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The COVID-19 Pandemic and Migrant Workers from Rural Bihar

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Abstract

Based on phone interviews with more than 1600 households in rural Bihar, this study provides rapid survey-based evidence on the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on casual and migrant workers from rural Bihar. The evidence shows that more than half of rural households had at least one migrant worker prior to the pandemic, and for 94 percent of these households, their migrant workers' livelihood was adversely affected. There was large-scale reverse migration with a large fraction of returning migrants spending as much as 4-5 months in native villages with limited opportunities for alternative work (including MGNREGA employment). The disruption of employment among migrant workers who stayed in destination areas led to drastic cuts in their remittances back home. About one-fifth of the migrant workers who had gone back to the destination areas were still to resume work at destination sites at the time of the survey.

Keywords: COVID-19, migrant workers, livelihood impact, Bihar

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1. The COVID-19 context and this study

At the time of writing (August 15, 2021), India has already been through a more virulent and devastating second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. With an official total count exceeding 430,000 deaths (about 280,000 since the beginning of March 2021 alone) and an estimated excess mortality due to COVID-19 which may be up to ten times higher, the scale of the human calamity has been colossal.¹ Besides the tragic loss of human lives, there is also the large toll on people's livelihoods that were severely disrupted by the pandemic either directly by disease and death among family members or indirectly by the shutdown of large parts of the economy through lockdowns and mobility restrictions imposed for shorter or longer periods in a bid to contain the spread of the virus.

India initially went in for an aggressive suppression strategy with a series of national lockdowns beginning late March 2020. The lockdowns however also caused an economic shutdown with a decimation of work, livelihoods and incomes for large sections of the population. With no vaccine in sight till well into 2021, the economic costs of the pandemic had been mounting throughout 2020. While the well-off have more staying power, this raised grave concerns about how the poor and those with meagre livelihoods even in normal times could cope and survive the lockdown period and beyond.

The evidence and data on the pandemic's impact on livelihoods from official national statistical bodies has been largely limited to the quarterly GDP statistics. These aggregate statistics however do not tell us much about the pervasiveness, depth and diversity of livelihood impacts. The gap has instead been filled by a number of COVID-focused surveys and micro studies that have taken up the task of documenting impacts through their own collection of primary data.² This article reports results from a study on rural Bihar which is part of that effort.

This study – conducted jointly by the Institute for Human Development and the Centre for Development Economics and Sustainability – collected data through phone-based interviews with rural households in Bihar over the months of October 2020 through January 2021, hence focused on their experience during and following the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. The scope of the study was wide-ranging in assessing impacts on six different sources of livelihood, impacts on select health, nutrition and education indicators as well as the extent of various forms of government support received by households. This article is limited to the findings on only one part of the study relating to the livelihood impacts on migrant workers from these households.³ As documented below in section 3, migrant work constitutes the most significant source of income for rural households in Bihar.

¹ See, for instance, estimates by Anand, Sandefur and Subramanian (2021) ranging between 3.4 and 4.9 million excess deaths up to June 2021.

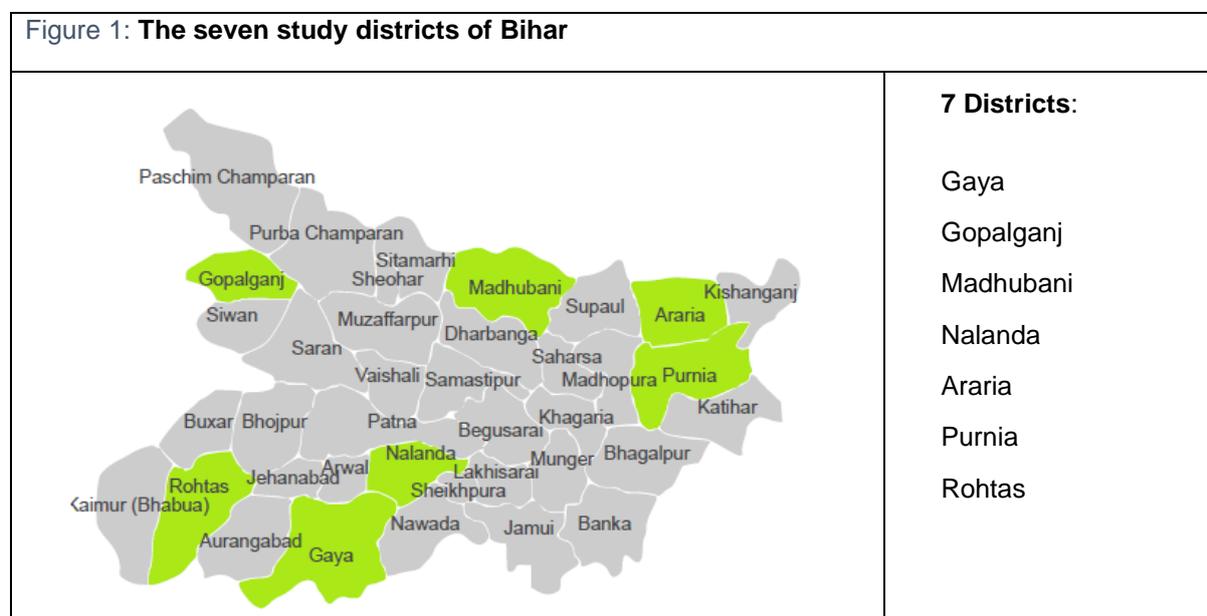
² A catalogue of 92 such COVID impact surveys (at the time of writing) has been compiled by the Centre for Sustainable Employment at Azim Premji University (https://cse.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/covid19-analysis-of-impact-and-relief-measures/#other_surveys). For a recent review from a food security perspective of the larger multi-state COVID surveys, see Drèze and Somanchi (2021). For a review from a gender perspective, see Agarwal (2021).

³ For a full report on the study, see Datt, Dutta and Mishra (2021).

While a number of other recent COVID impact surveys have gathered information on migrant workers,⁴ the distinguishing feature of the data and findings presented from this study for rural Bihar is its richness of detail. Drawing upon the extensive data gathered through the study, this paper offers a detailed account of the nature and magnitude of the pandemic’s impact on the livelihoods for this significant category of workers.

2. Data collection in rural Bihar

Primary data were collected through mobile phone-based interviews for a final sample of 1613 rural households (with 9,317 household members) between October 23, 2020 and January 10, 2021 in 12 villages across seven districts of Bihar. The seven study districts – Gaya, Gopalganj, Madhubani, Nalanda, Araria, Purnia and Rohtas – are well spread out across different regions of Bihar and are broadly representative of the state as a whole (Figure 1).



The study sample relied on the database from the Bihar Research Programme conducted by the Institute for Human Development (IHD) in rural Bihar during 2016-17.⁵ A decision to proceed with sampling based on the prior sample from IHD’s 2016-17 study was made for several reasons. First, given the highly restrictive pandemic conditions, it was not possible to construct a new sample frame or conduct a new listing operation. Second, the 2016-17 IHD set of sample districts and villages (itself based on earlier work by the IHD in Bihar) had been carefully chosen to be representative of the state in a number of socioeconomic respects. Third, mobile phone numbers for over four-fifths of the 2016-17 sample households were available, and hence they were potentially contactable for a phone survey. Fourth, the IHD

⁴ See, for instance, Action Aid (2020), Adinkari et al. (2020), Centre for Equity Studies (2020), CPI(M)-CITU. (2020), Jan Sahas (2020), Kesar et al. (2020), PRADAN et al. (2020), Rawal et al. (2020), Sengupta and Jha (2020), Seth (2020), Azim Premji University (2021), Gulati, Jose and Singh (2021), Inclusion Economics (2021), and World Bank, IDinsight and the Development Data Lab (2021).

⁵ During 2016-17 IHD conducted a study on ‘Political Economy of Development, Poverty and Change in Rural Bihar’ which was funded by Indian Council for Social Science Research.

field and research staff had a high degree of familiarity with the study area, built on their experience with these villages over a long period relying on IHD's demonstrated strength in conducting field surveys in Bihar since 1998. Given the challenges of conducting phone-based interviews in difficult pandemic conditions, this experience promised (and proved) to be an invaluable asset. Table 1 shows the distribution of the final sample by village and social group.⁶

District	Village name	SC-ST	OBC-1	OBC-2	Upper Caste	Muslim	Total
Gaya	Alalpur Bishanpur	13	17	12	28	0	70
	Rupaspur Salempur	30	12	17	16	1	76
Gopalganj	Paharpur Dayal	0	0	34	9	0	43
	Dewan Parsa	28	24	3	31	19	105
Madhubani	Mahisam	78	62	32	79	102	353
	Khangaon	40	60	9	60	5	174
Nalanda	Chandkura	67	13	34	4	0	118
	Mohiuddinpur	22	6	0	5	0	33
Araria	Jitwarpur	24	173	26	105	16	344
Purnia	Belabadan	38	21	22	0	28	109
Rohtas	Samauti Buzurg	45	21	17	21	7	111
	Amarhi	17	7	39	14	0	77
Total		402	416	245	372	178	1,613

Note: SC: Scheduled Castes; ST: Scheduled Tribes; OBC-1: Other Backward Castes-Category 1; Other Backward Castes-Category 2.

As the original sample 2016-17 was stratified by village and social group, we updated the post-stratification sample weights by projecting the total number of households by village and each of the five social groups.⁷ Needless to say, these sampling weights are approximate insofar as the projected number of households are an approximation based on past inter-census growth rates. However, it is preferable to use approximate sample weights rather than treat the sample as an unweighted one.

3. Livelihood profile of households prior to the pandemic

The average study household has 5.7 members, with 2.2 children below 18 years of age, 0.3 elderly members above 65 years, and 3.3 members in the working age group of 18-65 years (Table 2).

⁶ For further details on the sample design, see Datt, Dutta and Mishra (2021).

⁷ This was done by updating the number of households in each village and social group as obtained from the Village Schedule of the 2016-17 IHD field survey by the corresponding growth rate of the number of village households from the Primary Census Abstract from the 2001 and 2011 censuses. The sample weights for village i and social group j were then constructed as:

$$w_{ij} = (\text{Projected number of households in 2020})_{ij} / (\text{Number of sample households})_{ij}$$

	Male	Female	Total
Children (0-17 years)	1.1	1.1	2.2
Working age adults (18-65 years)	1.7	1.6	3.3
Elderly (above 65 years)	0.2	0.1	0.3
Total household members	3.0	2.7	5.7

Note: All calculations use sample weights.

Broadly following the National Sample Survey (NSS) classification of employment categories, the survey distinguishes the following six categories of work or livelihood activities:

- (i) Self-employed in agriculture
- (ii) Self-employed in animal husbandry
- (iii) Self-employed in non-agriculture
- (iv) Regular wage/ salaried worker
- (v) Casual labour in agriculture and non-agriculture (other than migrant labour),
- (vi) Migrant labour

Table 3 shows the distribution of households by the main source of income across the above livelihood categories. The header row also shows the shares of different social groups, indicating that a large proportion of households (26%) belong to the SC/ST category, followed by slightly less than one-fourth of households in the upper caste category (Brahmin, Kayastha, Bhumihar and Rajput). About 19% belong to OBC-1 category⁸ while 15% are OBC-2. 17% of households are Muslim.

Main source of income	% of all households					
	All households (100)	SC-ST (25.7)	OBC-1 (19.0)	OBC-2 (15.3)	Upper Caste (23.0)	Muslim (17.0)
Self-employed in agriculture	14.5	2.2	7.7	29.2	29.6	7.0
Self-employed in animal husbandry	0.3	0.0	0.6	1.3	0.0	0.0
Self-employed in non-agriculture	8.3	3.0	12.5	14.7	8.7	5.1
Regular wage/ salaried worker	6.5	4.8	4.4	7.8	7.3	9.2
Casual labour	19.0	38.9	27.7	11.4	2.7	8.0
Migrant labour	50.3	50.9	46.6	34.5	49.7	68.9
Other	1.1	0.3	0.5	1.2	2.0	1.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note: All calculations use sample weights.

As evident from Table 3, casual and migrant labour are the two most important sources of income for household in rural Bihar. It is striking that migrant labour is the main income source for 50% of households. Casual labour is the second largest category as the main income source for about one-fifth of households. This is followed by self-employment in agriculture (main income source for 15% of households) and self-employment in non-agriculture (about

⁸ OBC-1 category households are those in the “creamy” layer of other backward caste households.

8% of households). The dependence on regular wage/salaried work is quite limited, with about 7% of households reporting it as their main source of income. Finally, self-employment in animal husbandry is rarely the main source of income; it is so for only 0.3% of all households.⁹

However, most households engage in multiple income-generating activities. Apart from the main income source for the household, the survey asked if any household members were engaged in different categories of work (Table 4). On average, households are engaged in two livelihood activities. More than two-thirds of households are engaged in two or more activities; about 31% are engaged in three or more.

Table 4 shows the participation rates for the six main categories of work. As seen from the Table, migrant labour is the most common category of work, with 55% of households reporting at least one migrant worker. Animal husbandry is also very common with a 54% participation rate. However, despite this high participation rate, as noted above, it is rarely the main source of income as noted above.

Type of livelihood activity	Participation rate (% of households with at least one member participating in...)					
	All households	SC-ST	OBC-1	OBC-2	Upper Caste	Muslim
Self-employed in agriculture	38.9	19.3	32.1	64.3	58.6	26.9
Self-employed in animal husbandry	54.0	60.9	52.5	65.8	40.2	53.4
Self-employed in non-agriculture	11.0	3.8	14.0	21.7	10.8	9.2
Regular wage/ salaried worker	7.5	5.9	5.7	7.6	8.8	10.5
Casual labour	35.7	67.6	52.5	21.6	4.2	24.0
Migrant worker	55.4	56.2	52.3	41.3	54.0	72.1
Any livelihood activity	99.1	99.7	99.0	99.4	98.8	98.8
Average number of livelihood activities	2.0	2.1	2.1	2.2	1.8	2.0
2 or more activities (% of households)	68	71	69	78	57	69
3 or more activities (% of households)	31	37	34	39	20	26

Note: All calculations use sample weights.

Two other important categories of work are self-employment in agriculture (with a participation rate of 39%) and casual labour (with 36% participation). Self-employment in non-agricultural activities and regular wage/ salaried work are relatively less important with participation rates of 11 and 7.5 percent respectively.

There is considerable occupational diversity across social groups. Ignoring animal husbandry as it is rarely the main source of income, the two most common activities for the SC-ST group are casual labour (participation rate of 68%) and migrant labour (56%). For the OBC-1 group too, their two most common activities are casual labour (53%) and migrant labour (52%). For the OBC-2, it is self-employment in agriculture (64%) and migrant labour (41%). The same two are also the most important for the Upper Caste group – self-employment in agriculture (59%) and migrant labour (54%). For Muslims, migrant labour is by far the most important activity (with a participation rate of 72%) followed by self-employment in agriculture (27%).

⁹ The “other” category mainly includes households who depend on pensions and transfers.

Despite this diversity, it is notable that migrant labour is one of the two most common sources of livelihood for all social groups.

Given the limited scope of the phone-based survey, it was not possible to collect detailed information on household incomes as may be typical in more detailed household surveys. The survey did however include a single question on monthly household income from all sources (including remittance income) during the year preceding the Covid-19 pandemic. This income question did not ask for an exact value of income, but asked respondents to select one of the seven size categories for their monthly household income, ranging from below Rs. 5,000 to more than Rs. 30,000. We aggregated some of the smaller categories to identify four broad income groups, as below:¹⁰

- (i) Lowest income group (monthly household income of < Rs. 5,000)
- (ii) Low income group (monthly household income of Rs. 5,000 – Rs. 10,000)
- (iii) Middle income group (monthly household income of Rs. 10,000 – Rs. 20,000)
- (iv) Top income group (monthly household income of > Rs. 20,000)

Table 5 shows the distribution of study households by income groups. The shares of the lowest, low, middle and top income groups in the total number of households are 13, 50, 28 and 9 percent respectively. The relative nature of these categories ought to be kept in mind; even the top income group have relatively modest income levels. Nonetheless, the SC-ST and Muslim groups are significantly poorer relative to the other social groups.

Income group	Total	SC-ST	OBC-1	OBC-2	Upper Caste	Muslim
Lowest (< Rs 5,000)	12.9	15.0	17.3	8.4	9.3	13.9
Low (Rs 5,000 - Rs 10,000)	50.2	58.1	44.6	55.7	37.1	57.4
Middle (Rs 10,000 - Rs 20,000)	27.8	21.5	33.3	26.6	37.3	19.4
Top (> Rs 20,000)	9.0	5.4	4.8	9.3	16.3	9.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note: All calculations use sample weights. Income groups are defined in terms of total monthly household income.

The following section present our findings on how the livelihoods of migrant workers in rural Bihar were impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings are based on the information that the survey collected for up to two migrant workers from each household.

Unless otherwise specified, the reference period for studying the impact is April-September 2020, the six-month period following the first national lockdown announced by the Prime Minister that began on March 24.¹¹ Note that in many of the following Tables, we refer to the reference period of April-September 2020 as “since Corona” or “during Corona”, and we interchangeably refer to the pandemic impact as impact of Corona or impact of Covid-19. For some of the questions, the reference period is up to the date of interview with the household.

¹⁰ As we did not ask for the level of household incomes, we were unable to classify households in terms of per capita income.

¹¹ There were four successive lockdowns between March 24 and May 31, 2020.

4. Impact on migrant workers

As noted above, migrant labour is an important source of livelihood for households in rural Bihar; about 55% of households have at least one migrant worker and we refer to these households as migrant labour households. As also mentioned above, the survey collected information for up to two migrant workers in the household. About 44% of all households or 79% of migrant labour households have one migrant worker, while 11% of all households or 21% of migrant labour households also have a second migrant worker (Table 6).

Migrant labour households (with at least one migrant worker) as % of all households	55.4
Households with one migrant worker as % of all households	43.9
Households with two migrant worker as % of all households	11.5
Households with a second migrant worker as % of migrant labour households	20.8

Note: All calculations use sample weights.

Virtually all migrant workers are male; this is equally true of first and second migrant workers in the household (Table 7). They are relatively young. For instance, 50% of the first migrant workers are 37 years or younger, and three-quarters are below 45 years. The second migrant workers are even younger; three-quarters of them are 30 or younger.

Sex and age of migrant workers	First migrant worker (all migrant labour households)	Second migrant worker (21% of migrant labour households)
male	99.5	99.4
Age of migrant worker (years)		
Min	18	14
P25	30	22
Median	37	25
P75	44	30
Max	64	56

Note: All calculations use sample weights.

Very few of the migrant workers (about 2% of first or second migrant workers) work within the district, and only a few work in other districts within Bihar (less than 4% of first migrant workers, 1% of second migrant workers); see Table 8. Similarly, very few (1% of first migrant workers, 2% of second migrant workers) work outside India. Nearly 93-94% of migrant workers work outside Bihar, with about 85-87% working in urban areas outside Bihar. Thus, by far, the

dominant form of migrant work is to urban centres in other states, and hence relatively long-distance in nature.

Place of work	% of first migrant workers	% of second migrant workers
Within district, rural	0.0	0.8
Within district, urban	1.7	1.6
Other district within Bihar, rural	0.2	0.0
Other district within Bihar, urban	3.6	1.1
Outside Bihar, rural	6.8	9.5
Outside Bihar, urban	86.5	84.8
Outside India	1.3	2.1

Note: All calculations use sample weights.

4.1. Overall impact on migrant workers

Our survey reveals that as far as migrant workers from rural Bihar are concerned, hardly anyone was spared by the impact of the pandemic. All almost all the migrant workers, 94% of first migrant workers and 91% of second migrant workers reported being affected by Corona (Table 9). This is equivalent to about 52% percent of all households being affected by Corona through the impact on migrant workers alone.

	% of first migrant workers	% of second migrant workers
Affected by Corona	93.6	91.1

Note: All calculations use sample weights.

The survey inquired into a broad range of effects on migrant workers which we discuss below.

4.2. How was migrant workers' employment disrupted?

The survey asked about different channels through which migrant workers' employment was impacted by the pandemic and the pandemic response, especially the lockdowns since March 24, 2020, which severely restricted mobility and economic activity, effectively shutting down large parts of the economy. Table 10 presents the results.

Table 10: Different channels of impact on migrant workers' employment

Factors impacting on migrant workers' employment	% of first migrant workers	% of second migrant workers
Work site closed or employment terminated by employer	45.5	41.6
Work site closed or employment suspended by employer	27.7	37.3
Unable to work due to travel restrictions	73.3	73.1
Stopped working due to fear of infection	94.7	94.3
Stopped working because wanted to get back home to native village	19.6	27.0
Other	0.7	1.8
Returned to the native village or stayed in the destination area		
Returned	56.0	51.3
Stayed	44.0	48.7

Note: All calculations use sample weights.

Note that the channels or factors identified in Table 10 are not mutually exclusive. Often, multiple factors are in play. For instance, nearly all (more than 94%) migrant workers reported stopping work due to fear of infection, while nearly three-quarters also reported being unable to work due to travel restrictions. It is however notable that about 70% of them reported being impacted by work site closure or employment being terminated or suspended by the employer. This suggests that for the large majority of migrant workers, their employment disruption was highly involuntary; they could not continue to work even if they wanted to.

As a consequence of the above factors, the majority of migrant workers – 56% of first migrant workers and 51% of second migrant workers – returned to the native village. The following two sections further describe the experience of those who stayed in the destination area (the “stayers”) and others who returned to their village (the “returnees”).

4.3. The experience of “stayers”

As noted above, over two-fifths of migrant workers stayed in the destination areas. Based on our survey questions for the “stayers”, Table 11 and Table 12 sketch some aspects of their experience.

Table 11: Loss of work and wages among stayers		
	% of stayers among	
	First migrant workers	Second migrant workers
Who lost any days of work due to Corona	87.7	85.4
Who were working at the time of the survey	97.5	90.1
Change in wage/salary rate since Corona:		
Decrease	25.8	35.0
No change	70.7	60.5
Increase	3.5	4.5
	Average %age change	
Change in wage/salary rate since Corona:		
Among stayers reporting decrease	-26.7	-21.3
Among stayers reporting increase	19.9	9.4

Note: All calculations use sample weights.

Table 12: Impact on remittances by stayers		
	First migrant workers	Second migrant workers
Change in remittances: % of stayers		
Decrease	94.3	94.4
No change	5.7	5.6
Change in remittances: average %age change among stayers reporting a decline	-53.5	-53.5

Note: All calculations use sample weights.

First, the vast majority of stayers, 88% of stayers among first migrant workers and 85% of stayers among second migrant workers, reported loss of days of work due to Corona. Fortunately, by the time of the survey, nearly all of the stayers were working, which may also explain why they continued to stay in the destination area. Nonetheless, this does not detract from the widespread if temporary loss of employment among the stayers.

Second, the survey also inquired into changes in wage/ salary rates experienced by stayers. A large majority, about 70% of stayers among first migrant workers and about 60% among second migrant workers, reported no change in wage/ salary rates. For them, the impact came not through the rates of remuneration but through the loss of days of work. It is however significant that about a quarter of stayers among first migrant workers and about a third of stayers among second migrant workers also reported a decrease in remuneration rates. The average decline in remuneration rates among these groups was 27% and 21% respectively.

Third, this impact on the stayers had a significant flow-on effect on remittances sent by them. As much as 94% of stayers reported a fall in remittances sent home. The average fall in remittances was more than 50%, significantly adding to the shock to the overall income of their native households.

4.4. The experience of “returnees”

The survey asked a range of questions about the experience of migrant workers who returned to the village since the pandemic. This section describes different elements of that experience.

Timing of return

While migrant workers started trickling back to their native villages in February 2020 itself, return migration accelerated during March through May. By the end of May 2020, about three-quarters of the returnees among first migrant workers (57% among the second migrant workers) had already come back to the native villages (Table 13).

Month of return	First migrant workers		Second migrant workers	
	%age of returnees	Cumulative %age of returnees	%age of returnees	Cumulative %age of returnees
Jan-20	1.7	1.7	1.6	1.6
Feb-20	10.4	12.2	8.1	9.7
Mar-20	14.4	26.5	3.1	12.8
Apr-20	25.4	51.9	20.6	33.3
May-20	22.6	74.5	23.8	57.1
Jun-20	12.1	86.6	15.8	72.9
Jul-20	7.5	94.1	16.4	89.3
Aug-20	3.2	97.3	4.9	94.2
Sep-20	1.8	99.2	2.2	96.5
Oct-20	0.8	100.0	1.9	98.4
Nov-20			1.6	100.0

Note: All calculations use sample weights.

Loss of days of work up to arrival in native village

The survey asked about the number of days the migrant workers were without work between March 22 (the first Janata curfew) and their return to the village. The reported losses of days of work though varied were enormous. The median loss amongst returning first migrant workers was 44 days; 50 days among returning second migrant workers. Losses were more substantial for many. For instance, 25% of the first migrant returnees had work days losses (up to arrival in the village) of 70 days or more (Table 14).

Loss of days of work up to the return to native village	Number of days	
	First migrant workers	Second migrant workers
Min	0	0
P25	5	30
Median	44	50
P75	70	65
Max	200	180

Note: All calculations use sample weights.

The journey back home

As was well-documented by numerous media reports at the time, the returnees often made a long, arduous and costly journey back home. Table 15 provides several relevant details. For instance, the Table shows that the returnees used more than one mode of travel to get back to the native village; this is evident from the fact the sum of percentages of returnees using different modes of travel adds up to more than 100. A comment could also be made on the use of the so-called “Shramik” (workers) trains that were organized by the government during the national lockdown to allow stranded migrant workers to get back home.¹² Only a little more than one-fifth of the returnees made use of Shramik trains for their return journeys. The low proportion is testimony to the fact that there were significant delays in the organization of these trains, by which time many migrant workers had already left the destination area by alternative means. In addition, there were only a few of such Shramik trains and the whole operation was poorly organized which severely limited access.

¹² The nationwide lockdown was announced on March 24, 2020 with a 4-hour notice, leaving a large section of migrant workers in a highly precarious position with their livelihoods shut down and no means of public transport to get back home.

Table 15: Some details of the journey back home for returning migrant workers		
	First migrant workers	Second migrant workers
Means of travel for returnees	% of returnees using this mode of travel	
Shramik train	22.2	21.5
Other train	31.3	30.2
Bus, truck or other road transport	81.4	78.5
On bicycle	1.3	3.0
On foot (walking)	27.8	32.6
Number of days to complete the journey from the destination area to the native village	% of returnees	
0	3.4	2.4
1	4.5	6.8
2	22.7	17.2
3	28.9	33.0
4	27.9	32.0
5	12.6	6.8
6		1.9
Average number of days	3.1	3.1
Cost of return journey	Rupees	
Median	3,000	2,600
Mean	2,589	2,534
Unpaid wage arrears at the time of returning to village	% of returnees	
Returnees with wage arrears	9.5	2.4
Amount of arrears among those with wage arrears	Rupees	
Median	7,000	4,500
Any other payment received from employer at the time of returning to village	% of returnees	
No payment received	94.2	95.5
Amount received among those receiving payments	Rupees	
Median	2,500	2,000

Note: All calculations use sample weights.

The survey also found that on average the return journey took about three days, and for about 40% of the returnees, it took four or more days. The median cost of the return journey was Rs 3,000 for returnees among first migrant workers, and Rs 2600 for returnees among second migrant workers. While the returnees had to bear this out-of-pocket cost, about 10% of the returnee first migrant workers also had unpaid wage arrears when they left (with a median value of Rs 7,000). We also asked if the returnees received any other payment from their employers at the time return journey. About 95% of them did not receive any such payment.

Work situation upon return

Of the returnees, 38% among the returning first migrant workers and 52% among the returning second migrant workers were still in the village at the time of the survey (Table 16). The rest had gone back to the destination area. Among those who were still in the village, about 65% of first migrant workers and 58% of second migrant workers found alternative work in or around the village. Only about 4% of the returnees found MGNREGA work; about 48% and 44% of the first and second returnees respectively found other wage work; while the rest, about 13% and 11% of first and second returnees respectively, resorted to self-employment activities.

Often such alternative work was part-time in nature, on average only about 3-4 days per week. If it was wage work, the median earnings were Rs 250 per day among first returnees and Rs. 300 per day among second returnees.

	First migrant workers	Second migrant workers
	% of returnees	
Still in the village at the time of the survey	37.6	51.8
	% of returnees still in the village	
Found alternative work in or around the village	65.3	58.1
MGNREGA work	3.7	3.6
Other wage work	48.3	43.9
Self-employed in agriculture or non-agriculture	13.3	10.6
	Days per week	
Days of alternative work per week		
Median (among those who found such work)	4	3
Mean (among those who found such work)	4.0	3.1
	Rs per day	
Earnings from alternative work (for wage work only)		
Median (among those who found such work)	250	300
Mean (among those who found such work)	265	293

Note: All calculations use sample weights.

By the time of the survey, 62% of returnees among the first migrant workers and 48% of returnees among the second migrant workers had gone back to the destination areas. But this was not before having spent a significant amount of time in the native village, ranging between about two weeks and as long as about 8 months. Among those who went back to the destination areas, the median number of days spent in the native village was 149 days for first migrant workers and 133 days for second migrant workers (Table 17). Thus, the typical migrant worker who went back to destination areas spent 4-5 months in the native village, indicative of a significant loss of work opportunities. In addition, (i) at least about one-fifth of those who had gone back to destination areas were still to resume work at the destination sites at the time of the survey, and (ii) a little under one-fifth of those who had resumed work at destination sites reported earning a lower amount than what they used to before their reverse migration.

Table 17: Work situation for returning migrant workers who went back to destination areas

	First migrant workers	Second migrant workers
	% of returnees	
Who went back to destination area	62.4	48.2
Number of days spent in native village before returning to destination area	For those who went back to destination area	
Min	16	13
P25	112	100
Median	149	133
P75	189	163
Max	257	247
% of those who went back to destination area but still had not resumed work at the time of the survey	20.5	37.5
Whether the worker is earning the same amount as before:	% among those who had resumed work in destination area	
Same as before	79.5	86.5
Higher amount	2.1	
Lower amount	18.4	13.5

Note: All calculations use sample weights.

5. Summing up

The picture that emerges from the detailed evidence documented above is one of pervasive and severe impacts on rural livelihoods in the state of Bihar. The evidence presented above is limited to the impacts on migrant workers and primarily relates to impacts over the first 8-10 months of the pandemic since April 2020. This is a period when Covid-19 infections were concentrated in urban areas of the country. The evidence shows that it nonetheless exacted a large toll on rural livelihoods too, mainly due to the widespread disruption of economic activities and the dominant link through migrant workers on whose earnings as much as a half the rural households in Bihar critically depend. The livelihood impacts the study documents are likely to have pushed many into poverty and those already poor into a more severe state of deprivation.

A detailed comparison of our findings with those emerging from similar other studies on the COVID-19 crisis is beyond the scope of this paper. Such a comparison is also difficult due to the large variation across studies in sample size, location, reference period and survey instruments. However, in broad terms, the above evidence for Bihar is consistent with and reinforces the evidence from the other studies.

This evidence presents a strong case for the provision of further support to households for them to find a pathway to a reasonable recovery.¹³ This case is only strengthened by the experience of the more devastating second wave of the pandemic since March 2021 that has heavily afflicted the rural areas too.

¹³ See Datt, Dutta and Mishra (2021) for evidence on impact on other sources of livelihood as well as the extent of government support received by these households.

The pandemic has highlighted the complete lack of social protection for migrant workers who are the backbone of key sectors of the economy including construction, manufacturing and agriculture, and who are critical to the welfare of large number rural households who rely on remittances sent by them. The constrained portability of certain safety nets such as subsidized food through the Public Distribution System (despite the recent One Nation One Ration initiative), and the absence of social insurance mechanisms such as an analogue of MGNREGA in urban areas stand out as key areas for future social policy reform.

This study also highlights the importance of continued and rapid data gathering to monitor the evolving impacts of the pandemic and engineer timely support to those in need. It also underscores the need to develop flexible support mechanisms which can spring into action based on some observable triggers that an institutionalized data gathering process can regularly monitor.

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