ISSN: 2581-8422, Vol. 07, No. (1) 2024, Pg. 29-41

Current Research Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities

journalofsocialsciences.org

Lived Experiences of Interstate Migrant Workers during COVID-19 Lockdown: An Oral History in West Bengal

SANTANU KUNDU and ANUPAM DEBNATH*

Department of Social Work, Visva-Bharati University, Sriniketan.

Abstract

Migration serves as a livelihood strategy for many people. The imposition of a nationwide lockdown in India in March 2020 (PIB, 2020) increased the rate of reverse migration, which deepened socio-economic inequalities among the most vulnerable population, such as the migrant workers in underdeveloped areas of *Jangal Mahal* in the state of West Bengal, India. In this regard, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) attempt to reduce inequalities within and among countries (Goal 10) and ensure that no one is left behind (UN, 2020). The paper's main objective is to explore the ways the COVID-19 lockdown has deepened the existing livelihood insecurities based on the experiences of interstate migrant workers in *Jangal Mahal*. Oral history was used as a qualitative research strategy to collect migrant workers' lived experiences within the context of the COVID-19 lockdown. Using the snowball sampling technique, eight interstate migrant workers from the Bankura and Purulia districts of West Bengal were selected for the study. Semi-structured interview sessions were recorded ethically with their consent during June and July 2022. Their first-person narratives of migrant workers suggest that during the lockdown, most were compelled to face a lack of transportation, harassment by the police, discrimination, loss of savings, lack of food, lack of safe drinking water, lack of shelter, loss of income, and poor sanitation facilities in the quarantine centres.

Article History

Received: 04 February 2024

Accepted: 12 June 2024

Keywords

Covid-19 Lockdown;
Jangal Mahal;
Lived Experiences;
Migrant Workers;
Oral History.

Introduction

As a complex phenomenon that has persisted from prehistoric periods to the present, migration can be defined as a ‘permanent’ or 'semi-permanent' change of abode. Due to its sociocultural and economic advantages, migration has been a means of sustenance for a large number of individuals (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009). India had 45.6 crore migrants in 2011, or 38 percent of the total population (Iyer, 2020). Since a migrant is often perceived as an

CONTACT Anupam Debnath mjusic@ius.edu.ba Rutgers University, The State University of New Jersey, Department of Human Ecology, Program in Science Learning, 59 Lipman Drive, Waller Hall 104, New Brunswick, USA.

Doi: 10.12944/CRJSSH.7.1.04

'outsider' in the destination area, it seriously affects them, and the degree of vulnerability is very high among migrant workers globally (Borhade, 2011).

Mainly in India, the people of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Jammu and Kashmir, and West Bengal are the biggest source of migrant workers (Choudhary, 2020). They go to Delhi, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, and Kerala, India's most urbanised states. The agriculture sector, brick kilns, construction sites, small and tiny roadside businesses such as tea shops, *dhabas*, small eateries, hotels, restaurants, and services such as maid serving, security guarding, driving, industrial non-skilled working, and so on are the major livelihood strategies of migrant workers. These constitute 93 percent of the total workforce in India (Dandekar & Ghai, 2020), and they fall under what Keith Hart (1973) popularly coined as the 'informal sector' during his study of economic activities among rural migrants in Accra, Ghana. It was concluded that despite the external constraints imposed by capitalist domination, most migrants were engaged in informal activities that had an 'autonomous capacity' for generating income (Hart, 1973).

Today, the informal economy represents 61 percent of the world's workforce, and the Indian economy has a vast majority of informal or unorganised labour employment (Kalyani, 2015). However, migrant workers in the informal sector in post-independent India have been facing various kinds of difficulties in their daily lives, such as poverty, improper residence, cultural and language difficulties, a lack of family proximity and support, and discriminatory behaviour towards them because of their low socio-economic status.

Contextualising the Problem

The shift from hunter-gatherers to agrarian societies has favoured the spread of infectious diseases in the human population, and increased interactions between humans and animals have facilitated the transmission of zoonotic pathogens (Piret & Boivin, 2021). But though infectious diseases have always afflicted humanity throughout human history, it must be emphasised that in the contemporary global scenario, the expansion of cities, extension of trade territories, greater drug tolerance, increased human population, climate change, negative effects on ecosystems, as well as increased human mobility and human travel, have raised the emergence and spread of infectious diseases in an unprecedented way, leading to higher risks of outbreaks, epidemics, and even pandemics (Piret & Boivin, 2021).

One such highly contagious illness is COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019), which is a result of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. It was learnt in December 2019 in Wuhan, China (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022), and the first cases of COVID-19 in India were reported on January 30, 2020, in the three towns of Kerala (Vaman *et al*., 2020). On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a global pandemic, and by the evening of March 24, 2020, the Government of India carried out a nationwide lockdown and then extended it throughout India (Ministry of Home Affairs, India, 2020). It limited the movement of the entire 1.38 billion (138 crore) population of India. With factories and workplaces shut down, many of migrant workers had to face loss of income, food shortages, and indecision about their future (Iyengar & Jain, 2020).

In the face of COVID-19, these individuals found themselves increasingly vulnerable as the pandemic brought about a complete halt in economic activities. Consequently, they lost their sources of income, faced eviction from their rented accommodations by landlords wary of physical contact, and sought refuge in returning to their native lands. The existing literature underscored the profound challenges they encountered during the lockdown period, where they were stranded without access to essential resources such as food and money while enduring stringent restrictions. Thus, this situation posed a significant threat to their livelihood, as it undermined their natural, financial, social, and physical capital.
West Bengal ranks fourth in migration data among all states (Chakraborty *et al*., 2022). Remote areas of Bankura District and major parts of West Medinipur, Jhargram, and Purulia Districts of West Bengal are now literarily known as *Jangal Mahal* (Mahadani, 2022). *Jangal Mahal* literally means jungle estates. In 1805, this district was formed by the British. Now, a major part of West Medinipur, Jhargram, Purulia, and remote areas of Bankura District are now literarily referred to as *Jangal Mahal* (Official Website of the District Court of India, 2022). The drought-prone land, lack of fertile agricultural land,

lack of alternative livelihood opportunities, illiteracy, political instability, and the presence of various extremist groups, like the Maoists, are indicators of the backwardness of *Jangal Mahal*. Moreover, 41.52 percent of people are below the poverty level in West Medinipur (*District Human Development Report, Bankura,* 2007). Half of Purulia District's people live below the poverty line (Bagli & Tewari, 2019). Most people in *Jangal Mahal* engage in intra-state as well as interstate migration in search of better jobs and employment. Migration within a country is roughly 1.5 times larger than migration between countries. Mass internal migration back to India and other countries was chaotic and painful due to lockdowns, job losses, and social isolation. (World Bank, 2020).

Lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic in different states of India pointed out the hidden problem of the millions of migrant workers living in extreme poverty and vulnerability. A significant number of migrant workers returned during the lockdown. So, the pressure of returning migrant workers may bring socio-economic and livelihood challenges to this area. During the lockdown period, many migrant workers came to Bankura and Purulia districts of the *Jangal Mahal* area. The number of migrant workers in the Purulia district is 67,000. During the lockdown, they returned to their native places from various states and districts (Chakraborty, 2020). The Block Development Officer, *Sonamukhi* of Bankura District, reported that 33,004 migrant workers returned to their native place in Bankura District (from Field Source).

The 2030 Agenda and the 17 integrated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are representative of the aspirations of all countries for inclusive, holistic development of those who are lagging due to social exclusion. In the context of migration, Goal 10.7 of the SDGs stresses the importance of orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration of people through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies because the main goal of the SDGs is to ensure that no one is left behind. In this context, it becomes necessary to examine whether the migrant workforce, especially in backward districts, requires more attention and care from governmental and non-governmental organisations to achieve the SDGs.

The Thematic Synthesis of Existing Literature

Social Marginalisation of Migrant Workers during The Covid-19 Lockdown

The social marginalisation that migrant workers experienced during the COVID-19 lockdown was severe. The government's COVID-19 lockdown restricted migrant workers' mobility so much that they were troubled and terrified (Shahare, 2021). In response, many migrant labourers embarked on arduous journeys covering vast distances under harsh conditions, often enduring hunger, to board overcrowded trains. During the curfew, migrant labourers rented or stole bikes or carts to travel home. They were compelled to endure austere conditions in under-equipped quarantine facilities for extended periods, lasting up to 14 days. These marginalised migrant workers encountered multifaceted challenges, including job loss, diminished earnings, and inadequate access to essential services such as education, healthcare, sustenance, and clean water. Due to government inefficiency, marginalised migrant workers lost employment, suffered low salaries, and lacked education, healthcare, food, and water. Over 630 abandoned migrant labourers were hurt returning home, and 198 died (Sengupta & Jha, 2020). The repercussions of the COVID-19 lockdown extended beyond material deprivation, profoundly impacting the dignity and fundamental rights of migrant workers as they lost trust in the socio-political system of the COVID-19 lockdown (Yadav & Priya, 2021).

Economic Implications of Reverse Migration in India

The lockdown due to COVID-19 precipitated a mass exodus of millions of internal migrant labourers, mainly in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, West Bengal, and Jammu and Kashmir, to return to their native lands empty-handed (Singh *et al*., 2020). Thus, COVID-19-induced reverse migration has negatively impacted the rural economy as many people fell into deeper poverty and hunger. The world economy faced the threat of a serious recession due to the sudden spread of COVID-19, which limited livelihood opportunities, due to which migrant workers, from being providers of remittance incomes to their family members, became dependent on their family members. Moreover, since several migrant workers

who left the big cities during the crisis had to live on their marginal farms or find work in nearby towns instead of returning, a human resource shortage would trigger industrial deprivation, affecting the Indian economy (Khanna, 2020).

Emotional Implications of the COVID-19 Lockdown

The migrant labourers who were repatriated to Bangladesh due to COVID-19-related measures faced mental and socio-economic stress, according to Karim *et al*., (2020). Digital ethnography of low-income Bangladeshi migrant labourers in Southeast Asia and the Middle East revealed that unforeseen job losses and financial insecurities resulted in profound hardship for many migrant workers' families, leading to hunger and poverty.

The absence of job security and a stable means of providing for their families intensified economic challenges, with migrants indicating that such difficulties significantly impacted their mental well-being. Notably, some migrants expressed greater fear of losing their jobs than of contracting COVID-19 itself. Tragically, the stress and strain of their circumstances drove many young Bangladeshi workers to contemplate or carry out acts of suicide. The social and spiritual dimensions of these tragic occurrences were also evident, as the inability to attend the funerals of deceased loved ones due to extended hospital stays further compounded the emotional toll on migrant communities (Jamil & Dutta, 2021).

Gendered Implications of the COVID-19 Lockdown on Migrant Workers

In India, Delhi and Haryana women migrant workers lost income and debt during and after the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Their loss affected their quality of life because most relied on their daily income. They admitted to borrowing from friends, family, or moneylenders for everyday expenditures, especially without savings. Food quantity and quality (diet diversity) plummeted during and after the lockdown. Women compromised on food, period pads, phone recharges, cooking gas, and family health. Raising children and maintaining the family on a budget felt like jail. Because of facility and resource interruptions, their pandemic experiences were harsher. The lack of local address identification documents concerns them about COVID-19 care and alienates them. They felt ignored by the authorities (Azeez E. P. *et al*., 2021).

While in China, women migrants were less likely than males to return to cities and paid labour following the epidemic. Having a preschool-aged kid negatively impacted women migrants' work decisions, but not men's. Importantly, the COVID-19 pandemic had slowed progress in increasing Chinese rural women's labour market standing compared to pre-pandemic eras (Yueping *et al*., 2021).

Employment Issues During COVID-19 Lockdown

COVID-19-related layoffs might have cost low-skilled Indian migrant workers in Saudi Arabia 21 percent of their predicted wages. Recruitment costs might have reduced family payments by USD 2 billion if losses reached 36 percent of expected or probable profits (Abella & Sasikumar, 2020).

After returning to China in February 2020, COVID-19 prevented over 90 percent of rural-hukou migrant labourers from obtaining work. The lockdown to prevent contagious viruses harmed the least educated and skilled across all age groups. Many rural-hukou migrant workers created temporary storefronts or took low-paying odd jobs in their hometowns to endure the long shutdown and strict return-to-work criteria (Che *et al*., 2020).

The Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN), a relief programme created after the Indian lockdown, revealed that 36,343 people were affected, and during closure, 84 percent of workers were unpaid. Contractors often miss work. Some contractors supplied cash or food during a rough patch, while others did not. A few contractors remained. Companies threatened to withhold housing and food if workers departed. Transferred money was also scarce. Many workers borrowed from family, friends, and local businesses to survive. It created an everlasting debt cycle (Adhikari *et al*., 2020).

In the global north, Filipino migrant workers in Los Angeles and New York, USA, were severely impacted by the COVID-19 epidemic, which led to unemployment and homelessness. Employers fired domestic workers out of fear they would spread the disease and hurt their elderly relatives, and United States corporations' shift to home-based offices meant they no longer required them.

Domestic workers are paying higher rent owing to unemployment (Pandey *et al*., 2021).

Major Gap Identified

A review of the literature revealed that there were few studies that explored the social, economic, mental, and gendered effects of COVID-19 on migrant workers. However, livelihood insecurities are feelings of unease centred around the means of securing the basics of life, such as natural capital, financial capital, social capital, and physical capital, which confer value or benefits to interstate migrant workers. The ways interstate migrant workers endured the aftermath of the COVID-19 lockdown and the ways they faced their livelihood insecurities in India's heterogeneous cultural and geographical landscape from their own experiences and perspectives have not been explored much through in-depth qualitative research.

Central Research Question

From the preceding discussions and lacunae that can be identified in the pre-existing literature, the central question of the study that emerged was:

What were the lived experiences of interstate migrant workers during the COVID-19 lockdown in terms of livelihood insecurity?

Methodology of the Study

Research Design

An exploratory approach to qualitative data collection was done to document the lived experiences of interstate migrant workers in Bankura and Purulia Districts of West Bengal, India, during the COVID-19 lockdown. Thus, the researchers used primary and secondary data sources in the form of online resources to understand the background of the problem.

Strategy for Data Collection

Oral history is the systematic collection of living people's testimony about their own experiences. Since oral history depends upon human memory and the spoken word, it serves as an essential strategy to place migrant workers' lived experiences within the context of the COVID-19 lockdown. Thus, oral history was used as a qualitative research strategy to collect and study data by formulating research questions, conducting background research, interviewing interstate migrants, evaluating transcripts, and organising and presenting results (Moyer, 1999).

Validation Strategies

To ensure the credibility and accuracy of the study findings, various tactics were employed to promote validity. These included the use of both interviews and observations, as well as the involvement of both authors in the analysis of the data. Additionally, sharing interpretations with the research participants and getting their feedback were other methods of member-checking. Moreover, the investigators endeavoured to furnish detailed accounts of the participants' lived experiences. In this sense, an attempt was made to keep researchers conscious of the ways in which their viewpoints may affect the gathering, processing, and interpretation of data.

Tools of Data Collection

Eight in-depth interview sessions (six face-to-face and two telephonic) through semi-structured interview schedules were recorded ethically with their consent during June and July 2022 to capture the broadest range of perspectives possible in order to address the central research question of the study.

Geographical Area of the Study

West Medinipur, Bankura, Jhargram, and Purulia Districts of the Indian state of West Bengal are popularly known as *Jangal Mahal*. Historically, the area has been forest-surrounded, which constituted the geographical area of the study. Bankura, West Bengal, is situated in the state's western region. Bankura District is located between 22°38′ north latitude and 86°36′ east longitude to 87°47′ east longitude (Bankura District Official Website, 2022). The coordinates 22°6′–23°50′ north latitude and 85°75′–86.65° east longitude indicate the location of Purulia (Purulia District Official Website, 2022).

Population of the Study

The researchers first contacted an acquaintance, who provided information about the addresses of two other migrant workers. The researchers accordingly visited the Manbazar block of Purulia district. After acclimating himself to the villages, rapport was established with the migrant workers, and information was gathered through semi-structured interviews. Further contacts were noted from conversations with migrants, and the same procedure was followed by

visiting the other villages of Puncha and Bandwan Purulia Districts and Joypur, Bishnupur, and Salboni, the blocks of Bankura District. In this way, the researcher familiarised himself with the nature and conditions of migrant workers as well as their challenges during COVID-19.

Sampling Techniques Used in the Study

According to Babbie (2020), snowball sampling is appropriate for exploratory purposes when the members of a special population are difficult to locate, such as migrant workers or undocumented immigrants.

Among the non-probability sampling techniques, snowball sampling was thus used to recruit research participants in the study because finding interstate migrant workers was challenging and because the interstate migrant workers were connected and knew others who faced challenges as migrants during the COVID-19 lockdown, which was the purpose of the investigation of the study.

The first research participant who was recruited to the sample was an acquaintance of the researchers, who provided multiple referrals. Then, each new referral provided the researchers with more potential research participants. However, the researchers determined which referrals to recruit to ensure maximum variation based on the purpose of the study. In this way, the Exponential Discriminative Snowball Sampling technique was used to recruit eight interstate migrant workers from the Bankura and Purulia Districts of West Bengal.

Ethical Considerations and Validation Strategy

No participant was forced to participate in the study, and all relevant information regarding the study was informed to them for their consent to participate in the research study. Since validation cannot be dismissed entirely despite being a qualitative study, reviewing the story with the participants helped to validate the meanings and subsequent interpretations.

Results

Participant One

After a five-month lockdown, Participant One, a 25-year-old bridge construction worker from Manbazar, Purulia District, returned from Nagpur, Maharashtra. After passing the secondary examination at the age of 19, he went to Nagpur for better livelihood opportunities because economic conditions were not strong enough to fulfil the basic needs of the six members of the family. To support the family, he migrated from Purulia to Maharashtra. He earned ₹12,000/- monthly from the construction company in Nagpur.

'During the lockdown, I immediately lost my job. The construction company had arranged for a shelter for us. There, I stayed for five months. The company had provided only one month's food. I paid for my food for the next four months using my savings. After five months, we decided to return home because we did not have work or food. Can you imagine our condition? That time, we rented a car, which cost ₹ 9000 per head. After returning home, I spent 14 days in home quarantine. Then, I started working as a plumber and building construction worker in my village for survival. But I did not get enough work to look after my family. So, I wanted to return to my old job in Nagpur, but the company did not call me to return.'

---------- Participant One

Participant Two

Participant Two, a 27-year-old painter from Purulia, migrated to Paradip, Odisha, at age 20 in search of better financial opportunities. Having completed only eight years of education, he discontinued his studies to work as a daily wage labourer in his village to support his family. During this time, his mother was the sole breadwinner, as his father was unable to work due to illness. Determined to improve his family's financial situation, he migrated to Paradip and found employment with a construction company, earning a monthly salary of ₹22,000.

'With my bike, I travelled 400 km in two days when Janata Curfews declared a strike, and the company was forcefully sending all workers back to their homes. The company only gave some money for fuel. I stayed at home without work for three months. The company again called to join. After one month of work, I suddenly felt very ill one day and became senseless. I was hospitalised at the time after being diagnosed as COVID-19-positive. After 14 days of treatment in the hospital, I became fit and wanted to re-join my work, but the company forcefully made me leave work for 21 days. So, I again travelled 400 kilometres to reach home. The construction company did not pay me my salary and did not

provide any medical expenses for my hospitalization. It was such a tough time for me and my family.'
---------- Participant Two

Participant Three

Participant Three, a 22-year-old male hailing from Belboni, Bankura, found employment as a labourer at a cotton spinning plant in Himachal Pradesh. He dropped out of school at the age of 16 during his eleventh grade. The father worked as a worker daily and was unable to provide for the family. He was the youngest son in four households. He travelled to Himachal Pradesh accompanied by his friend, where he earned a monthly income of ₹15,000. On a monthly basis, he would send his money to his father.

'When the lockdown was declared, the thread mill company got closed; the company did not pay us any salary. They told us that we would be provided only two meals daily on the condition that we had to take less than ₹2,000 from our salary when the mill reopened after the lockdown. Only a small amount of packaged food, which was of bad quality, was given to us. At that time, I did not even have enough money to recharge my phone. My parents somehow arranged some money to recharge my phone and sent me some money for food and the rent of the house. After three months of complete lockdown, I got news that the government had arranged a train from Himachal Pradesh to Howrah. But a cyclone came, and the railway cancelled the train. After four months of lockdown, the mill opened. In these conditions, the company cuts ₹2,000 every month. After eight months of lockdown, I wanted to return home, but the company did not allow me. I returned home, and for coming home without the permission of the mill manager, I lost my job.'
---------- Participant Three

Participant Four

Participant Four was a 31-year-old construction worker in south Mumbai. His monthly salary was ₹20,000/-. Despite his graduation, he was unable to find employment. Being the only male offspring in a household of three individuals, he had to shoulder more obligations because his father's chronic health problems incapacitated him from employment. As the sole breadwinner in his family, he set out on a voyage to Mumbai at the age of 25 to seek work prospects and financially assist his family.

'The company manager told us that the company would be closed for just ten days when the Janta curfew was declared. There were 1000 workers at the time, but they fled during the lockdown because their home was nearby. But I could not return home because of the distance. During the first forty-five days of lockdown, I spent time with my five co-workers in a room. The company paid forty percent of wages only for food and house rent. I cooked food. I did not have enough money to send my family. I needed money for my father's treatment, so I used up all my savings. But it was not enough for treatment. So, I took loans from my friends for my father's treatment. I warned my friends not to tell my parents about my economic crisis.'
---------- Participant Four

Participant Five

Participant Five was a 27-year-old young male who worked as a cook at a restaurant in Bangalore. He earned ₹15,000 per month as a salary. The restaurant's owner also provided food and room for him. After passing high school, he left home to earn money to support the family. The family was struggling to provide food for five people. At the age of 19, he worked as a cook's assistant in Bangalore, where he had moved with a friend from his village of Hijaldiha, Bankura.

'Due to the lockdown, the restaurant was closed, and the restaurant owner gave us food and shelter, but they said they had no money to pay our salary. After opening the restaurant, the salary was cut in half because the online food delivery system was active and the physical mode of service was closed. When the special train started, I returned home with help. After returning home, I spent 14 days in quarantine at school. The local Gram Panchayat helps me by giving me 1000 rupees. I feel lonely at the quarantine centre. Then I used all my savings to open a roadside "Thella Gadi" of fast food. My fast-food centre was running well, but I could not run any longer because I did not have my own place to run my shop. The local political leaders would come and ask to cut money, or else they said they would not allow me to run. So, at that time, I faced helplessness. After that, I returned to Bangalore and began working in another restaurant.'
---------- Participant Five

Participant Six

A 21-year-old boy from Joypur, Bankura, has worked as a goldsmith at a jewellery showroom in Bangalore since 2018. He did not continue his studies after passing the class eight exam. He earned ₹20,000 monthly, and the showroom provided shelter and food.

'When the lockdown was declared, the showroom was closed. I lost his job and drove away from their showroom. At that time, the total public transport system was restricted throughout the country. I took a special bus from Bangalore to Kolkata. I spoke with them and quoted them high fares for a single seat on the bus back home. After that, I hired a car to return home from Kolkata. The total cost of returning was around sixty thousand rupees. Then, I stayed for 14 days of quarantine at school. My brother, taking precautions every time, delivered me food and water from outside the school gate. After the lockdown, I did not get any pending wages from the gold showroom and did not get a call to return. I became jobless. I used all my savings for bus fares and the family's expenditures. After that, I decided to open a small tea shop near my house.'

---------- Participant Six

Participant Seven

Participant Seven, a 29-year-old migrant worker from Puncha, Purulia, was a resort's receptionist and chief accountant in Jamshedpur, Jharkhand. His salary was ₹10,000 per month, and he had free food and shelter at this resort. His family consisted of seven members, but the earnings member is one. At 20 years old, he left the house to support his family by working in a restaurant. He continued his higher studies at the open-learning institution.

'After declaring the nationwide lockdown, the resort owner arranged a meeting to announce the shutdown of their resort and advised us to return home. I requested that my cousin take me from Jamshedpur to Puncha by bike. I had no separate room in my house. I spent 14 days of quarantine at my maternal uncle's home. Both two earning members of the family had no work at that time. I had a small savings. I used my savings to arrange food for family members. I bought a bike nine months before the lockdown announcement with the installment policy. I was unable to pay the installment in April. After two months, the company took my bike because I did not pay the installment on time. At that time, I faced an economic and psychological crisis. I knew that the savings were not enough for food for their family. Every night, with friends, I went to the tribal village of Ajodhya Hills to buy a goat and sell it in my village market.'

----- Participant Seven

Participant Eight

Participant Eight, a 22-year-old male, worked as a machine operator for a Honda motor company in Kolar, Karnataka. After pursuing his degree from the Industrial Training Institute I.T.I., he went to Kolar from his village in Bankura, West Bengal, for a better livelihood, earning ₹13,000 per month. Just one year before the lockdown, he went to Karnataka to earn money to help his parents.

'Lockdown was declared unexpectedly, but I was unable to return from Karnataka. At that time, the company was also closed. I did not get money from the company. Although the company gave us packets of food, my co-workers and I felt hungry because the amount of food was not enough for us. We could not buy food outside because we had insufficient money. So I cooked meals. I faced threats from the local police when we went to the market to buy groceries and vegetables.'

---------- Participant Eight

Discussion

From the above cases, it is evident that out of eight interstate migrant workers, three participants (One, Two and Seven) belonged to rural areas of Purulia district, while the rest of the five research participants (Three, Four, Five, Six and Eight) belonged to rural areas of Bankura district in West Bengal, and all of them were cis-gendered males who were either in their early twenties or in their late twenties as far as their age was concerned.

It can also be seen that irrespective of the district they belonged to, most of them, like Participants One and Three, left their school education or abandoned their studies (except Participant Eight, who had a degree from the Industrial Training Institute) in order to provide for their poor families.

According to Everett Lee, who proposed a comprehensive theory of migration in 1966, while certain circumstances tend to hold people within

it or attract people from other areas (pull factors), negative circumstances (push factors) tend to repel them, which could be evidently seen in the case of the migrant workers of both districts. From the perspectives of Participants One, Two and Seven, since the Purulia district region was part of the hilly Choto Nagpur plateau, the factors that pushed them to search for better livelihood opportunities in the nearby states like Orissa and Jharkhand were the lack of sufficient nutrient-rich fertile soil for their desired crop cultivation despite owning land, the lack of adequate water irrigation facilities, the lack of livestock farming, the lack of industry, and the lack of alternative livelihood opportunities. They also reported that migration is a 'way of life' for them, as they would stay in the neighbouring states for a longer duration to earn a living and provide for their families.

On the other hand, in the case of those who belonged to Bankura district, they owned less agricultural land per head compared to their counterparts in Purulia; therefore, despite having more nutrient-rich soil, they felt they were unable to fulfil the needs of their families, which acted as a push factor for them to search for better livelihood opportunities in faraway states like Karnataka, Himachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra. But unlike those from Purulia, the migrants from Bankura would stay in the other states for a shorter duration. They wanted to go back to their native land and start a new business with their savings.

The earnings of all the interstate migrant workers ranged from ₹12,000 to ₹22,000, which all of them believed were more than they could earn if they had stayed back in their native countries. It enabled them to not only meet their basic human needs but also to save some money for future expenses. However, after the COVID-19 lockdown was imposed, all the interstate migrant workers were affected, irrespective of the state they were residing in. For example, Participant Two had to travel 400 kilometres to reach home. This was consistent with the findings of Shahare (2021); Sengupta & Jha (2020); and Yadav & Priya (2021), which showed that restricted mobility among migrants during COVID-19 crises forced them to walk hundreds of kilometres to reach home. The nature of such reverse migration led to the loss of their human dignity.

Furthermore, Participants One and Seven faced difficulties during their quarantine period, and all the research participants experienced excessive worries and helplessness in the context of their livelihood insecurity, which was again consistent with the findings of the existing literature. Participant Eight received several threats from the police, which, during the COVID-19 lockdown and crises, acted as the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) because, from an Althusserian lens, it assisted the state to repress the subordinate social classes through violent, coercive means (Buchanan, 2018). In addition to this, since the migrant workers internalised the constant surveillance on them, they no longer felt the necessity to resist much and thus became, to some extent, what Foucault termed "docile bodies" (AbdulZahra *et al*., 2020).

Norwegian sociologist Johan Vincent Galtung argued that structural violence, which can also be used to describe a situation where society, institutions, and organisations are unable to fulfil the essential needs of individuals or groups, is often imperceptible and accepted as normal in society, which hinders individuals from identifying and confronting its root causes. Therefore, despite the genuine desire of some bureaucratic officials to provide assistance, the bureaucratic procedures they adhere to may inadvertently hinder their well-meaning efforts in specific situations (Gupta, 2012).

Oral history from the research participants also revealed that during the COVID-19 lockdown, the company paid Bapan only 40 percent of his wages for food. Participant Two received inadequate money for fuel. Participants Three and Eight were provided with a small amount of packaged food from their employers, respectively. The restaurant in which Participant Five worked provided him only food and shelter but no salary, and Participant Seven, too, did not get any payments. In this way, in the context of COVID-19 lockdown, where the Agambenian (1998) notion of the'state of exception' became the new norm, the migrant workers were reduced to 'bare life' or mere life as their human lives were subjected to dehumanisation due to the nature of the policies adopted (Espinoza Garrido *et al*., 2021). Akin to the Agambenian construct of the homo sacer, they suffered, but their suffering did not violate either the law or the legitimacy of the sovereign (Gupta,

2012). As far as the nature of their coping with their problems was concerned, they resorted to problem-focused coping as Participant Four took a loan from his friend during the COVID-19-induced financial crisis, while Participant Five and Six used up all their savings to open a small food business.

It should also be noted that the government provided them with one-time financial assistance of ₹1,000 to their bank accounts during the lockdown. However, due to Indian banking policies, when two interstate migrant workers received cash, the money was automatically deducted from their bank accounts because they were unable to maintain the minimum bank account balance.

In this regard, from the legal perspective of the social work profession, the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act, 1979 (ISMW Act, 1979) was supposed to protect the interstate migrant workers because the labour contractors who recruited the migrants for their purposes were required to register migrant workers with the government authorities. Not only are passbooks, identity cards, and licences mandatory for the migrant workers, but guidelines regarding wages, accommodation, free medical facilities, and protective clothing that were to be provided by the contractor were also outlined in the law. Unfortunately, from the narratives of their oral histories, it can be ascertained that the eight interstate migrant workers who were interviewed did not receive any such benefits under the ISMW Act, 1979, at the time of the COVID-19 crisis.

Concluding Remarks

It can be concluded that due to negative circumstances (push factors) such as poor livelihood opportunities in their native lands of Bankura and Purulia districts, the eight research participants became migrant workers, which was a livelihood strategy for them to meet their needs as well as those of their families. However, because the study's findings were consistent with the report of the Standing Committee on Labour in 2011, which stated that the implementation of the ISMW Act, 1979, was poor, interstate migrant workers faced enormous financial and emotional crises during the COVID-19 lockdown. They spent all their savings and had to borrow to survive in the aftermath of the COVID-19 lockdown. Such were the lived experiences of eight interstate migrant workers during the lockdown in terms of their livelihood insecurity.

Through the research strategy of oral history, the study was thus an attempt to give voice to these unheard voices of the migrant workers, whose dignity of life was robbed, and it reflected the poor migration policies of the state and the companies that have recruited them. This, in turn, showed the importance of fulfilling SDG Goal 10.7 to ensure that migrant workers are not left behind in the inclusive development discourse. They require more attention from the government and civil society organisations for them to even avail themselves of the rationing system, irrespective of the state they reside in; to avail themselves of appropriate counselling services; and to avail themselves of migrant-friendly benefits from the government and non-governmental institutions.

Though broad-scale generalisations cannot be made yet, these are only a few of the crucial steps out of many that are required to be implemented effectively with sound monitoring procedures so that these migrant workers are no longer made to experience such helplessness from a disadvantageous position, especially during times of future global health challenges and/or pandemics.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Anil Chandra Mahato and Pathik Pal, who provided the majority of the contact details of all the research participants, and special thanks to all the migrant workers for their voluntary participation and support during the study.

Funding Sources

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Authors' Contribution

Each author mentioned has significantly and directly contributed intellectually to the project and has given their approval for its publication.

Data Availability

The manuscript incorporates all datasets produced or examined throughout this research study.

References

1. AbdulZahra, H. R., Zainal, Z. I., & Awang, M. E. (2020). FOUCAULDIAN SURVEILLANCE IN DAVE EGGERS' THE CIRCLE. *PalArch's Journals.* https://archives.palarch.nl/index.php/jae/article/download/4625/4573/8854
2. Abella, M. I., & Sasikumar, S. K. (2020). Estimating Earnings Losses of Migrant Workers Due to COVID-19. *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics,* 63(4), 921–939. https://doi.org/10.1007/s41027-020-00281-y
3. Adhikari, A., Goregaonkar, N., Narayanan, R., Panicker, N., & Ramamoorthy, N. (2020). Manufactured Maladies: Lives and Livelihoods of Migrant Workers During COVID-19 Lockdown in India. *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics,* 63(4), 969–997. https://doi.org/10.1007/s41027-020-00282-x
4. Agamben, G. (1998). Homo Sacer: Sovereign power and bare life. Stanford University Press.
5. Azeez E P, A., Negi, D. P., Rani, A., & A P, S. K. (2021). The impact of COVID-19 on migrant women workers in India. *Eurasian Geography and Economics,* 62(1), 93–112. https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2020.1843513
6. Babbie, E. R. (2020). The practice of social research. Cengage AU.
7. Bagli, S., & Tewari, G. (2019). Multidimensional Poverty: An Exploratory Study in Purulia District, West Bengal. *Economic Affairs,* 64(3), 517-527. DOI: 10.30954/0424-2513.3.2019.7
8. Bankura District Official Website. (2022, December 6). Location. Bankura District, Government of West Bengal | Town of Terracotta | India. https://bankura.gov.in/location/
9. Borhade, A. (2011). Migrant's (Denied) access to health care in India. *Research Paper Series,* UNICEF/UNESCO, 2, 213–239.
10. Buchanan, I. (2018). A dictionary of critical theory. Oxford University Press, USA.
11. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2022, July 30). COVID-19 and your health. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/your-health/about-covid-19/basics-covid-19.html
12. Chakraborty, M., Mukherjee, S., & Dasgupta, P. (2022). Bengali Migrant Workers in South India: A Mixed-Method Inquiry into Their Earnings, Livings and Struggle During Covid Pandemic. *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, 65(2), 425–443. https://doi.org/10.1007/s41027-022-00374-w
13. Chakraborty, S. (2020, July 2). Purulia website for migrants. The Telegraph Online. https://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/coronavirus-lockodwn-purulia-website-for-migrants/cid/1785011
14. Che, L., Du, H., & Chan, K. W. (2020). Unequal pain: A sketch of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on migrants' employment in China. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 61(4–5), 448–463. https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2020.1791726
15. Choudhary, Y. (2020, June 5). COVID-19: The pandemic unveiling the ironic conditions of migrant labour in India. Sustaim Consulting. https://www.sustaimconsulting.com/post/covid-19-the-pandemic-unveiling-the-ironic-conditions-of-migrant-labour-in-india
16. Dandekar, A., & Ghai, R. (2020). Migration and Reverse Migration in the Age of COVID-19. Economic and Political Weekly, 55(19). https://www.epw.in/journal/2020/19/commentary/migration-and-reverse-migration-age-covid-19.html
17. Deshingkar, P., & Akter, S. (2009). Migration and Human Development in India. Human Development Report Office (HDRO), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). https://hdr.undp.org/content/migration-and-human-development-india
18. District Human Development Report Bankura (1). (2007). Department of Planning & Statistics, Government of West Bengal. http://wbpspm.

gov.in/publications/Districtper cent20Humanper cent20Developmentper cent20Report

19. Espinoza Garrido, L., Mieszkowski, S., Spengler, B., & Wewior, J. (2021). Migrant lives in a state of exception (II): Sovereignty, mobility and agency in a globalised world. Parallax, 27(3), 241-249. https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2022.2071202
20. Gupta, A. (2012). Red tape: Bureaucracy, structural violence, and poverty in India. Duke University Press.
21. Hart, K. (1973). Informal income opportunities and urban employment in Ghana. *The Journal of Modern African Studies,* 11(1), 61-89. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022278x00008089
22. Nter-State Migrant Workmen | Chief Labour Commissioner. (N.d.). Inter-State Migrant Workmen | Chief Labour Commissioner. Retrieved December 22, 2022, From Https://Clc.gov.in/Clc/Acts-Rules/Inter-State-Migrant-Workmen
23. Iyengar, K. P., & Jain, V. K. (2020). Covid-19 And The Plight Of Migrants In India. *Postgraduate Medical Journal,* Postgradmedj-2020-138454. Https://Doi.org/10.1136/postgradmedj-2020-138454
24. Iyer, M. (2020, June 10). Migration in India and the impact of the lockdown on migrants. PRS Legislative Research. https://prsindia.org/theprsblog/migration-in-india-and-the-impact-of-the-lockdown-
25. Jamil, R., & Dutta, U. (2021). Centering the Margins: The Precarity of Bangladeshi Low-Income Migrant Workers During the Time of COVID-19. *American Behavioral Scientist,* 65(10), 1384–1405. https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642211000397
26. Kalyani, M. (2015). Unorganised Workers: A Core Strength of Indian Labour Force: An Analysis. *International Journal of Research in Business Studies and Management,* 2(12), 44-46. https://www.academia.edu/36027183/Unorganised_Workers_A_Core_Strength_of_Indian_Labour_Force_An_Analysis
27. Karim, M. R., Islam, M. T., & Talukder, B. (2020). COVID-19′s impacts on migrant workers from Bangladesh: In search of policy intervention. *World Development,* 136, 105123. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105123
28. Khanna, A. (2020). Impact of Migration of Labour Force due to Global COVID-19 Pandemic with Reference to India. *Journal of Health Management,* 22(2), 181–191. https://doi.org/10.1177/0972063420935542
29. Lee, E. S. (1966). A THEORY OF MIGRATION. Demography, 3(1), 47-57. https://doi.org/10.2307/2060063
30. Ministry of Home Affairs, India. (2020, March 22). Government of India issues Orders prescribing lockdown for containment of COVID-19 Epidemic in the country. *Press Information Bureau.* https://pib.gov.in/PressReleseDetail.aspx?PRID=1607997
31. Moyer, J. (1999). Step-by-step guide to oral history. Do History Home. Retrieved November 28, 2022, from https://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html#WHATIS
32. Official Website of District Court of India. (2022, December 15). History. Home/District Court in India | Official Website of District Court of India. https://districts.ecourts.gov.in/Puruliahistory
33. Pandey, K., Parreñas, R. S., & Sabio, G. S. (2021). Essential and Expendable: Migrant Domestic Workers and the COVID-19 Pandemic. *American Behavioral Scientist,* 65(10), 1287–1301. https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642211000396
34. PIB. (2020). PM calls for complete lockdown of entire nation for 21 days PM addresses the nation on COVID-19 (VRRK/AK). Press Information Bureau Government of India Prime Minister's Office. https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=200658
35. Piret, J., & Boivin, G. (2021). Pandemics throughout history. Frontiers in Microbiology, 11. https://doi.org/10.3389/fmicb.2020.631736
36. Purulia District Official Website. (2022, November 25). History. Purulia District, Government of West Bengal | Land of Chou and Palash | India. https://purulia.gov.in/history/
37. Sengupta, S., & Jha, M. K. (2020). Social Policy, COVID-19 and Impoverished Migrants: Challenges and Prospects in Locked Down India. *The International Journal of Community and Social Development*, 2(2), 152–172. https://doi.org/10.1177/2516602620933715
38. Shahare, V. B. (2021). COVID-19 lockdown: The neglected migrant workers in India. *Asia Pacific Journal of Social Work and Development,* 31(1–2), 97–104. https://doi.org/10.1080/02185385.2021.1875335
39. Singh, S. K., Mishra, N., & Chaudhary, A. (2020). Return migration of labourers in the

surge of covid-19 in India: multidimensional vulnerability and public health challenges. *MOJ Public Health*, 9(5). DOI: 10.15406/mojph.2020.09.00341

40. UN. (2020, July 23). Reduce inequality within and among countries. United Nations Sustainable Development. Retrieved September 24, 2022, from https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/inequality/
41. United Nations. (n.d.). SDG indicator 10.7.2 on migration policies. Welcome to the United Nations. https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/data/sdg-indicator-1072-migration-policies
42. Vaman, R., Valamparampil, M., Ramdas, A., Manoj, A., Varghese, B., & Joseph, F. (2020). A confirmed case of COVID-19 among the first three from Kerala, India. *Indian Journal of Medical Research*, 151(5), 493. https://doi.org/10.4103/ijmr.ijmr_2205_20
43. Yadav, S., & Priya, K. R. (2021). Migrant Workers and COVID-19: Listening to the Unheard Voices of Invisible India. *Journal of the Anthropological Survey of India*, 70(1), 62–71. https://doi.org/10.1177/2277436X20968984
44. Yueping, S., Hantao, W., Xiao-yuan, D., & Zhili, W. (2021). To Return or Stay? The Gendered Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Migrant Workers in China. *Feminist Economics,* 27(1–2), 236–253. https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2020.1845391
45. World Bank. (2020, April). COVID-19 crisis through a migration lens. Open Knowledge Repository. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/33634
46. World Health Organization. (2020, January 10). Coronavirus. *World Health Organization* (WHO). https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1