of them had to return as they were unable to sustain themselves at destinations. They did not receive adequate relief and support at destination necessary for holding back. Moreover, those who returned were mainly from poor communities. The return migrants' social profile showed a definite caste-class-community association as the most severely affected labourers also belonged to economically and socially disadvantaged groups. Data also suggest that caste, class, and religious background is associated with their occupation

and earning at the destination. The sufferings of migrants aggravated immediately upon their return because they were viewed as carriers of the virus.

The paper has noted the impact of the loss of remittances which is crucial for sustaining families in the village. This has increased rural distress. One of the outcomes of distress is the rise in domestic violence against women. Property related disputes have also increased due to contestation over limited resources. Return migration has created an abundance of wage labourers, which, in turn, has affected wages and enhanced intra-workers competition over existing fewer local work opportunities. The problem compounded during the rainy season when work under MGNREGA came to a halt. Migrants' lack of access to other welfare schemes, primarily due to their non-enrollment, posed another constraint. All claims about the government proactively providing suitable livelihood options to the return migrants during the lockdown were exaggerated and far from being adequate. The return migrants and other village residents belonging to the resource-poor section needed immediate relief in the form of direct cash transfers, food subsidies and rural job creation. Without such support, it is difficult for migrants to lead a life with dignity and maintain whatever meagre living standard they had before the pandemic.

[**Note:** The authors are thankful to the respondents and residents of Khanet and Bathani Tola for their support in the conduction of interviews and collection of data and information.]

## Notes

1. The Hindu Data Team. 2020. "96% migrant workers did not get rations from the government, 90% did not receive wages during lockdown: survey". *The Hindu*, 20 April. Accessed 8 June. <https://www.thehindu.com/data/data-96-migrant-workers-did-not-get-rations-from-the-government-90-did-not-receive-wages-during-lockdown-survey/article31384413.ece>.
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3. In Bathani Tola, twenty-two Dalits, including women and children, were slaughtered by members of the Ranvir Sena on 11 July 1996. Ranvir Sena was a private militia of the upper caste Bhumihars. Dalits, mostly agricultural labourers in the village, were agitating for enhancement of their wages. Khanet also witnessed brutal murder of five Dalits by the Ranvir Sena on 12 December 1996 (see PUCL 1997).
4. Mishra, B.K. 2020. "50% of Bihar households exposed to migration." *Times of India*, 15 February 2020. Accessed 8 June. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/patna/half-of-households-in-bihar-exposed-to-migration-study/articleshow/74141815.cms>.

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