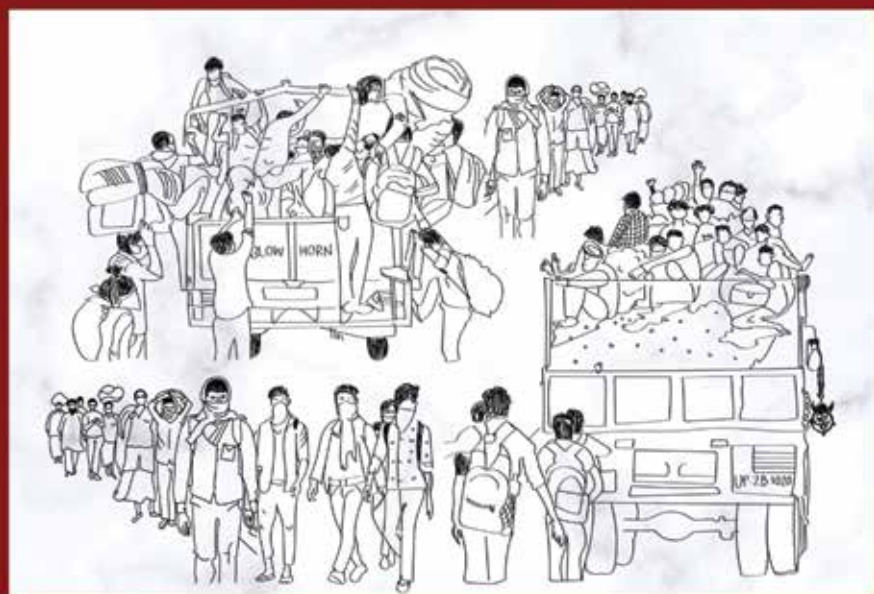


ABNER MANZAR

COVID-19 FOLLOWING THE MIGRANTS HOME PLIGHTS, STRUGGLES AND ASPIRATIONS



www.themigrants.in

illustrations: Sharada Kerkar



Following the Migrants Home

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INTRODUCTION

On 12th of April, 2020, I got a call from Mr. Mathew Cherian, the then CEO of HelpAge India. He said, “Abner, I am going for a distribution that we have organized in Dakshnipuri, would you like to join me?” There was absolutely nothing else that I wanted, I was a travel enthusiast who was stuck at home, I just wanted an excuse to get out of the house in any way possible. The streets were completely deserted, I readjusted my mask every two minutes, scared that the air would infect me. I respected the healthcare workers even more now for wearing these masks in the pre-Covid era. It felt so uncomfortable! We were stopped at seven police check-posts before we reached Dakshnipuri. The van with the food arrived soon after we did and seeing the van many people in the narrow basti lane huddled together to receive the food. The shouts and urges of all the volunteers asking people to maintain distance went unheard, these people were hungry and all they cared about was food. As the distribution took place, I spoke to some of the people around. An old woman said to me, “My son is a daily wage earner. He hasn’t earned a penny since the 24th of March that’s why we are standing in line otherwise we are respectable

people.” People who were earning money and trying their best to feed their families suddenly had to line-up for free food distribution vans. It wasn’t something they were used to, nor was it something they wanted to get used to, but as they took their food packets they mumbled a “shukriya” and moved on, knowing very well that they didn’t have any other option.

I have travelled across India and I have visited many remote regions of the country; I have never before seen this level of helplessness, hunger and desperation. My first day outside during the lockdown was shocking! I regularly went for the distributions that HelpAge India was organizing. As I drove across the Delhi NCR region for these distributions, I saw many people walking with big bags on their backs. Some people walking with children, some alone, others with their friends. During this time, the media started covering the migrant crisis. At the same time Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) decided to step out of their field of work (empowering people using digital skills) and did what the need of the hour demanded.

DEF’s team in Nuh (Haryana) in the outskirts of Delhi was immediately mobilized. They set up a relief camp near Sohna on a major highway that many of the migrants were taking to return to their native villages. Food packets, travel kits including water, Glucon-D and other dry items were kept in the camp.

DEF’s team in Nuh (Haryana) in the outskirts of Delhi was immediately mobilized. They set up a relief camp near Sohna on a major highway that many of the migrants were taking to return to their native villages. Food packets, travel kits including water, Glucon-D and other dry items were kept in the camp. I joined this relief effort and helped with the distribution; it would often include throwing these packets and water bottles into the trucks that were full of migrants. Many of the truck drivers were not willing to stop

for too long and so we had to throw these kits into the containers. A few of them stopped and I got a chance to speak to some of the migrants.

“The truck driver is charging 3,000 rupees from each of the 70 of us sitting in the container to take us to Bihar.”

“It is not my employer’s fault. What can they do if I am not allowed to work? They can’t continue paying me, can they?”

“I don’t know if I will ever reach home. And if I do, I don’t know if I will be alive by then.”

“My employer threw out all my belongings and told me to leave.”

“The police beat me up so much but then they let me go ahead. At least now I have crossed that barricade. Let’s see what happens at the next one.”

“I am surprised that I didn’t faint, sir. We have been walking with heavy bags in this heat for the last 60 kilometers. Sometimes even running from the police.”

The hot sun of May was beating down heavily as all these voices kept echoing in my head. Occupied by my thoughts I walked a little way down the highway and I saw two boys walking towards me with heavy bags on their backs. While I started to approach them to help with food or any other possible help. One of them collapsed and I along with other social workers picked him up and brought him under the shade of a truck that had stopped nearby. As we sprinkled some water on his face, I prepared some Glucon-D juice for him and asked his companion about their journey. “I am surprised that I didn’t faint, Sir. We have been walking with heavy bags in this heat for the last 60 kilometers. Sometimes even running from the police.” As soon as his companion regained his senses, he got up abruptly and started walking. He was still in a daze, not completely conscious. We stopped him and sat him down again.

“We were beaten up and kicked out by our employer” said Vijay as I sat him down and served him some food on yet another day. I was at the distribution site again when I saw him walking with his companion Sanjay. I was curious about them because they didn’t have any luggage. They were empty handed, in torn clothes. They looked completely lost so I stopped them and asked them where they’re going. “We have to go to Alwar. We don’t have anything left,” Vijay replied.

This story affected me more than others because these two were younger than me and they had to carry the burden of supporting their families.

When I asked him why he doesn’t have any luggage, he told me that his employer took away all their belongings and chased them away. They were beaten up due to which their clothes were torn. I was carrying some of my old clothes that I intended to donate, so I gave them some T-shirts. Their eyes were shining as I saw these starving boys gobble down the food that was served. I was not worried about them reaching home now, Alwar was just about 120 kilometres away and they were young boys. I say ‘just 120’ because of the things I had seen and heard in the past few days. I met a married couple previously with their two small children; they were cycling all the way to Bihar, 1,200 kilometres away, so surely these two would have been able to reach. Finally, we gave them enough water bottles and dry food items to sustain the journey and after telling them the directions, they thanked us and continued their walk. This story affected me more than others because these two were younger than me and they had to carry the burden of supporting their families. They had been beaten up and kicked out while they tried to somehow earn a living for their families.

Every day after coming back from the distribution camp my mind would remain at the site. I was unable to sleep because I would keep worrying about the people I met. I would wonder if the police stopped them again and didn't allow them to move forward or if they were starving or tired. They were all on an incredible journey — a journey that was thrust upon them because of the lack of foresight on the part of the decision makers. I would wonder what they would do in their villages once they reached home. Most people considered the migrant crisis to be over once the migrants

Most people considered the migrant crisis to be over once the migrants reached their villages, but something in me told me that this was just the beginning.

What would they do after reaching home? Would they find employment?

Did they have enough land to sustain by agriculture? If so then why did they migrate in the first place?

Will they be accepted by the locals?

reached their villages, but something in me told me that this was just the beginning. What would they do after reaching home? Would they find employment? Did they have enough land to sustain by agriculture? If so then why did they migrate in the first place? Will they be accepted by the locals? There were so many unanswered questions that nobody seemed to be curious about. But I wanted to know more, so I urged DEF to do ground research and I volunteered to travel for the field work. Within a few days Ravi Guria, a filmmaker and the head of media and communications at DEF agreed to join me on this journey. A route was charted out and on the 12th of June we set out on a journey that changed my perspective to life.

DAY ONE: 12TH JUNE 2020

The alarm rang at 6 am and I got up from my bed to switch it off, I was already awake by then. We started our journey at 8 in the morning and travelled on the Yamuna Expressway. The security guard at a food court on the Yamuna Expressway said, “This place was shut till the 7th of June. I wasn’t paid salary for the months of April and May, and so my family was only able to afford one meal a day.” He had a bottle of sanitizer, a face mask as well as a face shield on. As we drove in to the food court parking I spotted four cars in the parking lot, much lesser than the number you would find in the pre-Covid world. The man making chai behind the counter was wearing his mask; however, his nose was uncovered. We were served two hot cups of chai in Kulhads, the masala chai was very rejuvenating.

When the first toll gate came, I remembered that the Yamuna Expressway is a private highway so it doesn’t have a fastag facility. I quickly put cash in a box and the toll operator gave me a look of understanding and took the money, returning the cash and the toll receipt into the box.

The Yamuna Expressway and the Agra-Lucknow Expressway are the best roads in India so driving on them was a pleasure. As

UTTAR PRADESH

soon as we got off the expressway, I stopped at a petrol pump to fill the tank. The HPCL employee filling diesel in our car was visibly surprised by what he saw in the car; it might have even been the sheer amount of luggage.

The Yamuna Expressway and the Agra-Lucknow Expressway are the best roads in India so driving on them was a pleasure. As soon as we got off the expressway, I stopped at a petrol pump to fill the tank. The HPCL employee filling diesel in our car was visibly surprised by what he saw in the car; it might have even been the sheer amount of luggage.

We reached our hotel at 5pm and it was very welcoming. Our temperatures were checked before we entered and the check-in process was contactless. We had to send a picture of our ID cards on a WhatsApp number. We then filled a form about our travel history and preconditions if any. After this the receptionist asked to see my Aarogya Setu App. Since I hadn't filled in the self-assessment test on it yet, it said 'Low Risk of Infection'. What followed were fifteen minutes of uncertainty and panic. Finally, someone with authority said 'jaane de (let them go)' and I sighed in relief. Later when I filled in the self-assessment form the app declared me 'safe'.

DAY TWO: 13TH JUNE 2020

As I left Lucknow I called Utkarsh, the local coordinator in Barabanki, “Come, I have called some migrants to meet you at 10,” he said. The journey from Lucknow to the village of Saidanpur took one hour. As we entered the village the beautiful ruins of Wajahat Ali’s Haveli became visible. The small bricks were exposed because the outer layer of the building had peeled off. The building had beautiful arches that were still standing, most of the other structures were broken. One of DEF’s digital resource centres is located at this Haveli. As we walked into the Digital Literacy centre we were welcomed by Utkarsh. He had spoken to some migrants in the area and told them about us. He requested them to meet and have a chat with us.

About 75 people had come to the centre, far exceeding our expectation. We sat under a tree in a big empty open space in the Haveli. Ravi kicked off the conversation after a short introduction about our project and the reason we were talking to them. He collectively asked them where they had come from and nobody answered. He then asked a few individually and some of them started responding “Mumbai. Delhi. Maheshwari.” The one location

that stood out here was Maheshwari. On probing further, some of them told us that Maheshwari is a weaver's cluster like Barabanki. And since most of the villagers of Saidanpur were weavers, even those who migrated were involved in the same line of work. Maheshwari is famous for its sarees and many of the people we interacted with said that it pays better than Barabanki.

He said “*samajhte hain hum, is bimaari mein bohot si mushkilein hain, kaam nahi hai, paisa nahi hai, kuchh nahi hai* (I understand what this pandemic is and difficulties arising out of it. It has left us with no work, no money, absolutely nothing.)”

The pin drop silence soon turned into a chaotic noise as the group became comfortable with our presence. Ravi then asked them to speak when asked. He asked “*ye Covid-19 hai kya? Aur iska aap-ke upar kya asar hua hai?* (what is Covid-19 and what is the impact of it on your lives?)” and we again saw no response. After an awkward 10 seconds one of them raised his hand. I walked up to him to record him. He said “*samajhte hain hum, is bimaari mein bohot si mushkilein hain, kaam nahi hai, paisa nahi hai, kuchh nahi hai* (I understand what this pandemic is and difficulties arising out of it. It has left us with no work, no money, absolutely nothing.)” Another man started speaking over him, I pointed the camera towards him, he said, “We have to maintain distance, wash our hands and take other precautions in this disease.” Ravi then asked, “What happens if someone gets infected with Corona?” and he responded “The person dies, what else?”

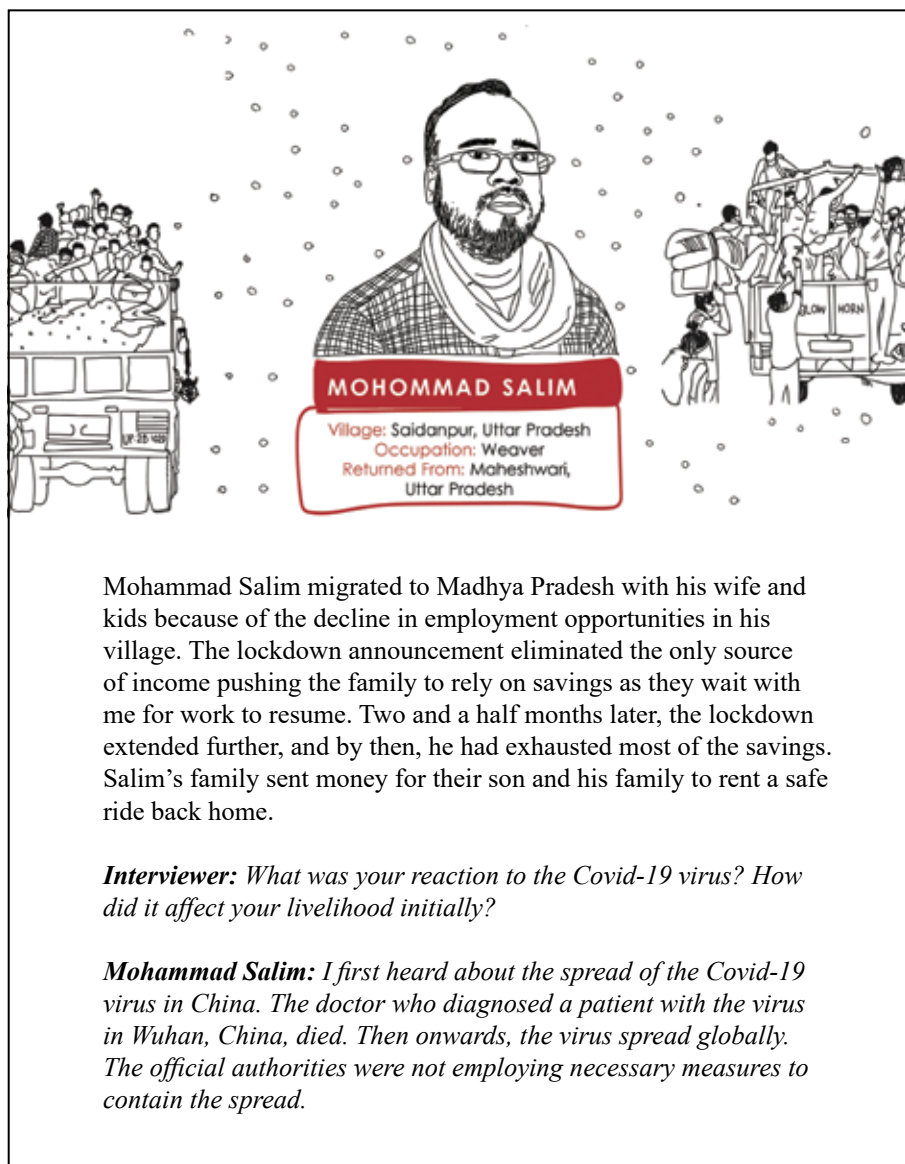
I was surprised to hear this because most of them had travelled back to their villages in horrible conditions without any form of distancing and they did this thinking that the virus would lead to their death. They were extremely desperate to reach home. Another one of them jumped in. He said “Not only is this disease deadly but if

you contract it, your whole neighborhood suffers from it. Apart from that of course it has led to hunger, joblessness and lack of money. It comes with a lot of problems. Only problems.”

When they were asked when and where they heard of the virus the first time, many of them answered, “We heard of it in December-January; we heard that it has come in China. Then it started spreading but we never thought it would come to India. Now that it has come it has led to too many problems.”

“No one did anything for us. After the lockdown was announced our employers stopped picking up our calls. They did nothing for us. All rich people are like this. They care about their comfort, not the plight of people like us. We are nothing for them. And the government? Tell me! You tell me! Where did the 20 lakh crore rupees go? Modiji has eaten it.

After another spell of silence Mohommad Salim spoke up. What started as a description of the current scenario led to a frustrated rant about the incompetency of the government, the intentions of wealthy people and the plight of the poor. He said, “No one did anything for us. After the lockdown was announced our employers stopped picking up our calls. They did nothing for us. All rich people are like this. They care about their comfort, not the plight of people like us. We are nothing for them. And the government? Tell me! You tell me! Where did the 20 lakh crore rupees go? Modiji has eaten it. And he has distributed it to all his ministers; there is nothing left for us.” His expression was very composed at the start of the conversation but with every sentence he said, the anger ruddied his face. He finished with, “and that Arnab Goswami! He is not a nationalist. All he does is instigate riots between Hindus and Muslims; that is not journalism.”



Mohammad Salim migrated to Madhya Pradesh with his wife and kids because of the decline in employment opportunities in his village. The lockdown announcement eliminated the only source of income pushing the family to rely on savings as they wait with me for work to resume. Two and a half months later, the lockdown extended further, and by then, he had exhausted most of the savings. Salim’s family sent money for their son and his family to rent a safe ride back home.

Interviewer: *What was your reaction to the Covid-19 virus? How did it affect your livelihood initially?*

Mohammad Salim: *I first heard about the spread of the Covid-19 virus in China. The doctor who diagnosed a patient with the virus in Wuhan, China, died. Then onwards, the virus spread globally. The official authorities were not employing necessary measures to contain the spread.*

In the subsequent days, the lockdown closed down my only source of income, the contractor rejected all my calls, and there were rent and food expenses for my family to take care of. I waited for work to restart for two and a half months, yet the cases were suggesting the contrary. My family in Uttar Pradesh sent some money to hire a vehicle for a ride back home. It cost Rs. 23,000 for the 8 of us to rent transportation to Uttar Pradesh.

The policemen did not cause any hassle through our ride back. Once they verified our documents at the Jhansi border and another brief checking 100 k.m. down the road. I braced myself for the worst before leaving Madhya Pradesh. I could have died, but it'd be while I was at home or trying to reach home. I prefer it over starving to death.

Interviewer: *Do you have any demands or expectations from the government?*

Mohammad Salim: *I have no expectations from the government. Why would I have any? The Prime Minister set-up a fund for migrant laborers; where is my money? Neither state nor central government is attending to the matters of the poor: We did not receive ration or money despite our registration for both, yet they spent on a statue that costs Rs.300 crores of tax-payers' money. Everyone is selfish nowadays; they all want money.*

In addition to all this, the local news channels are repeatedly broadcasting propaganda. The relevance of media has diminished in the country due to the government interventions in the production of content.

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By this time the group of 75 that were unwilling to speak were triggered into a commotion. Hearing Salim's rant there were others who wanted to express the hardships they faced. Saddam Hussain was working as a tailor in Hyderabad. He had gone there just a week before the lockdown was announced. He said "if they had such a problem with us why were they trying to keep us in their cities? We wanted to leave and none of the trains were running so we decided to wait for a while but the lockdown kept extending. Then the government announced help and they set up ration distribution centres. You should know, we wait all day and at the end of it they say, "It's over!" We receive lashes, Sir. We don't receive ration."

"We stopped on the outskirts of the city and waited. None of the vehicles stopped, we spent two nights on the side of the road when finally, a truck driver picked us up on the way. He was very kind. He would even feed us and he dropped us all the way to Lucknow. But as for our employers, they did absolutely nothing."

When we asked him how he finally left the place, he said, "When we saw that no one is helping us we went to the highway and started walking. We stopped on the outskirts of the city and waited. None of the vehicles stopped, we spent two nights on the side of the road when finally, a truck driver picked us up on the way. He was very kind. He would even feed us and he dropped us all the way to Lucknow. But as for our employers, they did absolutely nothing." He had a look of disgust and disappointment as he finished the sentence. "We could have died of hunger in the city, or of Covid on the journey. But it is better to die at home, not in a city where people don't care about us."



Saddam Hussain heard about the virus first during his visit to the village for festivities. He returned to Hyderabad three days before the announcement of the lockdown. With his employer requesting him to wait for work to restart without compensating, Saddam exhausted his savings and was left with Rs. 500. He waited with his friend on the highway for three days, and the two were able to begin their journey back to Barabanki.

Interviewer: *How did the lockdown affect your livelihood? Share the experience of your journey back home.*

Saddam Hussain: *Three days before departing for Hyderabad, I heard the virus could possibly spread all over the country. I confirmed the status of work with the contractor and headed back for work. Suddenly, it was all shut due to the lockdown. I continued to wait as instructed by my contractor, but eventually, he began to*

avoid my phone calls. I do not fully blame him; the circumstances were such. I had no one to rely on.

A few days before, my friends made the same journey. They were able to guide us to the highway where we could hitch a ride. I had lost my source of income and there was no food left. It was time I moved back.

The two of us walked to the highway and waited for two days on the footpath. It was on the third day we were able to find a driver who agreed to drop us till Allahabad free of charge. During the drive, he prepared food for himself, and the six of us; he purchased food from a restaurant for himself and the six of us. At reaching Allahabad, we rented another vehicle till Lucknow, and we walked for the remainder of the journey.

I was not scared! How do you expect a poor man to experience fear? I could have died sleeping on the highway, or the scarcity of food could have killed me, or possibly the virus could have killed me on my journey. I cannot afford to think about it; regardless, what difference will it make?

We warned the Pradhan Ji of our arrival. My family had prepared a car to drive me to and from the quarantine centre for a check-up. I was offered to quarantine at the school, but I chose not to. Since there was no provision of food at the centre, the Pradhan Ji suggested I home quarantine for twenty-one days. My family provided the food throughout my quarantine period.

Interviewer: *How has the pandemic altered your lifestyle? Do you have any demands or expectations from the government?*

Saddam Hussain: *The condition in the village is worsening. There is no work in Bansa. How am I to support my family? I have to go back, there is no other alternative for us. I have no faith in my co-workers. I worked with them for three years and they rejected my phone call when I needed assistance. There was only one staff member looking out for us, I could not impose too much.*

I registered for ration and other schemes by the government to ease the struggle. However, I received nothing. I waited in the queue for a whole day multiple times, yet at the closing hour, I was told to try again the next day since all the items have been purchased. The official authorities instruct to avoid unknown methods of transportation for preventive measures; I would have died of hunger waiting for proper channels to restart. The lack of empathy for migrants startles me! My experience was contrary to what they show on the news channels. I paid Rs. 80 per kg. for potatoes that cost Rs. 20 per kg. At leaving the house, the policemen would 'lathi charge' us. Yet, we are not the primary concern.

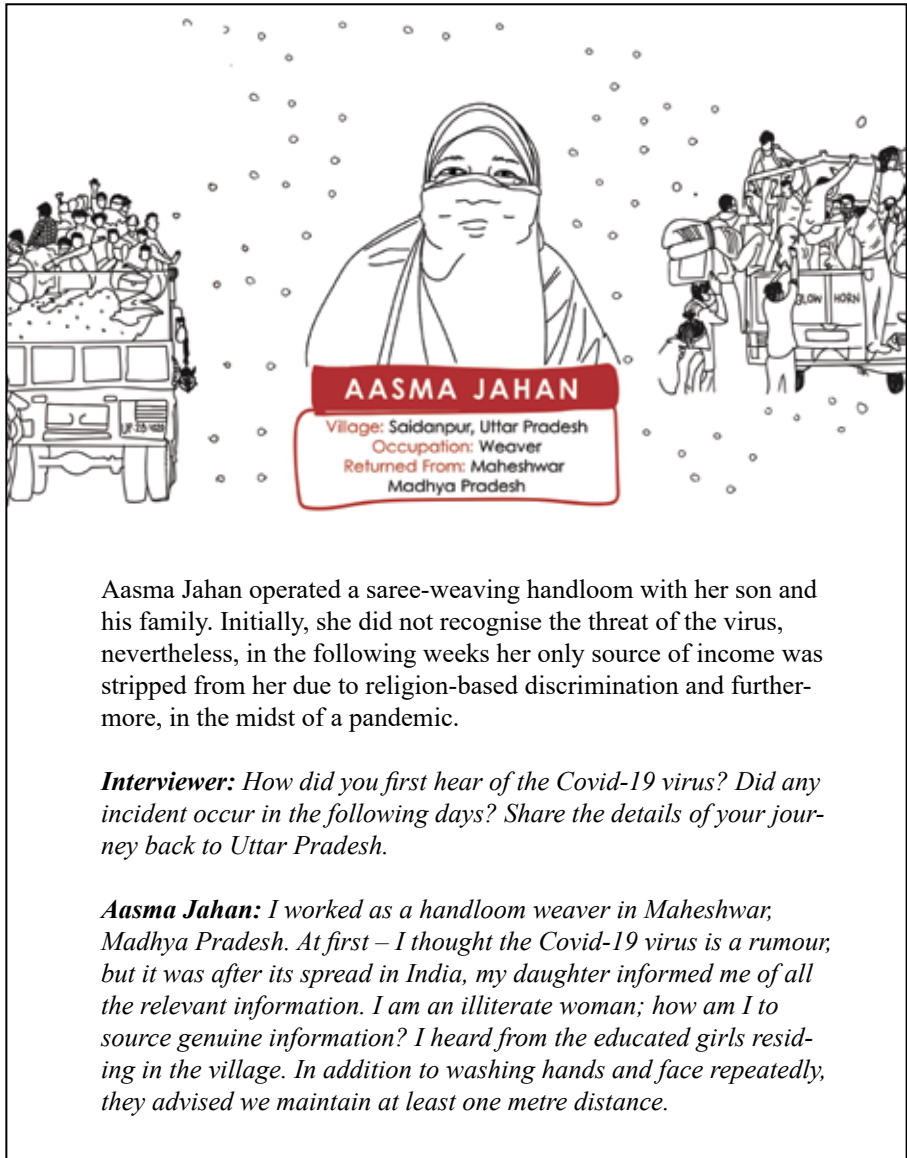
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Aasma Jahan was the first woman who raised her voice and said she had something to say. I walked over to her and she started. She was working as a weaver in Maheshwari.

Her granddaughter was born in the month of March. She said, “we had to leave with my 15-day-old granddaughter in the heat. We booked a toofan vehicle (a long taxi that seats about 12 people) and we all paid 3000 rupees per person. It was extremely hot so we would keep washing the baby’s face to make sure she stays cool and doesn’t fall sick. It was an extremely difficult journey. We spent most of our savings on it. Now we don’t know how we will eat, we don’t have a source of livelihood.”

Her employer asked her and her family to leave when he realized work wasn’t going to start soon. On asking her what her plans are now, she said, “God will take care of it. Nothing is in our control now.”





Aasma Jahan operated a saree-weaving handloom with her son and his family. Initially, she did not recognise the threat of the virus, nevertheless, in the following weeks her only source of income was stripped from her due to religion-based discrimination and furthermore, in the midst of a pandemic.

Interviewer: *How did you first hear of the Covid-19 virus? Did any incident occur in the following days? Share the details of your journey back to Uttar Pradesh.*

Aasma Jahan: *I worked as a handloom weaver in Maheshwar, Madhya Pradesh. At first – I thought the Covid-19 virus is a rumour, but it was after its spread in India, my daughter informed me of all the relevant information. I am an illiterate woman; how am I to source genuine information? I heard from the educated girls residing in the village. In addition to washing hands and face repeatedly, they advised we maintain at least one metre distance.*

We were working on two sarees when the government announced the curfew. To finish the sarees – we spent almost a month working, and suddenly it was shut. According to my employer, all his clients were Hindus who suggested other organisations to avoid employing any Muslims. I waited two and a half months for work to restart while sustaining by the money sent from home.

My son, his wife and their fifteen-day old child were there with me. The four of us waited for the rail service to resume or the inter-state bus service. Since the child was born very recently, we waited two weeks to rent a 'Toofan Gadi' back to Uttar Pradesh. My family sent me money, and along with four others – we paid a sum of Rs. 21,000. The child's face turned red due to the unbearable heat, and hence – we splashed cold water on his face throughout the journey. Other than the agonising heat, there were no troubles. The van dropped us at the quarantine centre for the Coronavirus test, which was followed by isolation in one room for fourteen days.

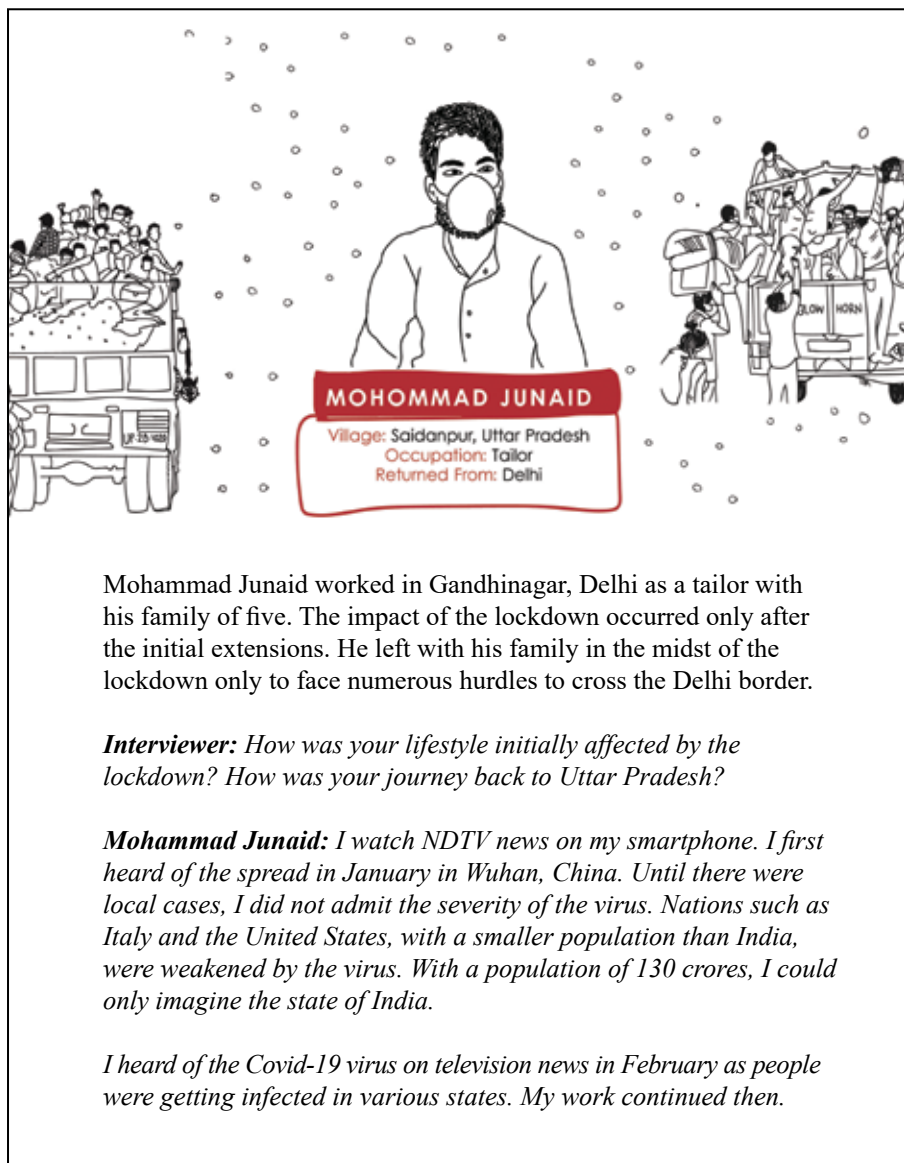
Interviewer: *Has the lockdown distorted your routine? If yes, how so?*

Aasma Jahan: *Once my quarantine ended, the men of the family embarked for employment around the village; however, they failed. I was displeased when my employer asked us to leave, although, due to the lack of work at home, the struggle remained the same. I will demand a higher incentive if he wants me to continue working for him.*

I am fifty-four years old and have not received a single rupee from the government; my health is unstable, yet I have not received any medical support; no one stood for us. We were forced to leave ourselves at the mercy of Allah. Being back in the village with the family provides the comfort of knowing we can survive on what little we have, as long as we are together.

Mohammad Junaid, a weaver who was working in Delhi started to share his story when he saw other people opening up. “We walked from our house in Delhi to the UP border but the police didn’t allow us to go through so we walked some way back and then slept on the side of the road. The police saw us there the next day and told us if we try to cross the border again they will beat us with the lathis. We started walking back again but an autowallah said he will help us cross the border. He asked for money and we gave him some of what we had. He however dropped us before the border. We again tried to cross but we weren’t allowed. As we started walking back we found out that someone can help us. A taxi driver said he can help but he was charging 450 rupees just to drop us across the border. Since we didn’t have any other option we paid him the money and he dropped us in UP. We slept on the road the next night as well. And the morning after that we found a bus to Lucknow. So a journey that should have taken 12 hours took three days.”

“... We slept on the road the next night as well. And the morning after that we found a bus to Lucknow. So a journey that should have taken 12 hours took three days.”



In the following days, the infection grew rapidly, our work slowed down and finally was shut down on the 22nd March. I was residing with my family in a rented room at the factory with my brothers, sisters, and parents. While the food was not a concern, covering other expenses was getting harder. Each extension of the lockdown caused a strain on our savings.

Accepting the execution of lockdown for possibly the whole year, we left on 19th May.

I called the number provided by the Government registration facility, shared all information asked and waited for their call. Others around were leaving by renting private vehicles since there was no assurance of government-mandated ride. We too were desperate; I couldn't wait and accumulate more debt.

An auto-rickshaw charged us Rs. 100 per person till the local bus station from where we boarded the bus to Barabanki. However, the police halted us at the Shastri Nagar police station for the evening due to orders from SDM instructing not to let any commercial vehicle cross the Delhi border. At eight the next morning, an auto-rickshaw driver suggested we take a bus from across the border. It was upon reaching the Delhi border I realised the auto driver was wrong.

The bus stopped in Agra once at a 'Dhaba' as the policemen suggested we restart our journey in morning hours to avoid collision on the highway. Via Lucknow, we got off at Musaoli and hitched another ride to Barabanki. Our first visit was to the Pradhan Ji's office where they sanitised us, followed by testing in Saroili, and home quarantine for fourteen days.

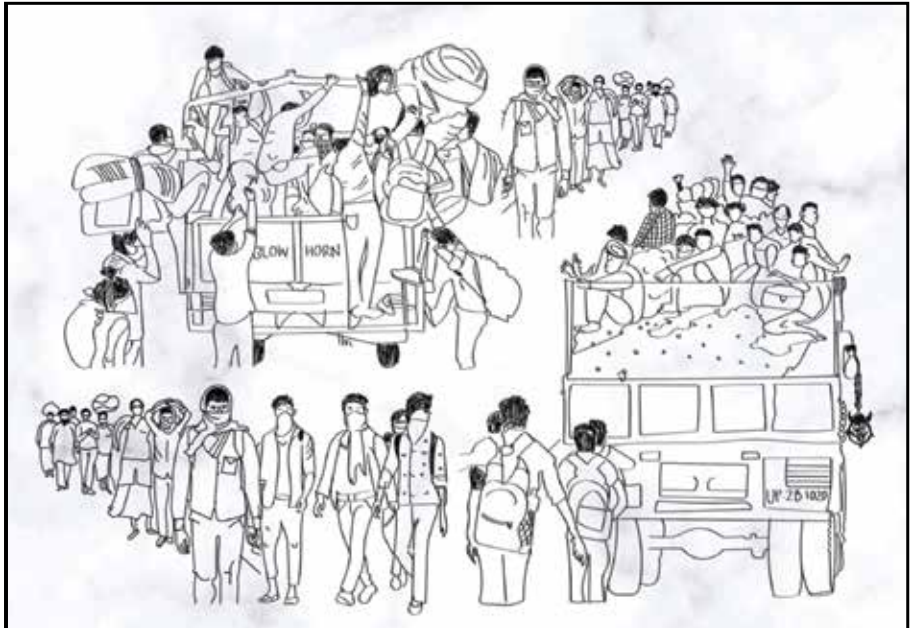
Interviewer: *What has been your experience in the village since you have been back?*

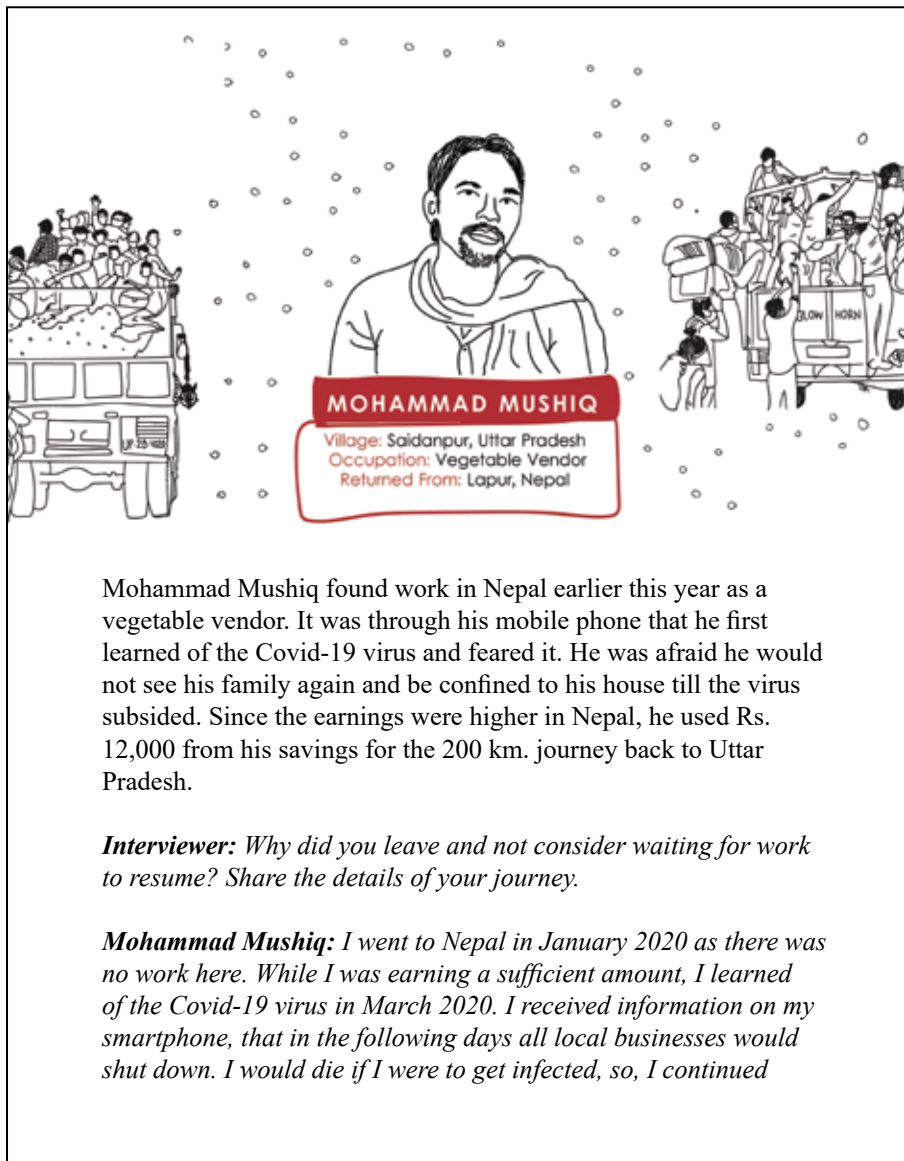
Mohammad Junaid: *Initially, it was harder than being in Delhi. The locals referred to us as virus carriers and avoided any contact, regardless, we maintained our distance for the next twenty-one days. Now, the situation is not the same; they are no longer scared of us.*

I will not go back if my employer does restart work since I will have to surpass another financial crisis. I earned Rs. 15,000 per month, and now there are no job opportunities in the village, nor in Lucknow. Currently, I am exploring the possibility of selling clothes as I have to provide for a family of six. I do follow the news, but I have not noticed any government schemes that solve my problem. We console ourselves by accepting it as Allah's wish.



Mohammad Mushiqa was working as a vegetable seller in Lalgunj, Nepal. Due to Covid-19, work in Nepal had also slowed down and he wasn't able to earn enough money. He started walking to the Indian border and was stopped by the police in several places but allowed to go through after brief questioning. When he reached the border they did some formalities, he filled out a form and then he was allowed to go. Saidanpur is about 200 kilometres from the border and he started walking but soon enough he found a bus going to Barabanki so he hopped on.





Mohammad Mushiq found work in Nepal earlier this year as a vegetable vendor. It was through his mobile phone that he first learned of the Covid-19 virus and feared it. He was afraid he would not see his family again and be confined to his house till the virus subsided. Since the earnings were higher in Nepal, he used Rs. 12,000 from his savings for the 200 km. journey back to Uttar Pradesh.

Interviewer: *Why did you leave and not consider waiting for work to resume? Share the details of your journey.*

Mohammad Mushiq: *I went to Nepal in January 2020 as there was no work here. While I was earning a sufficient amount, I learned of the Covid-19 virus in March 2020. I received information on my smartphone, that in the following days all local businesses would shut down. I would die if I were to get infected, so, I continued*

isolating with my relative. As the lockdown eased, he suggested I leave for home because there is a possibility of the lockdown extending further.

To be with my family, I began walking towards the Nepal-India border. It was a 36 km. walk to Rupaidiha, along with others making the same journey to their native villages in India. The Nepal police inquired only once and allowed me to continue with my journey, and the next stop was by the Indian Border authorities. I was issued a pass; the temperature was checked, the Aadhar Card was verified, and I was given a bus-ride till Lucknow. The Pradhan greeted me upon arrival in the village, and I was quarantined for the next fourteen days.

Interviewer: *How has the Covid-19 virus affected your livelihood?*

Mohammad Mushiq: *The days I spent at home before the lockdown, I was not doing well; neither am I now. Life was going on then, and it is still going on today. Once the lockdown is lifted, I will go back to Lalpur. The demand of the workers has reduced at the moment. While some labour work has resumed in full capacity, mine has not.*

UTTAR PRADESH

These stories didn't come as a shock to me now because I had seen many other migrants when I was part of the relief effort in Delhi. However, I hadn't heard their stories in detail. At that time what they cared about was reaching home, not talking to a stranger about their problems. But here in their village when they saw that someone had come to find out more about them there was no stopping them; they were angry and frustrated and they wanted to express it to someone.

After our interaction with the group, we had lunch at a kind well-wisher's house. We then drove towards the village of Bansa. It is about 4 kilometres away from Saidanpur. There were about 15 to 20 people waiting for us there. We distributed masks to all of them and then started our conversation with them.

“They (the villagers) say you went to the city saying you had a job, now we know that in reality you were just a labourer. It is humiliating!”

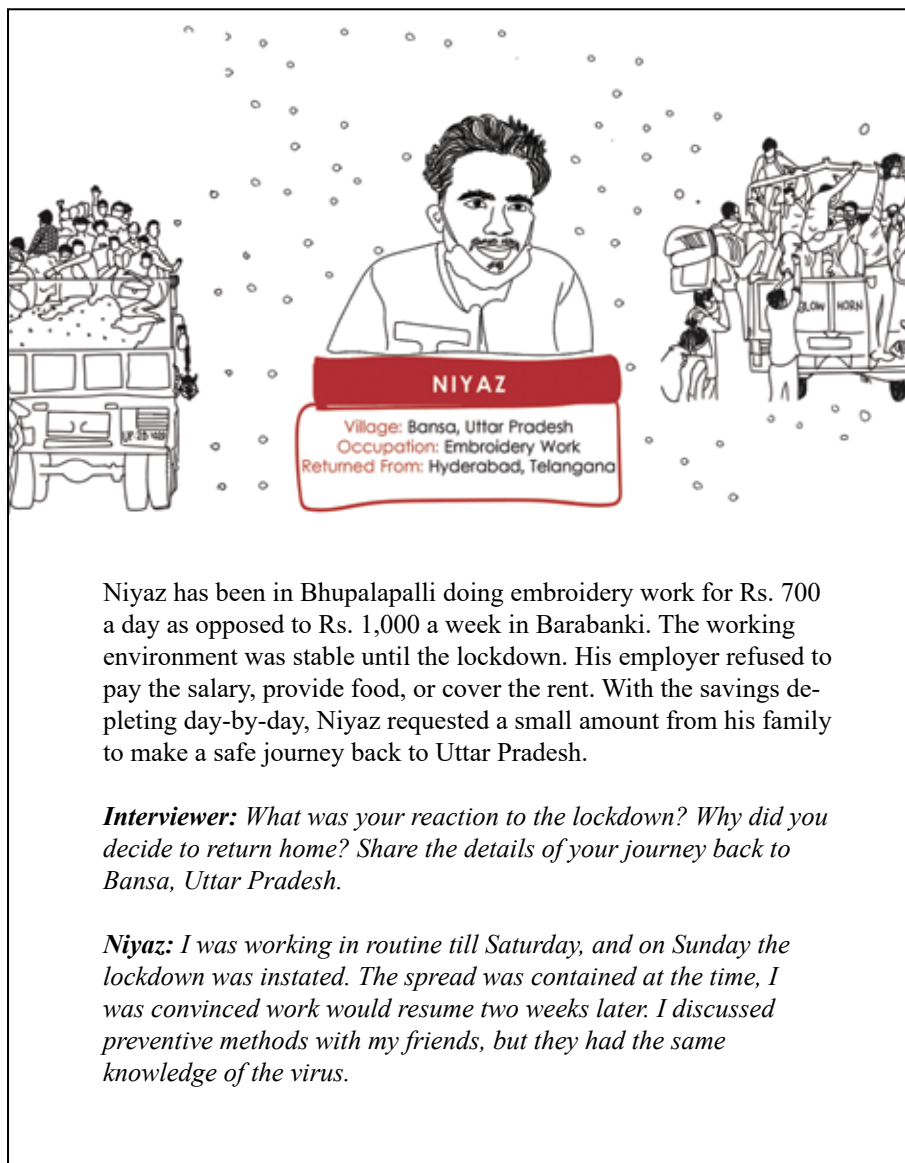
As there were fewer people the conversations were informal and free flowing. They were reluctant to speak at first but after one of them took the initiative to start talking, they all joined in and spoke about their work and journey one by one. We sat in the verandah of DEF's Digital Centre the village was visible from here.

A tractor passed by the narrow village road while small kids curiously peered in to get a view of us. Talking to the people here I realized very strongly what I had read in an article a few days back. People who go back home from the cities are usually welcomed like heroes but the reverse migration that has taken place in the last three months has made these heroes look weak and vulnerable. Some people in the village even mock them. “They say you went to the city saying you had a job, now we know that in reality you were just a labourer. It is humiliating!” said Niyaz, 22.

He returned from Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh a few weeks back.

He came back to the village on the 16th of May. He said, “Madam didn’t even ask us if we have had food or if we’re even alive. There was absolutely no contact with her after the 25th of March.” We asked him how he came back and he said “we waited for the trains. The government said there would be trains for us but our name didn’t come in the list. After suffering for two months we realized we can’t wait any longer so we applied for a movement pass online and then walked to the highway to find a truck. The truck driver charged me 3,700 rupees to take me to Lucknow. There were 14 others in the truck as well.” As Niyaz spoke to us his expression was calm and composed throughout, almost like he had resigned to his fate. He added smilingly, “Now we will not go back to that Madam. We will go back to Bhopal to work, but never with her.”





Niyaz has been in Bhupalapalli doing embroidery work for Rs. 700 a day as opposed to Rs. 1,000 a week in Barabanki. The working environment was stable until the lockdown. His employer refused to pay the salary, provide food, or cover the rent. With the savings depleting day-by-day, Niyaz requested a small amount from his family to make a safe journey back to Uttar Pradesh.

Interviewer: *What was your reaction to the lockdown? Why did you decide to return home? Share the details of your journey back to Bansa, Uttar Pradesh.*

Niyaz: *I was working in routine till Saturday, and on Sunday the lockdown was instated. The spread was contained at the time, I was convinced work would resume two weeks later. I discussed preventive methods with my friends, but they had the same knowledge of the virus.*

Two months passed by, everything remained shut. I spent the next few days isolating myself in my room, waiting for a mode of transportation back home. Through word-of-mouth, I received information on forms for a train ticket. My friend and I submitted the form and visited the police station. The policemen delayed the process by asking us to revisit the next day for fifteen consecutive days. It was at our fifteenth attempt they offered to issue a movement pass if we were able to rent a vehicle.

I sent my savings home at the announcement of lockdown as my family is financially dependent on me. Nonetheless, they transferred me a sufficient amount to pay Rs. 3,700 along with fourteen others for a truck ride back to Musauli. The policemen introduced us to truck drivers at the station who agreed to drive us for a certain amount and a movement pass. We left after getting tested at a local facility. The journey lasted two and a half days including stops for food. Food was distributed by government camps and volunteers.

Interviewer: *How do you plan on adapting to the circumstance?*

Niyaz: *I will have to return to Bhupalapalli soon enough since there is no work here. However, this time, I will not go back to the same employer. She cut off all communication after the lockdown was enforced.*

I am searching for embroidery work here right now and will only consider leaving once the threat of the pandemic is removed.

UTTAR PRADESH

The others also chipped in with comments about the inhumanity of their employers. Amit Kumar said, “I told my employer that Modiji has said that salary payments should not stop, he told me to go to the PM and ask him for money.” The Prime Minister of the country had made a statement that the employers were not in a position to back and in this whole mess the migrants were the ones who suffered.

“I told my employer that Modiji has said that salary payments should not stop, he told me to go to the PM and ask him for money.”

Utkarsh prompted us at this point, “We have to go to the next village, some people are waiting for us there as well”. We started driving towards the next village. The narrow lane was blocked by a tractor so we had to take a different route. We asked one of the people walking by if the road would lead outside and if it is wide enough for a car. He said, “Yeah, yeah!

You will be able to go very comfortably.” As we moved on an extremely difficult fifteen minutes came. The lane was as wide as the car, there was hardly any margin, or at least that’s what I thought until a biker came from the opposite direction. He didn’t stop at seeing the car he just came in front and parked on the side and signaled me to go past. With a drain on one side, honking bikes behind me and the biker on the other side we somehow got out of that situation without any scratch. The condition seemed like the migrants with the employers on one side, the government on the other side and Covid-19 honking from behind. They just had to leave without being scratched!

When we reached the next village, Rampur there were a few people waiting for us. Finally, one of them started talking. Then the conversation started flowing and soon it became heated. Their frustration was palpable. We also saw a case of fake news here.

They said they were promised 1,000 rupees to talk to us. When they realized that that is not the case their frustration shifted from the government and their employers to us. It took a while to pacify them and once they started listening, we asked them to visit the digital resource centre in the village to gain information about schemes that the government has put in place for them.

We distributed masks to all those who had come to speak with us and even then, they mumbled under their breaths, “We didn’t get money, what’ll we do with the masks? Eat them?”

We then left Rampur and went to Saidanpur. After a cup of chai with Utkarsh, we left for Lucknow. The sun was setting over the highway to Lucknow, its rays were reflecting off the road. It seemed like a beautiful ending to an eye-opening day.

DAY THREE: 14TH JUNE 2020

The plan for today was to meet some weavers and interact with some migrant workers individually. As we reached the Smartpur Centre in Lucknow, we were greeted by Utkarsh with a hot cup of chai. The walk to one of the weavers' homes was full of life. There were men, women and children, but mostly youngsters loitering around the village. As they saw me shooting the village lanes with the camera, the children would run away from it as if it would hurt them and the young men set their hair to make sure they were looking nice. We reached a weaver's house and Ravi decided to do the interview and I was very happy to take a walk through the village, taking some shots. As I walked out of the low door of the house with the camera, a woman who was washing clothes about 20 meters away shouted, "Don't you dare point that thing at me, I will break it if you do."

The reaction of the children instead were mixed. First, they would run from it and when they realized that I am not chasing them, they would come running in front of it only to run away again. It became a game for them. Utkarsh called one of the neighbours, a student at the Smartpur centre and asked him to take me around the village as I wanted to take some shots.

The young boy, maybe 13 years old, agreed and led the way. His pink kurta was going well with the background but I also needed some shots without it so I asked him to walk behind me. We were greeted by several people on the way. I saw four goats on the side of the lane in front of a house and took some shots of them when an old woman came out of the house and smilingly said, “What are you doing?” I told her about the project and she said, “Yes, many have come back. They have faced many hardships. May Allah take care of all of us.”

There were prayers on everyone’s lips. When we asked some of them about their plans ahead they replied, “It’s in God’s hands now. We are not sure what we will do.”

“Yes, many have come back. They have faced many hardships. May Allah take care of all of us.”

There were prayers on everyone’s lips. When we asked some of them about their plans ahead they replied, “It’s in God’s hands now. We are not sure what we will do.”

I walked back with the boy to the weaver’s house and saw Ravi deeply immersed in conversation. They had a shop outside their house so I went to sit there. Two young boys, aged 24 walked up to me and said, “What are you guys doing?” I told them we’re documenting the lives of those who have returned from the cities and they immediately asked, “for the YouTube channel?”. Within a few seconds they had subscribed to the DEF YouTube page. They said, “We will watch it when you upload it. Make it well.”

After Ravi was done with his interview, we started walking through the village looking for some of the people we had met yesterday to talk to them in greater detail. Adil, one of the people we met the previous day walked past us with a group of friends and we asked him if he would be willing to talk to us again. He happily

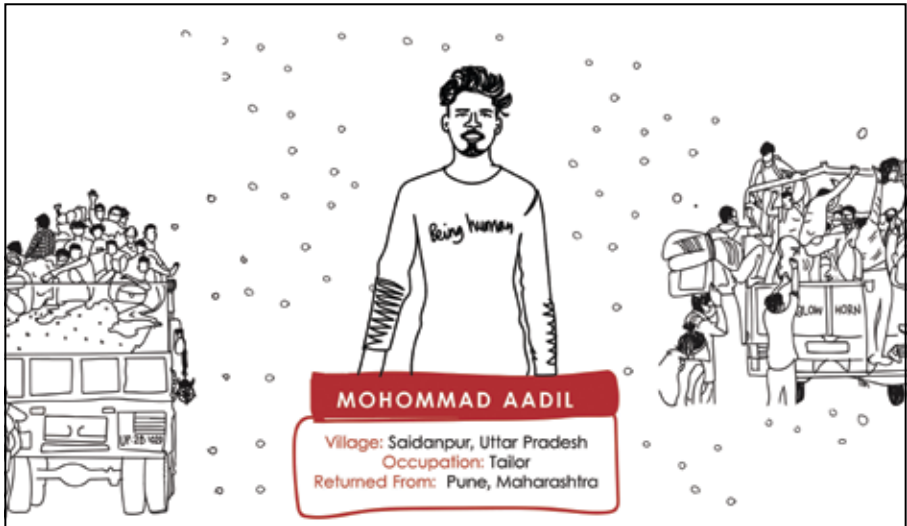
UTTAR PRADESH

agreed. He led the way to his house, we followed and his group of friends followed us too. When we reached his house, I looked back to find that the group had become bigger.

We asked Adil what he does now and he said “I play cricket now. Yesterday I lost the match so I lost some money but today I am going to put in some money and win the match. I will gain what I lost yesterday; I am confident of winning.” I asked him what he is doing for a living now and he said, “I just came out of quarantine four days back and there is absolutely no work in the village. Those who were there in the village before can’t find work, how will I? I am an outsider for them.” He went on about being treated like an outsider, “earlier when we used to come to the village we were welcomed like heroes but this time when we came we were discriminated against; people ran away from us. Sir, it doesn’t feel good at all. But now that my quarantine is over, slowly people have started talking to me again, I have reconnected with my old friends and we play cricket every day.” I asked him about his intentions of going back to the city and he said, “we didn’t like the way they treated us but we will have to go back. We don’t have much to do here. Once the lockdown gets over completely, we will return. There is going to be one imposed from tomorrow.”

“I just came out of quarantine four days back and there is absolutely no work in the village. Those who were there in the village before can’t find work, how will I? I am an outsider for them.”

Fake news had been circulated around the country about a strict lockdown being imposed from the 15th of June but the government had rubbished those claims, however, many people still believed it to be true.



Mohammad Aadil worked as a tailor in Pune (Maharashtra) since he graduated from high school. Due to his family's financial instability, he moved with his uncle and friends who helped him access better employment opportunities. The announcement of the lockdown left him stranded without any source of income for his and his family's survival. Once the employer who ensured the workers would be compensated, retracted on the same, Aadil made the journey back to his hometown to continue the search for work in a safer environment.

Interviewer: *Share your experience of the lockdown and your journey back to U.P.*

Mohammad Aadil: *I first heard of the spread of Covid-19 virus in China broadcasted on the Indian news. The second time, it was one of my friends who happened to test positive for the Coronavirus in Mumbai. In the following days, the spread increased in my neighbourhood, and there were four new cases.*

The workplace shut down at once. Our employer assured us the work will restart and our salaries will not be affected, however, a week later the restrictions barred it all. The employer refused to pay our dues and compensated us with Rs. 1,000 instead. Furthermore, as the lockdown extended, he suggested we return home, and for which he would not financially assist us.

My friends and I decided to leave by hitching a ride on a commercial vehicle for Rs. 4,500. There were a few struggles through the journey—the police halted us on multiple occasions for long hours. We were not allowed to enter the village upon arrival and it was only a day later, the Pradhan agreed to let us enter and quarantine.

There were instructions to quarantine for fourteen days of which, we spent seven at the school and the remaining at home. The family provided us food as we were isolated. While the villagers remained scared initially, their behaviour restored by the end of the quarantine.

The virus does not seem to be ending soon is what they say on the news. I wish to work and make a career. I am eighteen years old right now, I studied till high school in Madrassa, and it was due to the financial difficulties of my family that I began working as a tailor. I lived with my uncle and friends; they helped me learn the skills of tailoring and find a job. Now, I procrastinate playing Cricket because there is no work. I am hoping to learn a new skills or two to be eligible for the employment opportunities available in the village.

Outsiders in the city and outsiders in their villages, the pandemic rendered these migrants homeless in their homeland. “Na ghar ke, na ghat ke” is an apt saying in Hindi.

The sun was beating down on us heavily and one of the students of the Smartpur centre who was walking with us and guiding us through the village said, “It seems like the sun is slapping us every moment”. This student goes by the nickname Shehenshah (Emperor) in the village. He asked me, “How many followers do you have?” I said, “About 400-500” to which he replied, “my video got 2 million views. If the lockdown wasn’t announced I would have become a star.” Shehanshah is an interesting character. When he saw me talking to Ravi in English he came to me and said, “Yes. Hello! My name Shehenshah.”

The harsh sun had left the whole village without any shade; it was right on top of us and we couldn’t even spot our own shadow. As we walked around the village running towards the shade when we saw it, we met Saddam Hussain again and asked him if he would be willing to talk to us in greater detail. He was extremely reluctant, “I told you yesterday, there are only problems, nothing else.”

Wasi Saheb, a well-wisher of DEF’s initiative in Saidanpur and an influential man in the village invited us for lunch. We had chulha cooked rotis along with four types of chutneys; the food was delicious! His hospitality was very comforting and pleasing. His friend and neighbour joined us as well and invited us to meet his mother. We went to his house and we were greeted by his 90-year-old mother. “She is a little hard of hearing but her memory is very sharp,” I was told by her son. She had a twinkle in her eye. She said, “Nowadays we all fight. Hindus and Muslims fight about everything. In our time we didn’t even know who was a Hindu and who a Muslim. We were told by our parents not to use firecrackers on Eid. They would ask us to wait till Diwali to burst them. There was no division of any sort.”

UTTAR PRADESH

Talking to wise old people is somehow refreshing and heartwarming. The conversation with her and the sumptuous lunch refreshed us for the rest of the day. As we came out of their house, the heat again slapped us, just like Shehenshah had said.

We went to meet Shakeel, a tailor from Pune. He was originally a weaver but since there aren't enough job opportunities for weavers he went to Pune and started working as a tailor.

When we entered his house to talk to him, we requested him to sit at the loom and he chuckled, "This is the first time I'll sit there in ten years." Industrialism, capitalism, demand and supply drive our economy but they kill our skills. The weavers of Barabanki are skilled and yet they revert to other basic skills to earn a living and survive.

Nandlal had to sell his mobile phone to pay the truck driver and he did so. He was now on an unsure journey without any communication with his family. For the next four days, he had almost nothing to eat, even water had become a luxury.

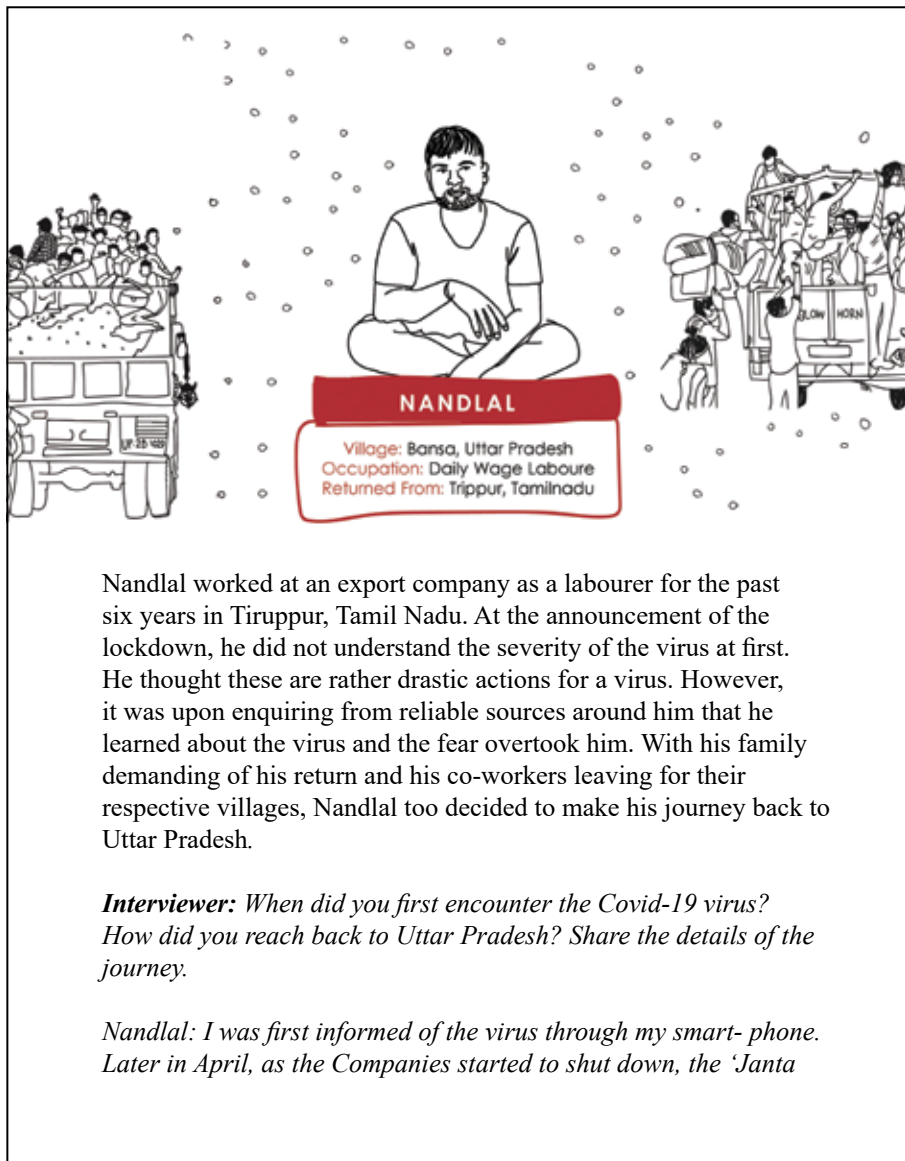
We then drove from Shakeel's house in Saidanpur to the village of Bansa. The roads seemed familiar today and somehow wider than they had felt yesterday. I believe familiarity has that effect. We parked the car under the shade of a tree and then walked to meet Nandlal. As we entered his house compound, we were greeted by two buffaloes. Nandlal greeted us, "Namaste!" and invited us into the house. His two-year-old daughter was playing with the dirty utensils; his wife quickly covered her head and face as she saw us and his mother smiled at us. He sat down uncomfortably on a cot as we set up the camera. We asked him to sit comfortably and then he started narrating his journey.

His journey started from Tiruppur in Tamil Nadu. His employer gave him 1,000 rupees to go back home. He took a bus to Chennai and hitched a truck ride from there to Vijayawada. In Vijayawada, he found a truck that charged 3,000 rupees to take them to Lucknow and he spent most of what he had on it.

He had to sell his mobile phone to pay the truck driver and he did so. He was now on an unsure journey without any communication with his family. For the next four days, he had almost nothing to eat, even water had become a luxury. As he said this, his mother intervened and came into the frame. “My son didn’t eat for five days. What kind of a world is this?” she said with watery eyes. We asked her if she knows about Covid-19 to which she responded, “I don’t know anything about this Corona of yours. All I know is that my son was in danger and I wanted him to come back home.” Tears trickled down her cheeks as she finished.

We asked Nandlal about the steps he took to be safe. He said, “I was going to quarantine myself at home. I informed the Pradhan that I am back and he asked me to self quarantine. A bed was set up away from everyone in the house and I went to a separate bathroom as well. The villagers were extremely rude towards me so I didn’t even want to go out. But after 21 days I went out and everything seemed to go back to normal.” When asked about the opportunities of earning a livelihood now for him, he told us that his employer has asked him to come back once the crisis is over, so he was planning to go back to Tamil Nadu.

In the middle of the conversation his daughter would often come to him and he would politely send her back. She hasn’t started speaking yet but her grandmother has conversations with her. She babbles at me and her grandmother responds, “Yes, beta. Yes, beta. Okay.” Even though this family was frustrated with their current situation they didn’t let that affect their conversations; they were all polite, soft-spoken and spoke about the issues they faced with dignity and propriety.



Nandlal worked at an export company as a labourer for the past six years in Tiruppur, Tamil Nadu. At the announcement of the lockdown, he did not understand the severity of the virus at first. He thought these are rather drastic actions for a virus. However, it was upon enquiring from reliable sources around him that he learned about the virus and the fear overtook him. With his family demanding of his return and his co-workers leaving for their respective villages, Nandlal too decided to make his journey back to Uttar Pradesh.

Interviewer: *When did you first encounter the Covid-19 virus? How did you reach back to Uttar Pradesh? Share the details of the journey.*

Nandlal: I was first informed of the virus through my smart- phone. Later in April, as the Companies started to shut down, the 'Janta

Curfew' announcement left no certainty of the future. I did not think being able to continue earning a living will ever be a concern. In the next few days, I gained more information about the virus through my contractor. He implied wearing a mask and isolating at home were the only two methods to avoid the disease.

There were two cases in Kerala, my employer informed us of. Also, he provided us soap, sanitizer, and masks. Soon after, the staff at the workplace got infected that led to the shutdown of the whole plant. I assumed it would not last longer than two weeks or so, however, it lasted over a month.

When the spread of the virus deteriorated, my roommates suggested we head home before we got infected and my family demanded of my safe return to the village at once.

The contractor helped us rent a vehicle, get all the necessary paperwork done, and even paid the dues as I had only Rs. 400 left. The driver we had requested for the bus, procrastinated for a few days after which we rented another bus. It took us 12 days to reach home. For the first two days, I was stranded in Tiruppur waiting for the bus driver. Most of us had contributed the remainder of our savings for renting the bus. We left for Vijayawada via Chennai, drove till Kanpur and then got off at Unnao. My mother asked a relative in the neighbourhood to drop me off till Lucknow on a two-wheeler because the lockdown forbade the movement of four-wheelers and further onwards I advanced on foot till Bansa.

I had a small amount of money and due to the strictness of the lockdown all 'Dhabas' were shut. I requested Rs. 3,000 from my brother. For five days during the journey, I was without food and

water. It was only after reaching Vijayawada I got water. Those who stocked prior to the departure did not have to go without food. In Kanpur, we noticed a water pump and as we approached it, the owner of the well barred us from using it. Perhaps, he was scared of the infection too.

Upon reaching the village, I experienced hostility from the villagers as they were sure I was a carrier of the Covid-19 virus. The Pradhan of our village explained the entire procedure of testing and quarantine. I lived alone for fourteen days and by then the villagers were confident of my health.

Interviewer: *How has the pandemic affected your livelihood? Do you have a plan for the future?*

Nandlal: *I earned Rs. 12,000 a month, paid Rs. 4,500 for the room I was sharing with five others, food required Rs. 500 every week, and the remaining amount would be sent to the family. Since my return, I work at farms earning Rs. 100 or Rs. 200 a day, not more. The work is erratic but no one in the village will pay above that. My infant consumes Rs. 200 worth of milk in five days and furthermore, we rely on ration. There are no assets either.*

The future seems like a dead-end. The lockdown is now further extended yet there are not enough employment opportunities here. The labourers are desperate! They have to accept work for Rs. 80. Sugar costs Rs. 40 per kg. and tea costs Rs. 10. How am I to continue staying alive like this?

I studied till 10th grade, so I can operate a smartphone; I use WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter regularly, although I

do not understand the functionality of Twitter. Thus, I deleted the application recently. I had to sell the smartphone for my daughter's medical expenses during the lockdown in Tamil Nadu itself. Ever since I have not updated myself with the news of the virus. I am hoping to provide my daughter with the necessary re-sources that allow her to surpass the unfortunate struggle my father and I experienced.

The government releases schemes that are for people with resources. I have not heard of any measure accessible to me. Besides, it is for those who have money who can get a loan, ration card, and all other assistance. The Pradhan responds with excuses if I inquire.

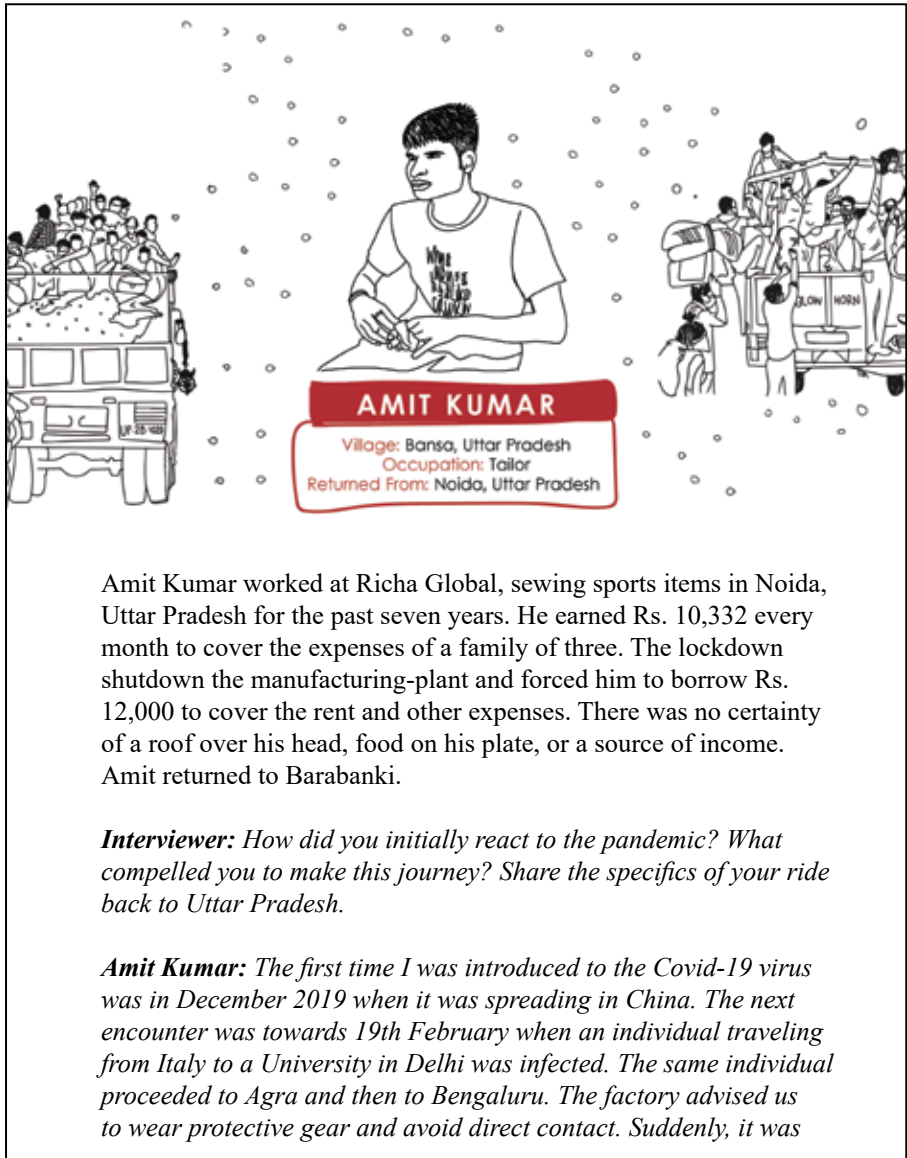
***Nandlal's Mother:** I do not have much information on the virus. Whatever I know, is through my son. I was worried to death; I did not eat, nor did I sleep. Perhaps, I would have died before all. It is up to him to go back. There is a financial responsibility on all the three of my children and in addition, Nandlal has his own family to support. He will continue to do what he thinks is right and he has my blind support.*

UTTAR PRADESH

After thanking Nandlal, his wife and his mother we left and walked to Amit Kumar's house about 30 meters away. As I entered his house, his mother saw me from afar and greeted me. I went to her and asked her if she was scared of the virus, she said, "Scared? Why would I be scared? I will just be careful not scared. When my son came back, I told him to stay in a separate room for two weeks. Now we are all safe."



Amit spoke about his journey and his issues very openly. He was extremely dissatisfied with his employers. He said, "Just like they weren't there for us when we needed them, we will not be there for them when they will need us." Unfortunately for Amit, he will not be able to follow through with that statement. He said later that in spite of how he was treated in the city, he will still have to go back to make sure his family is well-fed. Amit was working as a tailor in Noida. When asked about where he gets his news from, he clearly said that he doesn't believe what he sees on social media. He only believes what he watches on news channels like ABP News, India TV and Aaj Tak.



Amit Kumar worked at Richa Global, sewing sports items in Noida, Uttar Pradesh for the past seven years. He earned Rs. 10,332 every month to cover the expenses of a family of three. The lockdown shutdown the manufacturing-plant and forced him to borrow Rs. 12,000 to cover the rent and other expenses. There was no certainty of a roof over his head, food on his plate, or a source of income. Amit returned to Barabanki.

Interviewer: How did you initially react to the pandemic? What compelled you to make this journey? Share the specifics of your ride back to Uttar Pradesh.

Amit Kumar: The first time I was introduced to the Covid-19 virus was in December 2019 when it was spreading in China. The next encounter was towards 19th February when an individual traveling from Italy to a University in Delhi was infected. The same individual proceeded to Agra and then to Bengaluru. The factory advised us to wear protective gear and avoid direct contact. Suddenly, it was

declared a pandemic and the cases exceeded beyond 10,000. In the upcoming days, the lockdown was declared, I lost my employment; I lost my ability to financially support the family and myself.

I have a smartphone; I downloaded WhatsApp, Aarogya Setu, Aaj-Tak, ABP, and other similar applications. I do not rely on WhatsApp for verified information, I source that from the news channels. I believe everything they say. Through my phone, I heard Yogi Ji has instructed the migrants to use the state-sponsored bus service instead of paying for private vehicles. I called and booked my tickets at once.

The bus departed from Noida at 2 p.m. on the 26th of May and reached the next day at 4 p.m. Usually, this journey takes 11 hours, however, the driver delayed adding 11 more hours to the journey as the authorities had mandated to transport all migrants by the 30th of May and the driver did not wish to drive the same route risking his life. The policemen on the way offered 'khichdi' and water.

I informed the Pradhan Ji (Village Council Head) of my arrival. Since the facilities at the school quarantine centres were lacking, the state insisted on home-quarantine. On the 27th of May, I arrived at the medical centre in Barabanki for a check-up and quarantined myself in my house. The ASHA workers were informed as well; they visited my house to stick a warning sign and instructed to diligently follow all guidelines. Five days later, the Pradhan Ji asked for me at the Gram Panchayat as testing kits were available. The report marked me safe allowing me to move freely.

The food during my quarantine was provided in separate utensils I washed myself and masks were worn throughout this time.

Interviewer: *Has the pandemic affected your livelihood?*

Amit Kumar: *I have not been able to find work since my return. I do wish to return but I will not work at the same factory again. The organisation paid Rs. 5,000 to the workers who waited in the city, not to me. How is that fair? The G.M. and the supervisor were permitted to retain 30% of the workers, and the selection was based upon their relationship with the worker not their competence. I do believe the government could have regulated the procedure to ensure we get our salaries but the administration holds the larger blame.*

Interviewer: *You have experienced the pandemic in both an urban and rural setting. Did you observe any common practice or are the two contrasting?*

Amit Kumar: *It is harder to follow the guidelines in the village. No one is employed; it is the biggest worry at the moment. Any earning will be spent on food not sanitizers or masks. Although, since the spike in cases, the villagers are much more cautious. There are not many strangers in the village; there is always trust in another person but not in the city. I do not know anyone from my building, how will I be aware of everyone I have been in contact with?*

UTTAR PRADESH

We walked through the village lanes to go back to the car and then drove towards Saidanpur. We parked the car and walked through the narrow lanes to Junaid's house.

After the conversation with Junaid, we went to the digital center and sat down for a cup of chai and chat with Utkarsh. The ruins of the Haveli overlook the sunset; it is a beautiful setting for an evening chai. Utkarsh advised us to continue our journey carefully. He said, "You have a long journey ahead. Go slowly, go carefully and please maintain distance with people. You have to be very careful."

With Utkarsh's kind words, I risked a handshake. It deserved a hug but in today's world even the handshake was too much. I believe it conveyed my emotion of gratitude.

DAY FOUR: 15TH JUNE 2020

Today we travelled from Lucknow to Bettiah, a journey of about ten hours through the two most backward states in the country; Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The plan was to meet more migrants who had returned to their villages in Bihar to understand how their experiences were. How they were similar or different to what we heard from people who had returned to Uttar Pradesh?

DAY FIVE: 16TH JUNE 2020

We left for the village of Gonauli at 9.30 in the morning with Saeed, Rahul and Jwala Singh, our local DEF team. It was raining, the village roads were narrow and broken, as expected.

The village is on one main road. There are houses on either side and narrow lanes on both sides lead to the inner houses. Here we met Ramagya Prasad and spoke to him about his life in the past few months.

He was working as a tailor in Gurugram, Haryana when the lockdown was announced. He was earning ₹11,000 per month in his job and once the lockdown was announced he still had some savings so he used those to stay in Gurugram for the next two months. He wasn't contacted by his employer, nor did he try to contact him. This seemed normal to him. He said, "Why would I contact him when there is no work? I also know that I won't get money. If I don't work, why would I get money?" It seems preposterous to us that someone is not paid but for them it is absolutely normal not to be paid. It also highlights the fact that the 94% that work in the informal sector, this in fact is normal living without rights!

He had not only resigned to his fate; he didn't know any other way. As we were walking to his house someone from the side commented, "*Corona wali movie hai, (this is for a Corona film)*". His house was welcoming; his brother and wife greeted us and his kids ran a short distance and then looked back and smiled.





I lived with three others from the village. We shared a room for Rs. 3,000, including electricity. The work slowed down at first and later shut down altogether. A month had passed without earnings, so we decided to loan money to rent a truck back to Bihar. The truck driver charged Rs. 2,500 per person for sixteen people and dropped us in Khushinagar, Gorakhpur. During the three-day journey, we only got food in Uttar Pradesh and at no other location. We halted only thrice for food and water. Other than that, the policemen added to the delay. From Gorakhpur, we took an auto to the border and from there onwards we walked. I left on the 14th of June and reached on the 16th with finally getting home on the 29th of June.

My employer only continues hiring me because he is satisfied with my work. If he asked me to wait for work to restart, I would have. We work under a master who I am sure will soon pay us our dues.

Upon reaching the village, we took the initiative to quarantine ourselves at the centre. I was there for twelve days; the provision of food was enough, I got sprouts and jaggery in the morning, and 'dal', rice, and vegetables for dinner. I could not argue, I accepted whatever they gave. It was the four of us in one room with a total of two hundred individuals at the centre. The doctors visited daily to check our temperature. However, no Covid-19 test was done. There were common bathrooms that were cleaned, or we cleaned the whole space ourselves. People from BDO came to interview us once a day regarding the food and that was it.

Interviewer: *How has the pandemic repurposed your lifestyle? What challenges did you experience in the process and do you require any assistance from the government?*

Ramagya Prasad: *I worked in Haryana for the past six years earning Rs. 12,000 a month with expenditure costing Rs. 2,000 and saving Rs. 6,000. The work is erratic there, so, the monthly income would range around the same figure. I did not study beyond 8th grade. Before leaving, I worked in Bihar for Rs. 250 a day and a rough sum of Rs. 3,000 every month because here too, work was irregular.*

My family owns the house we reside in and I have the financial responsibility of my parents, wife and children. The two kids go to school. While I am not the only earning member, it requires Rs. 30,000 to run the house, including all expenses.

I have been idle since my return. We have to survive on ration and whatever remains of the savings. I await a potential source of income. We have to eat too, right? However, I have decided I will not leave the village amidst the pandemic. The situation does incite fear and it is a strange disease; everyone should fear it.

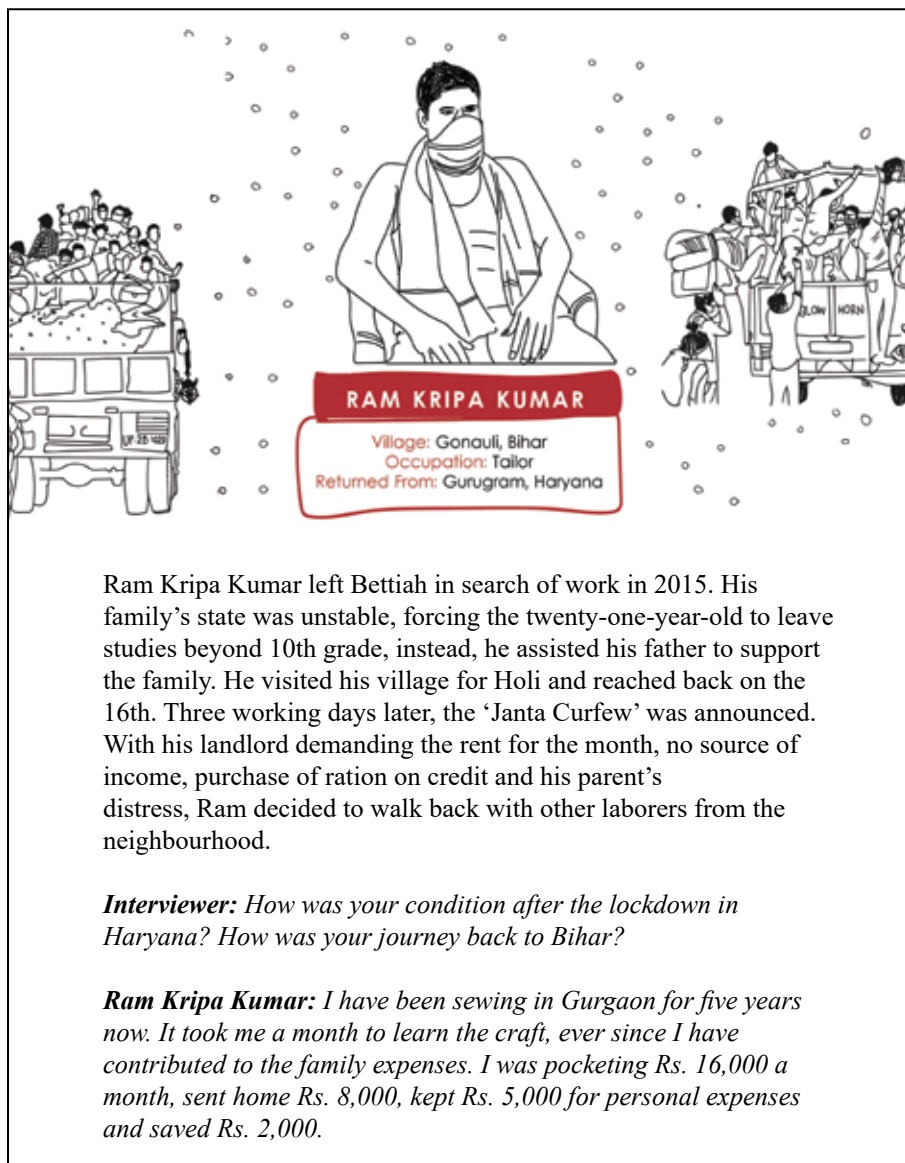
The future seems uncertain. I wish I continued with my education; things would have been different now. I began working at the age of 18, like others around the village.

I cannot demand things from the government. I can only accept what they give and I will do so righteously. I have not looked for any government schemes.

As I walked to the next person's house, I saw an old, thin man lecturing a group of youngsters. He spoke at length about the incompetence of the government. He said, "Those who have ration cards have two bikes and those who don't have ration cards don't have anything. The government gives ration cards only to those who don't need it. And see now, they said they will give ration to everyone irrespective of whether they have a ration card or not. But did anyone get any ration? No! They did not!"

The next person we spoke to was Ram Kripa Kumar who was working as a tailor in Gurugram. When the lockdown was announced he like many others believed this was a short-term measure and continued living in the city. His landlord, however, was not willing to accept a late payment. Every few days he would come and ask him for money. He would even say that he doesn't have any money and the electricity bill needs to be paid. His employers had completely stopped the payments. Finally, when Ram realised that this was enough, he decided to leave. With hardly any money in his pocket as he had used it to pay the rent, he left Gurugram on foot. He walked till Palwal, a distance of more than 50 kilometres.

There he found a police check post and the police stopped him. They asked him to get on a truck that was going towards Bihar and after travelling a few kilometres the truck driver told him that he needs to pay 2,600 rupees for the journey till Balia, Bihar. Ram agreed as he didn't see any other option. He asked for money from home and paid the truck driver. From Balia, he found a bus to Motihari and from Motihari he walked to his village, a distance of about 50 kilometres. This journey took him four days and he barely had four meals in those days. He said "I will never go back to work for the people I used to work for. If they treat us like shit, why will we work for them?"



Ram Kripa Kumar left Bettiah in search of work in 2015. His family's state was unstable, forcing the twenty-one-year-old to leave studies beyond 10th grade, instead, he assisted his father to support the family. He visited his village for Holi and reached back on the 16th. Three working days later, the 'Janta Curfew' was announced. With his landlord demanding the rent for the month, no source of income, purchase of ration on credit and his parent's distress, Ram decided to walk back with other laborers from the neighbourhood.

Interviewer: *How was your condition after the lockdown in Haryana? How was your journey back to Bihar?*

Ram Kripa Kumar: *I have been sewing in Gurgaon for five years now. It took me a month to learn the craft, ever since I have contributed to the family expenses. I was pocketing Rs. 16,000 a month, sent home Rs. 8,000, kept Rs. 5,000 for personal expenses and saved Rs. 2,000.*

I first heard about the virus in January at the organisation I was working at. In January, the General Manager and Manager instructed us to maintain distance, always wear a mask, sanitize repeatedly and check our temperature before entering. I did not submit to the threat of the virus. I returned to the village for Holi without collecting my dues. I reached Gurgaon on the 16th of March resuming my work almost immediately. Three days later, the manager announced the news of 'Janta Curfew'. All of a sudden, everything was shut. I was not paid my dues or the income for the days I spent waiting; it was inevitable. The whole world is aware but chooses to ignore it.

My condition worsened! I supported my family; I could not ask them for more aid. The landlord demanded rent for March a few days into the lockdown. He threatened to cut the electricity and block our water supply in hopes of receiving his rent. I had no savings; I had no money; not at home either.

The staff at the ration store agreed to provide food on credit and be paid in installments when possible. Although several times they insisted that I pay at once they were quick to accept my stance. A few weeks later, I called the 'line-master' who lent me Rs. 2,000 till our next pay check. It was all spent on repaying my debt at the ration shop. I grew uncomfortable in this foreign territory.

There were eight other labourers in a similar predicament heading towards Bihar. We worked together and then decided to walk back home. The locals advised to get checked before departing from Haryana; I did. A few of us walked till Palwal, Haryana; we requested a parked commercial vehicle for a ride, he refused there was no means to leave.

We continued our walk till the next check-post where we were questioned. I responded, “I had no money in my pocket; the salary was promised but never given. My landlord was threatening to evict me and sources of food were diminishing. How do you expect me to continue living there?” The policemen persuaded one of the truck drivers to drive us to Baliya, Uttar Pradesh for Rs. 2,600. From there, we walked to the bus station in Chapra, Bihar. The bus drove us till Motihari for Rs. 150 and the remainder of the distance was covered on foot. The entire journey took four days. There were commercial vehicles on the highway offering us short distance rides for a certain amount – Rs. 60 or 70.

Throughout the journey, we purchased food from small shops (water and biscuits) and the locals gave fruits or water. No restaurant or other food facilities were available.

I quarantined at a school in Bettiah. There were 290 individuals in the building but the appropriate hygiene was lacking. I was given two meals a day consisting of rice, “dal”, and vegetables, however, I got multiple servings.

Interviewer: *How did the pandemic affect you and your family?*

Ram Kripa Kumar: *The condition of my family is fragile. I wish to be around my parents to avoid any uncalculated complications. I quit my studies after 10th grade to meet my brother’s and sister’s educational expenses and since my father would only earn if there was work available, we lived earning an inadequate amount of Rs. 7,000 every month.*

I haven’t been working since I got back. I am hoping to find a job

here because I cannot be cheated again. If I were to go back, it would be for a different organisation. Although not this year, or not until the virus is eradicated. Right now, my wife is pregnant. I need to be around. My parents support my reason not to leave the town since the situation could worsen if I were infected on the way out.

The authorities noted our personal and work information and guaranteed us jobs in the village. I'm not anticipating a response any time soon. For others who earn ample, this might be a phase but the lockdown has blocked all our sources of survival. I am the sole earner of the family of three, and my father isn't contributing at the moment due to his fractured leg. The family expenses require Rs. 15,000; I own a house and a cow.



BIHAR

After meeting Ram Kripa, we went to Rajan Kumar's house. Rajan was working in Gurugram as a tailor and his brother was working at Vadodara in a factory. Both of them were facing the same issues but they chose to tackle those issues differently. Both their employers stopped paying them compelling them to leave, however, Rajan's brother was patient. He decided to wait for his turn in the trains that the government had started especially for migrants. Rajan on the other hand didn't have the luxury to do so; his landlord would cut their electricity off since they couldn't pay him. He along with his roommate found a trucker who agreed to drop them to Kushinagar for 2,500 rupees. It took him 36 hours to complete that

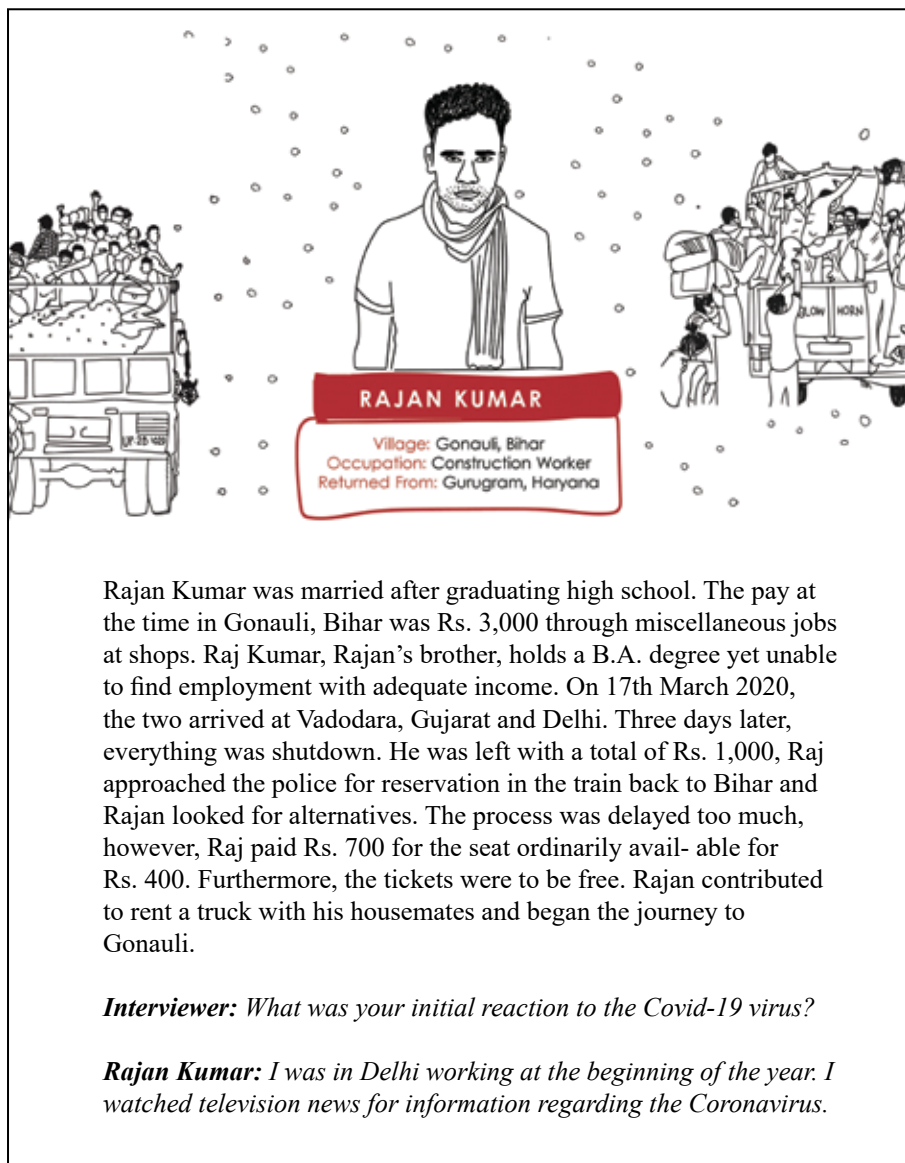
He along with his roommate found a trucker who agreed to drop them to Kushinagar for 2,500 rupees. It took him 36 hours to complete that journey that usually took only 13. The truck driver was trying to evade the police as they would be stopped and the migrants might have been asked to get down. He ate one meal during the whole journey. Some people were distributing food on the highway so he had Khichdi somewhere in UP. From Kushinagar, an Auto wallah dropped them at the UP-Bihar border. He charged them 50 rupees for the 10 km' journey. Rajan requested him to charge him lesser and the Auto wallah said, "Even we have families. Autos have not been running for a while and I also need to feed my family. Please understand!"

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and the Auto wallah said, “Even we have families. Autos have not been running for a while and I also need to feed my family. Please understand!” From Bihar border, Rajan walked a distance of 80 kilometres to his village. He went straight to a hospital to get checked up as he didn’t want to put his family in danger. After the tests the doctors asked him to go home but stay quarantined at home. He still wasn’t convinced so he went to a quarantine centre and told them that he has come from Gurgaon and he wants to be quarantined. They again asked him to self quarantine at home. But he was adamant, with an old father and small children at home he didn’t want to risk it. So, he convinced the officials to let him stay in the quarantine centre.

I found this happened very often, the migrants who came back were scared of spreading the infection and so were very willing to be quarantined, however, government quarantine facilities were not available. Others like Rajan were unable to stay quarantined; with small houses and unavailability of quarantine facilities, many of the migrants risked spreading the infection by staying with their family. Others would stay out in the open, in front of their houses so that they could maintain distance. But doing this would invite trouble from other villagers who were scared of catching infection.

Rajan’s brother Raj, found a train that took him from Vadodara to Gopalganj from where a bus dropped him at Bettiah. All passengers went through thermal scanning at the Gopalganj railway station. He requested the authorities in Bettiah to put him in a quarantine centre and they agreed. The brothers went home after being in the quarantine centre for two weeks and even after going home they kept a safe distance from other family members for two weeks.



Rajan Kumar was married after graduating high school. The pay at the time in Gonauli, Bihar was Rs. 3,000 through miscellaneous jobs at shops. Raj Kumar, Rajan's brother, holds a B.A. degree yet unable to find employment with adequate income. On 17th March 2020, the two arrived at Vadodara, Gujarat and Delhi. Three days later, everything was shutdown. He was left with a total of Rs. 1,000, Raj approached the police for reservation in the train back to Bihar and Rajan looked for alternatives. The process was delayed too much, however, Raj paid Rs. 700 for the seat ordinarily available for Rs. 400. Furthermore, the tickets were to be free. Rajan contributed to rent a truck with his housemates and began the journey to Gonauli.

Interviewer: *What was your initial reaction to the Covid-19 virus?*

Rajan Kumar: *I was in Delhi working at the beginning of the year. I watched television news for information regarding the Coronavirus.*

Since there were no cases in India, I mocked at the virus along with others. We both left for Bihar at the end of January and spent the next three months at home. It was on 17th March 2020 we reached back.

Raj Kumar: *I needed a job that would pay well. I attempted to apply at the Railways and local Police station. Neither of the two worked out. I had to leave. There was a disease in China; I safely assumed it would contain itself. A lockdown was imposed on the entire country; I was not calculating for that.*

Rajan Kumar: *PM Modi's speech was the first time we heard of the lockdown.*

Raj Kumar: *We requested assistance from the manager to which he declined and further refused to recognize us. There was rent to be paid, vegetables, and rice to be bought. The Supervisor backed the Company owner. We reached the stage where there was no income, yet the consumption for survival continued. It was then we decided to go home.*

Father: *I have limited information about the virus from television news and through my mobile phone. I did not go to school but I know the reasons Rajan and Raj were in Delhi do not stand anymore. What is the point of being there if there is no income or food? I asked them to come home and help on the farm to generate finite income. It is better than nothing.*

Interviewer: *How was your journey? What were the incidents you encountered?*

Rajan Kumar: *A one-day curfew, another nine-day lockdown, followed by a 14-day lockdown! Besides, there were six or seven*

active cases in the neighbourhood. To purchase vegetables, we had to risk being in the midst of a crowd. The landlord cut our electricity as we were not able to pay the full rent. The ration was not accessible and the moneylender was not even sure if we could repay the debt; thus, he cut us out. There were government subsidies for food, water and other necessities, yet none reached us.

Raj Kumar: *The drivers demanded Rs. 5,000 for fifty people in the confined back of the truck. I was dependent on my neighbors for food, and the landlord permitted me to live rent-free for the time. He too was struggling!*

I heard the trains were free. I walked 18 k.m. to the police station, who guided me to the Sarpanch. He was polite. The date of departure was pushed twice and in the process I was checked twice. According to the official authorities, "It was due to the lack of funds by the Bihar government." Two weeks later, after being tested for the third time, I was told the Bihar government has approved our return. On a normal day, it costs Rs. 400 for one ticket. Although the tickets were to be free, the Panchayat charged us Rs. 700. Besides, we were not given proper meals. The first meal —bread, vegetable curry, and water — was given in Patna and another rotten meal in Muzaffarpur. There were 1,400 people; two individuals or more were made to share the larger seats at a few spots. At the stations the train stopped, some individuals were able to purchase food and water. My situation was worse since I was placed in the last passenger coach, and the food would finish by the time it reached me.

Rajan Kumar: *I did not choose to wait for the train, it would have taken a while. However, my landlord too was pestering us to leave*

or pay the rent. My flat mate convinced a truck driver to drive us to Gorakhpur for Rs. 2500. The fifteen of us were stopped at a check-post but there was no fear. The policemen searched the vehicle and allowed us to continue with our journey. Our first meal was 'khichdi' on the second day when we stopped for rest in the evening.

The drive from Gurgaon, Haryana to Gonauli, Bihar took one day and two nights. The driver took longer routes to maintain discretion, however, one of the policemen at the check-post who stopped us only made a few queries. He suggested us not to take more passengers as that might lead other officers to seize the vehicle. All our viable sources recommended we get tested and carry a certificate as coverage.

Crossing through Jagdishpur, we were dropped at Khushinagar. The next 6 km were covered by foot. An auto charged us Rs. 50 for every 10 km close to the Bihar border and further, we covered 80 km to MGK hospital. I could not persuade the ones who already helped us to provide the service for free, considering the situation. All migrants are going through the same struggle. They need to eat and live too.

The doctors checked us and instructed us to quarantine at home for 21 days since there was no space available. I requested the policemen and Sarpanch for an empty room because I had no infrastructure either. The cleaning staff refused to attend to us in the cleaning process to avoid contamination. We continued to maintain hygiene.

Raj Kumar: *I reached earlier than Rajan. A state-sponsored bus drove us from Muzaffarpur to the quarantine center that happens to*

be a recently built jail for children. The next fourteen days were not as bad as they could have been in Vadodra. The provision of food was irregular; a meal for breakfast and one for dinner. It was dal and rice. Furthermore, they did let us have home-cooked food.

Interviewer: *How has your lifestyle been since you got back? Have you referred to any government schemes?*

Raj Kumar: *Why would I want to go back? I was refused all help, misdirected for two weeks and could afford one meal a day.*

Rajan Kumar: *I would go back for work in-case no opportunity is available in Bihar, although not this year. I spoke to other locals and they agreed to update me on a potential opportunity. The first time I left Gonauli, the pandemic defeated me.*

Raj Kumar: *I am looking for a job too. I will do any job as long as it covers the family expenses. My chances for local opportunities have reduced due to a hand injury. I will apply for a position in the police service once more. I need money; the virus has strangled all available sources of income.*

Rajan Kumar: *This was the first time in my life I was hoping to achieve set goals but the pandemic ruined every aspiration.*

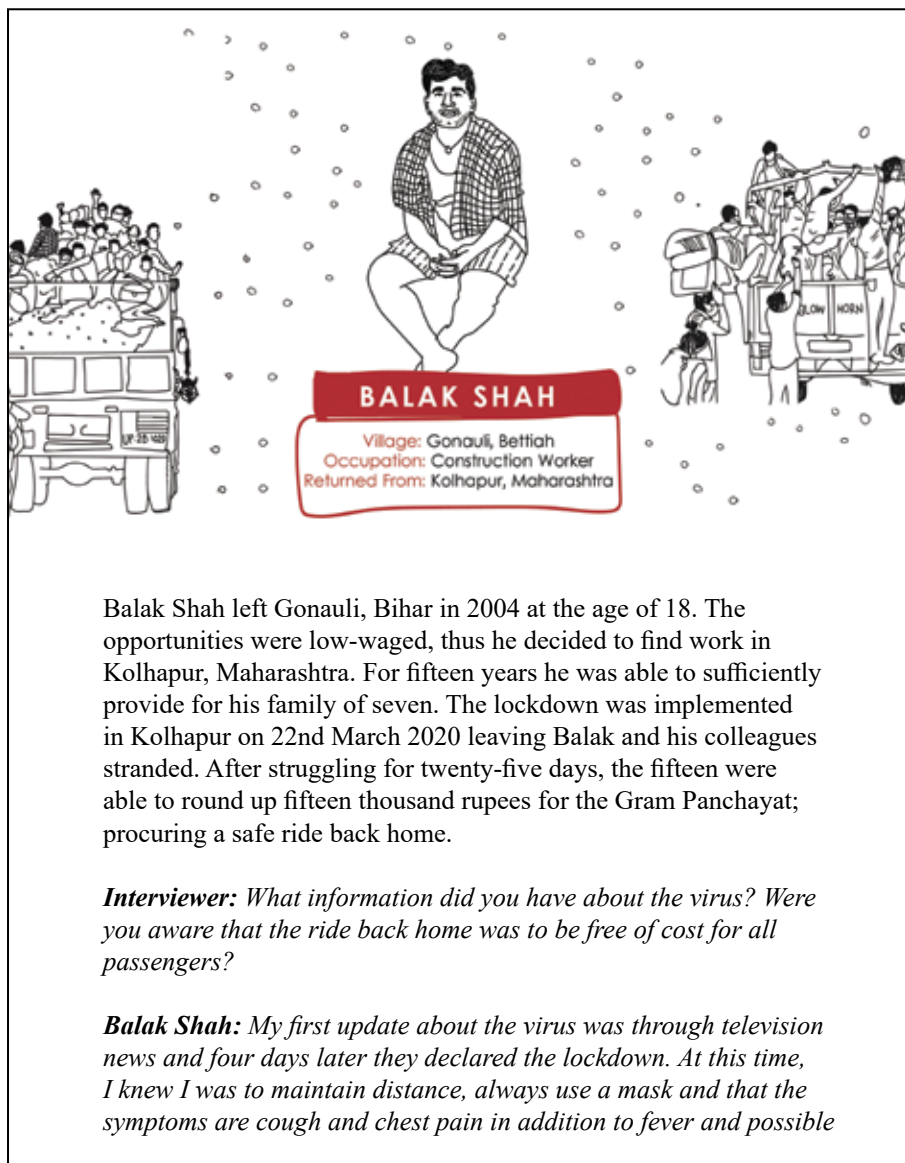
Raj Kumar: *We own the land our house is built on, and a cow. Our last resort is to start a business together without the interference of state banks.*

After talking to Rajan's family we went to Balak Shah's house. His oldest child is 14 years old, the next three children are daughters, the youngest one aged 7. They were all happily running around doing something or the other when we went there. Balak came to sit with us and when his wife joined in, the kids also came. Balak was working as a labourer in Kolhapur, Maharashtra when the lockdown was announced. He has been working there for the past 16 years. He came back to Bihar by train. The journey from Kolhapur to Gaya took four days. He had some biscuits and bananas during the journey.

We asked him how much the ticket costed him. He said 15,000 rupees. I was shocked! When I probed further, he said that he tried to avail the free ticket but when he went to the railway station, the government officials told him to come the next day. And this continued for the next few days until one of the locals told Balak, "It costs 15,000 to get a ticket. Tomorrow when you go, give them 15,000 and they will put you on the next train to Bihar." Balak had to then deplete all his savings to arrange that money. Once he made the payment, he was given a ticket.

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In Gaya, the passengers went through thermal screening after which they were allowed to go. He took a bus from Gaya to Bettiah and then walked to his village. At home he tried to self-quarantine but with four kids in the same house it was difficult. He said, "I tried to keep them away but the kids hadn't seen me for a very long time, so they would keep coming to me."



Balak Shah left Gonauli, Bihar in 2004 at the age of 18. The opportunities were low-waged, thus he decided to find work in Kolhapur, Maharashtra. For fifteen years he was able to sufficiently provide for his family of seven. The lockdown was implemented in Kolhapur on 22nd March 2020 leaving Balak and his colleagues stranded. After struggling for twenty-five days, the fifteen were able to round up fifteen thousand rupees for the Gram Panchayat; procuring a safe ride back home.

Interviewer: *What information did you have about the virus? Were you aware that the ride back home was to be free of cost for all passengers?*

Balak Shah: *My first update about the virus was through television news and four days later they declared the lockdown. At this time, I knew I was to maintain distance, always use a mask and that the symptoms are cough and chest pain in addition to fever and possible*

breathing difficulty. At our first visitation to the Gram Panchayat, they said, "There are no seats available. All of you can go back." It was through the word-of-mouth of my neighbourhood, we gathered fifteen thousand rupees amongst the fifteen of us to pay for the ride back home. I explored all alternative in advance, none were less troublesome.

Mrs. Shah: *This disease caused trouble we did not account for.*

Interviewer: *How was your journey back? What were the difficulties you faced? Did you receive any form of assistance?*

Balak Shah: *It took us twenty-eight days to organise a ride back home. Our company was shut abruptly on the day of the official announcement. There were no signs of work resuming.*

Once we received our tickets from the 'Gram Panchayat', we left for the railway station. I was checked at one of the Covid-19 testing booths. Once we entered the train, it was locked. No one was permitted to exit or enter. I was given one meal at the railway station in a four-day journey. For the first two days we circled Maharashtra, stopping at a limited number of stations where they would give a packet of biscuit, a banana and a bottle of water. Each of us had a single seat. I spent a night at the quarantine centre where they permitted us to go back home. There was no space at the centre, ten people could barely fit yet they had twenty. Upon reaching the village, me and my co-workers quarantined in the school in the outskirts of the village.

Interviewer: *Why did you choose to leave Bihar? Was there a significant difference in your earnings in Delhi?*

Balak Shah: *Someone from my village worked in Kolhapur; he*

helped me find a well-waged job of lifting sacks. I wouldn't earn much in Bihar. Initially, depending on the number of trucks, I'd earn approximately Rs. 13,000 in a month. I would send home Rs. 2,000 but now I can send over Rs. 5,000 a month and save Rs. 2,000.

Mrs. Shah: *I would have to curb my expenses depending on how much Balak sends in a month. With 4 children, maintaining the household is the highest expense. It costs Rs. 4,000. The company he works for does not always pay on time and besides, due to pain or illness, I am forced to spend Rs. 700 on the doctor. Once, all of us were ill at the same time. We isolated ourselves since seeing a doctor was unaffordable.*

Interviewer: *When did you first hear about Covid-19 virus? What do you know about the virus?*

Balak Shah: *All I knew at first was to maintain distance and always wear a mask. Later, I learnt the symptoms are chest pain, cough and fever. You might experience breathing difficulties as well. My job primarily depended on receiving goods from outside and to avoid contamination, everything was shut immediately. The only symptom my wife is aware of is fever.*

Interviewer: *What was your reaction to the journey back and compulsory quarantine?*

Mrs. Shah: *I did not know anything till he got back. We were all afraid, but the isolating for fourteen-days was sensible. The workload at home increased as I was also taking food for Balak at the quarantine centre for 9 of the fourteen days. However, he brought the kids gifts, so they met him just 4 days later.*

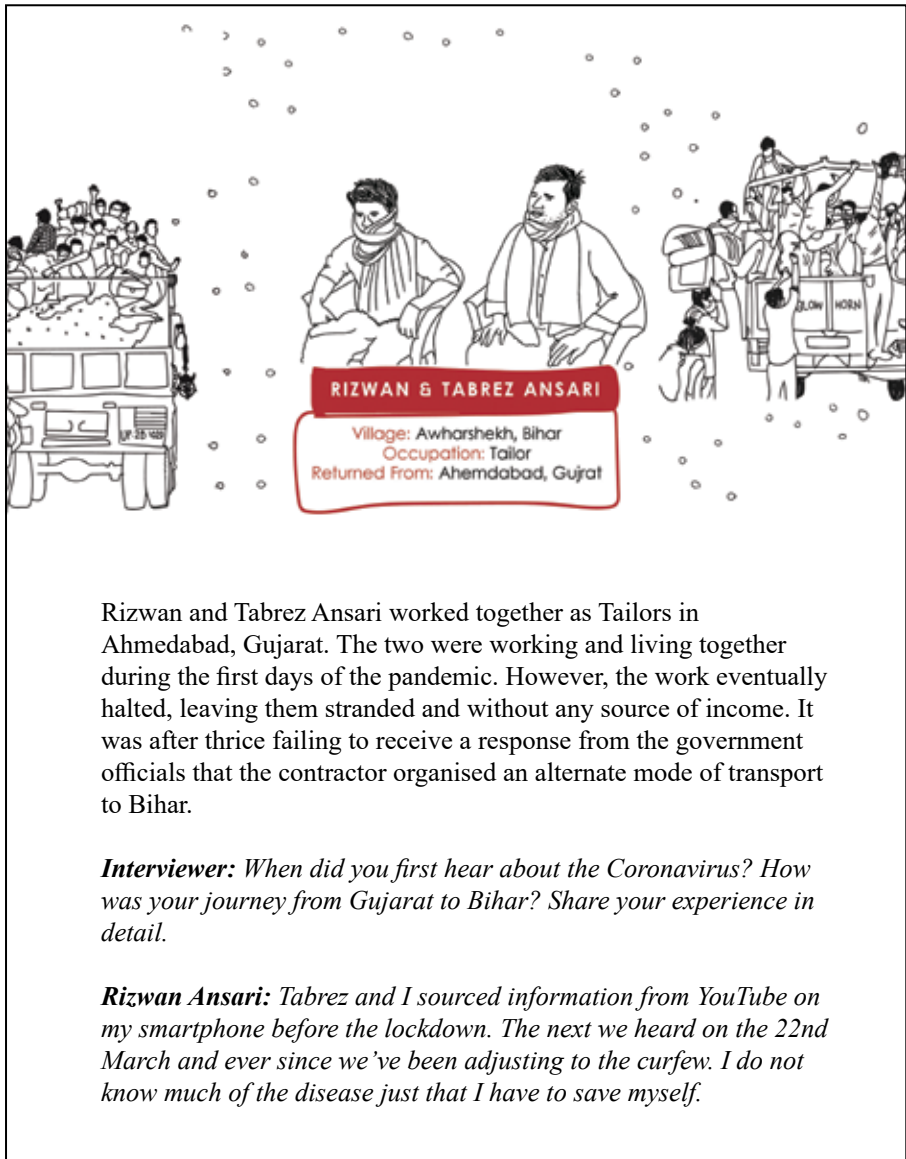
Interviewer: How has life been since you got back?

Balak Shah: I've been at home. I have been in touch with locals from Kolhapur, Maharashtra; they say things are still bad there. I would not want to go back. We weren't able to procure vegetables but only flour as the mill happened to be in the neighbourhood. We also were beaten by the police for leaving our houses. It was bad there.

I am considering starting my own business. I would require a loan of Rs. 200,000 to purchase the clothes and garments. In terms of assets, I should be eligible for a loan. I don't own a cow but I do have a house and the land it stands on.



After speaking with Balak and his family, we drove to the village of Awsharshekh. The roads in Bettiah are horrible! We were told by our local coordinator that the roads we were cursing were in fact amongst the best in the state. In the village of Awsharshekh we went to Rizwan's house. Rizwan, 25 and his brother, 18 had returned to the village about 20 days back from Ahmedabad. Both of them were tailors. They used to work at the same company and they also used to live together. Even though their employer was giving them some money, after two months they realised that it wouldn't be enough. They found a bus that would take them to Gopalganj. The contractor who organised it for them was charging 4,000 rupees per person. The two boys asked for money from home and paid the bus fare. The journey took about 48 hours. They didn't face issues on the way with respect to food. They said the driver stopped the bus at various places and there were many people who were distributing free food for the migrants there so they didn't go hungry. We asked them if these were government facilities, they said it didn't look like they were, however they couldn't be sure.



Rizwan and Tabrez Ansari worked together as Tailors in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. The two were working and living together during the first days of the pandemic. However, the work eventually halted, leaving them stranded and without any source of income. It was after thrice failing to receive a response from the government officials that the contractor organised an alternate mode of transport to Bihar.

Interviewer: *When did you first hear about the Coronavirus? How was your journey from Gujarat to Bihar? Share your experience in detail.*

Rizwan Ansari: *Tabrez and I sourced information from YouTube on my smartphone before the lockdown. The next we heard on the 22nd March and ever since we've been adjusting to the curfew. I do not know much of the disease just that I have to save myself.*

The two of us lived together in Ahmedabad working as tailors for a private factory. I was in Surat before for about seven years and moved to Ahmedabad for a better job. As the curfew began, our work diminished and eventually shut down, and all the sources of income reduced till we could barely pay for the daily expenses. Since we had no savings either, the family sent some money and the employer covered his dues, in addition to organising a bus ride back to Bihar.

We completed the online registration thrice for a train ride back to Bihar. Yet, even upon waiting twenty-days, we received no response. It was then the contractor rented a bus for thirty-five of us at Rs. 4,000 each. The bus headed to Gopalganj, Bihar. The only reason we waited for two months is because I was sure the work will restart, but when it did not, we left. The bus stopped at restaurants for food; we had to pay only once, the other times there was the provision of food and water by the locals on the way.

The first test was done after disembarking the bus at Gopalganj. From there, we took a public vehicle to Motihari, followed by another bus ride till Bettiah. Since the last two buses were state-mandated, there was no charge for the same.

Once we reached back, we quarantined for fourteen days in an empty room on my family's land. The family left food for us at the doorstep.

Interviewer: *How has the pandemic altered your outlook?*

Rizwan Ansari: *Initially, some villagers were harsh towards our return, although it was due to the fear of the virus, it took a bit of convincing to which they agreed.*

Rizwan Ansari: *I studied till 8th grade while Tabrez till 5th grade. Both of us are from impoverished households. Education did not put food on the table for us, learning the necessary skills to earn does.*

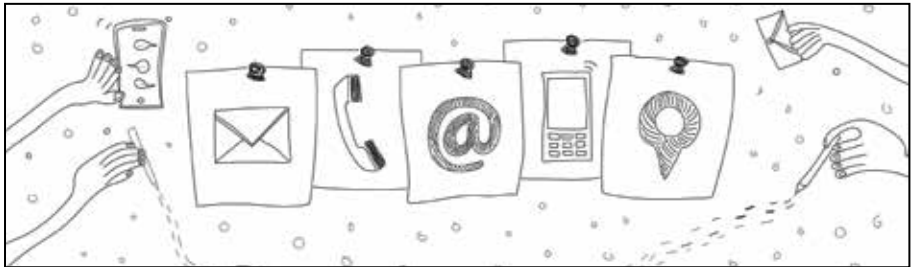
Individually, the two of us earned Rs. 12,000 a month, with expenditure worth Rs. 6,000 for me, and Rs. 8,000 for Tabrez. My father and two brothers work as labourers earning for the family, but I also have a wife and two kids to support.

Nowadays, we are cutting corn in our field. The income generated is lesser than the investment required to harvest a crop. Since the land is 4 'Katta' (less than an acre), we often operate at a loss. Both of us are waiting for the pandemic to ease so we can resume our work in Gujarat.

After conversing with Shyamakan Sharma, a carpenter who returned from Jammu, his 21-year-old son asked us what we would do with all this information. We explained to him that we're doing this as a part of a research program. He wasn't satisfied. He said, "how does it help us?" We told him that we would publish a research about the reverse migration that has taken place in the country in the past few months so that people know the facts along with data that backs it up and this footage would help us present this research in the form of a documentary film. This time he seemed a little more satisfied. He asked me, is this a private organisation and I said, "Yes, it is an NGO" to which he further inquired, "Is it registered?" I smiled at him and told him, "Yes, of course. Google 'Digital Empowerment Foundation', also follow them on all the social media handles." He said he would and this time it seemed like he was totally satisfied with my answer.

BIHAR

Most of the people that we came across in Bihar seemed resigning to their fate. They believed that what was done with them was either justifiable or understandable or at least expected. But this young man was nothing like them. He was from the new generation; the generation that questions, reasons and follows a certain method to come to conclusions. He wasn't accusing us of wasting his father's time, all he was doing was trying to understand why we were doing it and questioning our intentions and credentials. It was very refreshing!



DAY SIX: 17TH JUNE 2020

The first village we visited today was Jogapatti where we met Sunil Prasad. He went to Gurugram to work on the 17th of March since there weren't any good job opportunities in his village. In Gurugram he had a salary of 10,000 but didn't get to earn it since he was there only for a week. "I took loans for my daughter's marriage. About 2-3 lakh rupees that's why I went to Gurugram to work," he said. He thought the lockdown was short term so he didn't worry at first. But as it kept extending and the condition of Delhi got worse in terms of the number of cases, he started panicking. After a few days when he saw there isn't a way to go back either, he started walking. He kept walking and found some trucks on the way and paid them to take him a short distance.

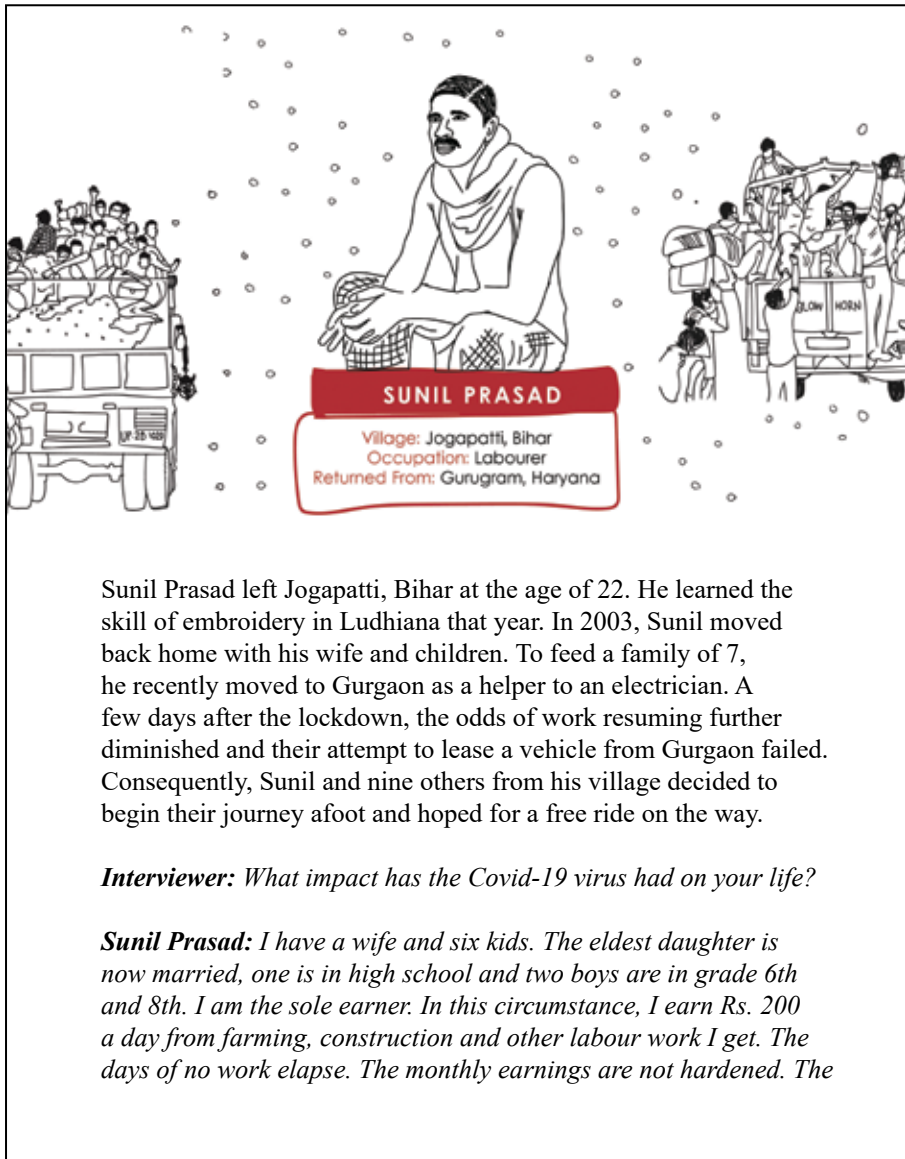
He described his journey to us, "we gave ₹500 for 125 km from near Gurugram. We then stopped at a place where some civilians were distributing food. We got on a truck again for ₹250 for 250 k.m. From there we again found a truck for ₹ 300-400 for 500 k.m." In this way, he reached Gorakhpur in UP where the UP government had organised a bus and they dropped him for 50-60 k.m. for free. He said he didn't get any help from Bihar administration.

He found a hospital there and got himself checked. “Finally, when we reached near the village, we went to a quarantine centre for 14 days since we didn’t want to put the village in danger. We didn’t get any food for seven days. We then requested the BDO to make some ration available to us and he agreed,” he said. There was such a simplicity in his words and expression. His opinions were not based on theoretical ideologies of politics; it was completely based on how the people treated him.

After returning to the village, he stayed quarantined at home for another two weeks because he didn’t want to risk the lives of the villagers. He told us that he has been looking for a job but there are absolutely no employment opportunities in his area. He has just been sitting at home; jobless, penniless, debt-ridden and depressed. He expressed his grief over failing his kids, “My kids have had to leave their studies. I can’t pay for their books and fees. I find it hard to buy ration, studies are a luxury. My 15-year-old son is very capable. He would come first in everything, so I put him in a private school. He loved to study and he was very good at it as well. I even sent him for tuitions. But now I have absolutely no money, it breaks my heart that because of me my kids can’t have a bright future. Now I have had to send him to a government school.”

“My kids have had to leave their studies. I can’t pay for their books and fees. I find it hard to buy ration, studies are a luxury...”

He said he wants to stay in Bihar now. He doesn’t want to travel far away. Family is very important to him and he said that the only reason he left was that the situation had become extremely dire. He wants the government to create more job opportunities in Bihar itself.



Sunil Prasad left Jogapatti, Bihar at the age of 22. He learned the skill of embroidery in Ludhiana that year. In 2003, Sunil moved back home with his wife and children. To feed a family of 7, he recently moved to Gurgaon as a helper to an electrician. A few days after the lockdown, the odds of work resuming further diminished and their attempt to lease a vehicle from Gurgaon failed. Consequently, Sunil and nine others from his village decided to begin their journey afoot and hoped for a free ride on the way.

Interviewer: *What impact has the Covid-19 virus had on your life?*

Sunil Prasad: *I have a wife and six kids. The eldest daughter is now married, one is in high school and two boys are in grade 6th and 8th. I am the sole earner. In this circumstance, I earn Rs. 200 a day from farming, construction and other labour work I get. The days of no work elapse. The monthly earnings are not hardened. The*

lockdown destabilised the stance I had spent years to reach. It was terrorising in Gurgaon! Only 200 of the workers remained in my neighbourhood.

Interviewer: *What was your first response to the lockdown?*

Sunil Prasad: *On 17th March, I first heard about the virus spreading vastly in China. The news anchor on the television triggered the thought: sooner or later the disease will surround us. To avoid human contact, I isolated myself and purchased masks along with a hand sanitiser. The announcement of the lockdown being implemented did not affect me. I was convinced it would not last over a few days. I waited for a government resolution. Delhi and Gurgaon were rising hotspots at the time. I and nine others from home were prepared to lease a vehicle home. However, when that failed, we began our journey on foot.*

Interviewer: *Describe your journey back to Bihar.*

Sunil Prasad: *We left in the afternoon on 17th May. At a distance of just 5k.m., the four of us were offered a 150k.m. ride. There was not ample space for all of us. There were camps providing food, water and shelter. We requested the drivers at the camp to drive us 100 to 250k.m. as suitable for their route for a certain amount. We conveniently reached Gorakhpur and continued. A policeman at the check-posts in Uttar-Pradesh was able to convince another vehicle-driver for a ride. At the drop-off point, there was no movement of vehicles, leading us to continue on foot. A few minutes later, another commercial vehicle agreed to drive us to Kushinagar. Since at the check-posts were demanded certificates declaring us fit, we got checked at a local hospital and were deemed fit. Once again, we walked. Once again, in 3 k.m. another commercial vehicle dropped us till Basi and further a different carrier to the outskirts of my village.*

Before we reached the village, there was no official quarantine centre. The 'Sarpanch' and the BDO argued over potential concerns of quarantining without any basic facilities. For us, there was no alternative. I was aware of the risk and did not wish to contaminate my family or neighbours. I survived the first week without basic facilities. My family lived nearby; they supplied food, sheets, and other essential items. The 'Sarpanch' and the BDO too received funding to request doctors, a first-aid kit for each of us and three meals a day ('dal', rice, and vegetable). It was God's blessing supporting me through those fourteen days. There were twenty-five of us at the centre. The other quarantine centre was holding above 200 individuals. I did not wish to isolate myself there since I was trying to protect myself, not infect myself.

During our walk, I interacted with others on the road. While maintaining 1m distance. We exchanged information about the quarantining procedure. It was just a conversation, neither of us was in a position to help the other. My organisation provided regular check-ups along with advisory by doctors. I was well informed.

Interviewer: *How has the Covid-19 virus impacted your life? Will you resume your work in Gurgaon if the lockdown is lifted?*

Sunil Prasad: *The monthly house expenditure costs minimum of Rs. 7,000. Further, there are recurring medical expenses. There is no direction to look at. I do not have funds to start a new business, nor do I have the opportunity to earn. My only asset is the piece of land I got after my father passed away. The land only allows growing wheat with an unpredictable outcome. We live in a tin house and own one more nearby.*

I had to start working early because my father was ill. His wheat farm did not earn enough to provide for all. I began working after

graduating from high school. I was married in 1997 and left the same year in search of a job.

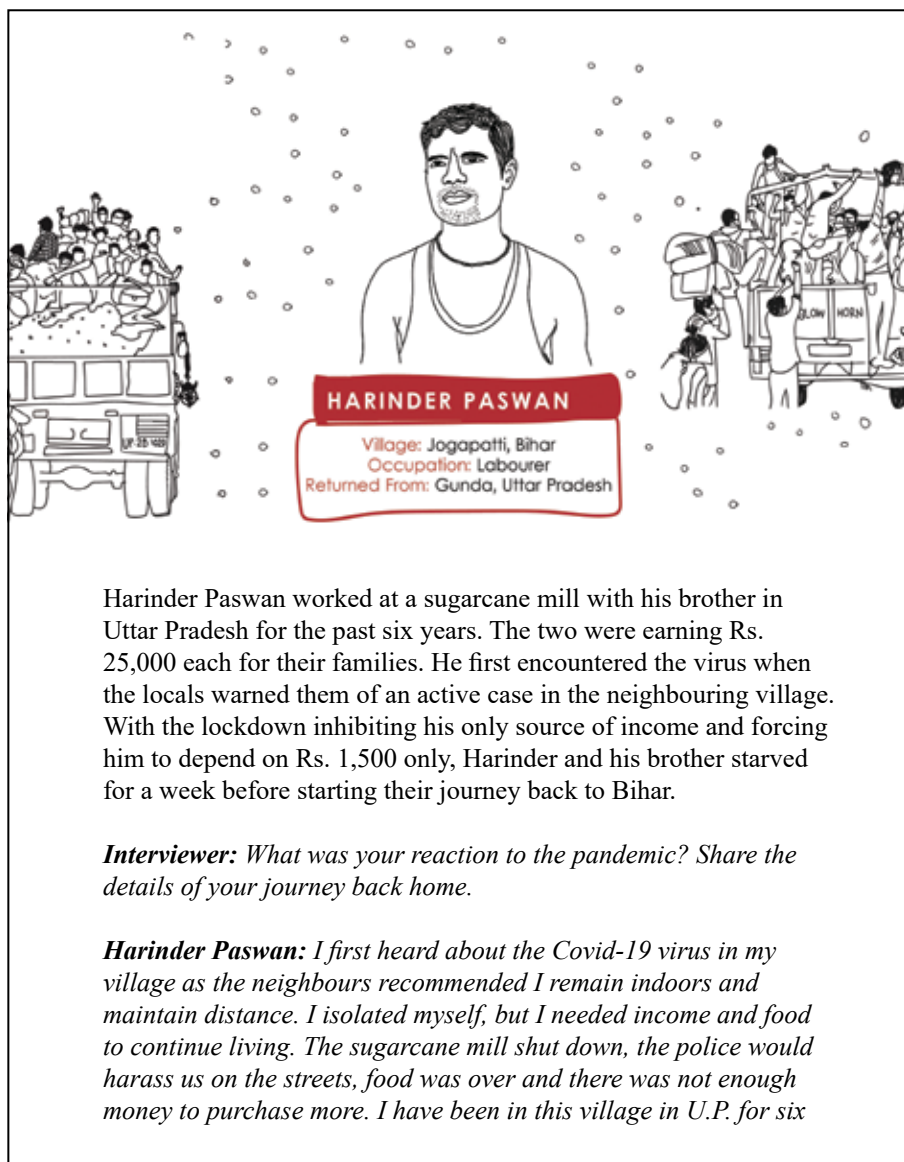
The children are bearing the extent of the crisis too. There is no definite form of education for them anymore. For years, I was able to provide education at an English-medium school. My son flourished and was exceptional in academics and dancing. His current public school does not have teachers or other facilities. I am not sure what the future holds, I pray for that. There is currently no alternative that allows me to provide education to my children. At the moment, putting ample food on the table is a struggle.

I have decided not to leave home this time. This virus is lethal; I will not be leaving my family alone to deal with it. The children are young, and my daughter relies on me to escort her during evening hours. I am hoping for a state-sponsored loan to open a new shop. If other opportunities are available, I am open to those too. We have to continue living, financial aid will allow us to restart our lives.

Harinder Paswan and his brother live next to each other and as we reached their house all the kids ran around trying to make a game out of the visit. Much like the baby goats who were posing for the camera. They told us that they have many mouths to feed and they need to earn at least 15,000-20,000 rupees to do so. They have to support their parents, kids, their wives and even relatives at times. In the village they are not able to earn more than 1,500 rupees per month. They have taken loans on high interest rates to survive. They said, “We can’t live without loans either, we will die of hunger.” These two brothers are the only earning members in their family and they work very hard to earn about 20,000 each, every month. They toil in the city, work as labourers, do more than most people so that their families are well-fed.

They said that when the lockdown was announced the locals told them not to leave, they promised to take care of their needs of food, however, Harinder wanted to return to his family. He still waited for two months when the locals said they can no longer sustain the two, even their incomes had taken a hit so they left from Gunda, Uttar Pradesh on foot. “We had ₹ 1500 with us; we bought food with that and then were hungry for a week. We decided to leave on foot and reached Bansi (150 kms away) in UP at the Bihar border where we were stopped by the police. Whenever we would stop at a village they would start shouting, “Corona has come! Corona has come! And they would chase us away,” they said.

The facilities at the quarantine centre were far from adequate. They didn’t get food regularly and they even went without water for four days. Finally, when they made a great commotion, an official came and mishandled Harinder. He said his arm still hurts. However, he added, “but it’s worth it. We got to drink water.” These two also say that if given the option they would like to stay in Bihar and find employment here itself; the outside is full of uncertainties. Their message to the government was to create more job opportunities in Bihar so that people like them don’t have to face separation from their families to earn a respectable income.



Harinder Paswan worked at a sugarcane mill with his brother in Uttar Pradesh for the past six years. The two were earning Rs. 25,000 each for their families. He first encountered the virus when the locals warned them of an active case in the neighbouring village. With the lockdown inhibiting his only source of income and forcing him to depend on Rs. 1,500 only, Harinder and his brother starved for a week before starting their journey back to Bihar.

Interviewer: *What was your reaction to the pandemic? Share the details of your journey back home.*

Harinder Paswan: *I first heard about the Covid-19 virus in my village as the neighbours recommended I remain indoors and maintain distance. I isolated myself, but I needed income and food to continue living. The sugarcane mill shut down, the police would harass us on the streets, food was over and there was not enough money to purchase more. I have been in this village in U.P. for six*

years now; the locals and I are acquainted enough for them to be giving us food and water for one and a half months. They were experiencing the same struggle; no job security or certainty of food. We were a liability to them by the end!

I earned Rs. 25,000 a month from the sugarcane mill along with my brother who earns the same amount. We contribute Rs. 18,000 to the house expenditure, save a portion and use the rest for personal expenditure. I am the sole earner for my parents, wife, two daughters and one son.

It had been almost two months; we exhausted all our possible sources of food and money. For the next seven days, we starved while contemplating on the methods of transportation back home. The locals told us the guidelines meticulously before our departure, and the sixteen of us began to walk to Bihar. We covered 150k.m. in almost twelve hours reaching Basi by the next evening. The travel in the daytime was agonizing because of the extreme weather conditions and lead to blisters erupting on my feet. We actively avoided the districts with a substantial number of active cases by sneaking through the sides.

I was told by the Panchayat to head to Basi since the check-up facilities were operational there. There was a Coronavirus test, followed by a state-sponsored bus-ride to the school in Bettiah. I reached the quarantine-center late that evening to isolate myself for fourteen-days.

I was given two meals a day; 'dal', rice, soya-beans, and vegetables. The seven of us in the room received one mask each and I purchased the sanitizer. The Mukhiya did not arrange all required facilities or equipments; for four days, there was no water. The guard of the building would fill our bottles from the village; however, he

was inconsistent with his hours. My wrists were twisted, and I was threatened with a shove while attempting to fill water myself. How am I supposed to live without water now? All individuals at the quarantine center collectively demanded immediate water arrangements and only then did the Mukhiya set up a water tank. The doctors visited four times throughout our quarantine period

Interviewer: *Has your routine been affected due to the lockdown or the pandemic?*

Harinder Paswan: *I have been doing odd labor work in Bettiah earning a maximum of Rs. 1,600 a month. The labor-task earns Rs. 150 a day, although, the availability of work is irregular. There is a local who lends money; I have borrowed Rs. 3,000 of which I spent Rs. 2,000 on my sister's visit and Rs. 1,000 on purchasing food. At times, I reduce my food consumption to provide more on my family's plate. The debt will eventually deepen as there is no work in Bihar and the lockdown does not seem to be ending soon. The children need to survive, I will feed them howsoever possible. They are currently at home since the school is shut but they attend tuition sessions in the neighbourhood.*

I want to go back if the work restarts. There are no other options, I cannot watch my family die of starvation. I have spent the majority of my days in a year harvesting crops in Uttar Pradesh or Punjab, depending on the season. I did not expect the circumstances to reach this extreme. All these years, I paid for the food we ate until now as I was not successful at acquiring a ration card, and I do not earn enough to provide for all. A few weeks ago, there was no rice or oil for two days; we were compelled to borrow. My wife and I argue since she requires funds to run the house, but I have no viable source of income. What do I give? I would bring my children

presents when I returned for a vacation. This time, I was not able to afford anything, I instead took the packet of biscuit from the quarantine center and they accepted with a smile.

I have no expectations from the government, neither have I inquired about the schemes. Generating employment opportunities would resolve the primary worry of most migrants struggling at home.

After meeting Harinder's family we went to Geeta Devi's house where we met her, her husband and her 16-year-old daughter Shivani. They had returned from Ambala, Haryana a few weeks back. As the conversation started the mother shifted in her seat uncomfortably and mumbled. Her daughter, seeing this took charge of the conversation and described their journey well. She spoke freely about the struggles her family was facing and guided her mother through the safety processes. The Haryana government was very helpful she said and added that she had made sure all the documents were in place and she was the one who applied for their pass and the train ticket. The train was free, they even provided food before the journey.

Online education is my last chance if I can't go back to Ambala. I want to become an army officer. I originally wanted to become a doctor but as the condition of the family got worse it was no longer a viable career option.

"I don't know if I will be able to continue the studies. I want to but the condition at home is very bad. We might have to stay back in the village, if I tell you the truth I want to go back to Ambala, there aren't any good schools here. I won't be able to study well. Online education is my last chance if I can't go back to Ambala. I want to become an army officer. I originally wanted to become a doctor but as the condition of the family got worse it was no longer a viable career option. But I am fine with army as well. It all depends on luck. It is very possible that even that won't happen," said Shivani.

The whole family was speechless when we asked them if they have another source of income. They have a small shop but it is not a sustainable source of income.



Geeta Devi lived with her daughter Shivani at Ambala Cantonment area for the past fifteen years. She worked as a sculptor to support her husband provide for their daughter. After watching the news of the lockdown, the two waited for a month before being forced out of the house. They then decided to return to Bihar.

Interviewer: *How did you react to the news of the Covid-19 virus? Why did you make the journey back to Bihar instead of waiting there?*

Shivani: *I first saw the news on Instagram and shared it with my mother. The necessary precautions such as wearing a mask, isolating, using sanitizer and washing fruits properly before consuming.*

Geeta Devi: *Since we were inside, the only source of information was television news. The work stopped at the announcement of the*

lockdown. Over the next few days, we struggled with food and water primarily. Since the savings were over, we could not afford rent and the landlord demanded we leave the premises.

Shivani: *We registered on the 11th of May at a cyber-café and waited till 25th of May for our tickets. During the lockdown, the Haryana government assisted us with food and water, in addition to the screening process.*

There was the provision of rice, vegetables, 'roti', pickle and 'dal' before boarding the train and during the journey as well. The train maintained basic hygiene, social distancing protocols by assigning one seat per person for the 1,200 passengers and dropped us at Muzaffarpur. In Muzaffarpur, the food they provided was barely a full meal as compared to what we received from the Haryana government. From there, we took another train to Bettiah.

The train ride got delayed in Chapra due to a conflict. Some individuals were displeased with a train full of Muslims and so they attacked the train and broke its windows. The policemen were few at the time, adding two hours to the journey. Eventually, their train left and ours followed.

A bus brought us to Jogapatti from Bettiah railway station after getting checked. Upon reaching the village, we quarantined at home for fifteen days.

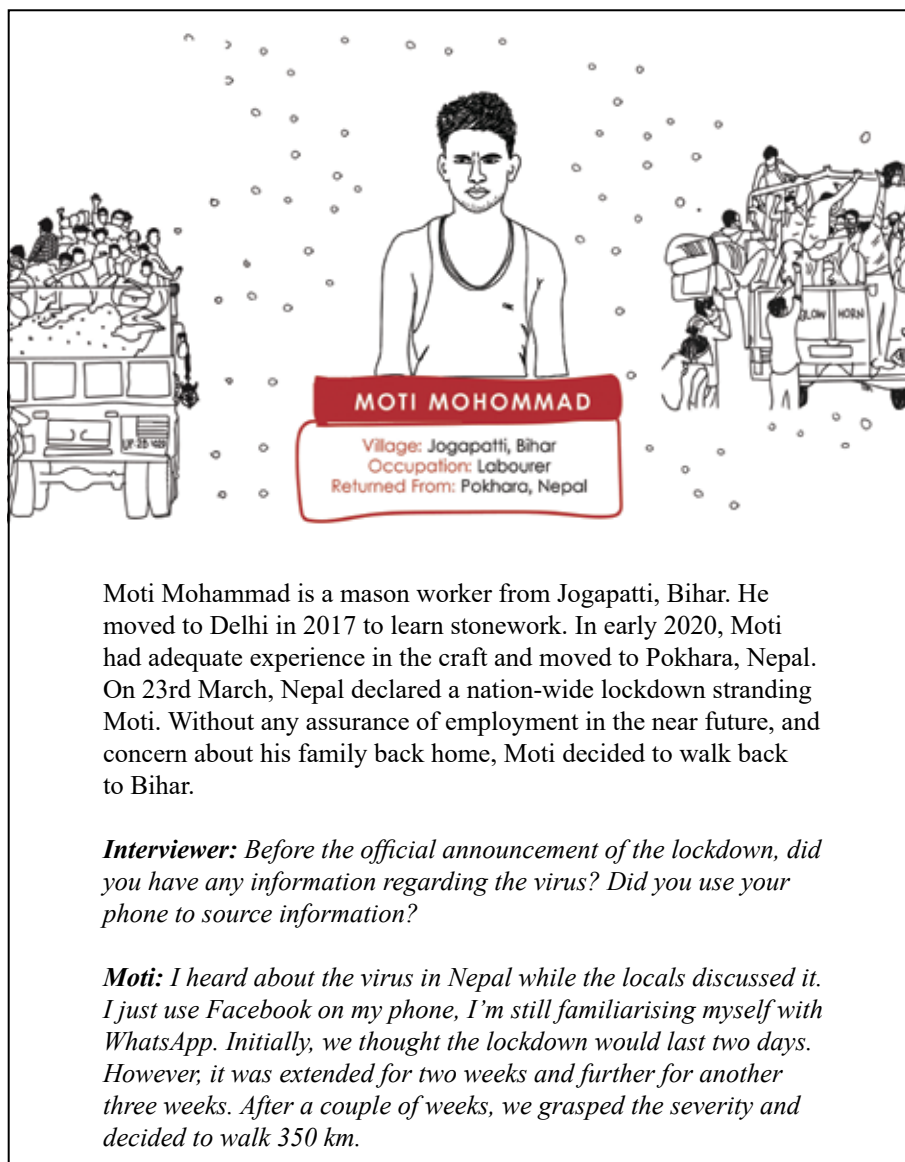
Interviewer: *How has the pandemic altered your lifestyle?*

Shivani: *In the initial days, the schools remained shut for a while. And now, I have not grasped much due to the digital difference. There are constant network issues. I doubt the situation will get better soon, although we will continue living here till it does. I*

have to comply with the online classes as we wait here. I would not want to continue living here since there is a considerable difference between the education infrastructure of the two places.

Geeta Devi: *I initially followed my husband there. He worked as a vegetable vendor and since my parents were ill, there was a need for another source of income. I earned Rs. 4,000 a month with an expenditure of almost Rs. 3000 on Shivani's education.*

Since there are no earnings either, we will have to convince Shivani to study here. It was for her education we lived in Ambala. Currently, we are purchasing food through the small shop we own; my husband and I share the operations of the shop.



Interviewer: *How was your journey? What were the difficulties you experienced? Did you receive any assistance?*

Moti: *We began our journey at 5 in the evening and covered 50 km. As we stopped to refill our bottles, the locals seemed frightened and chased us away because they believed we would infect them with the disease. Shopkeepers refused to sell us water, rather diverted to a different store. We walked back and forth without procuring any water.*

The hostile strangers demanded that we leave the area. We walked 100 km in 24 hours and finally rested with water and food. It was late in the evening when we got to Narayan Ghatt, Nepal. We had covered 165 km by then and decided to sleep on the footpath. At around 3 am, we set afoot after filling our bottles. This route took us through the forest. Half-way through we took a break in a town. We continued walking towards the border where we were interrogated by the Indian border authorities. As the policemen asked for permission, the officer verbally abused us and did not let us cross the border. Through the help of others, we found a different route to walk through the forest where the border authorities did not harass us and we successfully crossed the border. Our journey continued till we reached the school that was converted into a quarantine centre. Multiple people stopped to offer us a ride for Rs. 3000 but we barely had any money.

Interviewer: *What was your experience like after you reached Bihar — Did you face any hostility from the locals? What have you been doing since you got back and how have the past few weeks affected you?*

Moti: *I had decided to get checked before entering the village to avoid infecting my family members and the neighbours. We were then instructed to quarantine for twenty-one days in our respective houses. I stayed alone in the thatched house as the family continued*

living in the concrete house. Due to the walk, my feet were entirely bruised and blistered. It took about 22 days to recover.

There was not much work. I would help at the farm in exchange for some food. If the opportunity to leave was presented again, I would not be too keen to redeem it. I had a job, it was ok. I would eat there; I would work there. My employer in Nepal too asked us to leave and did not offer any help. I cannot face this kind of struggle again. I would rather make my living in my village and continue being with my family.

Interviewer: *How has the pandemic affected you? Did you know there are government schemes to help you through it?*

Moti: *It took me a year and a half to learn the skills after which I headed to Nepal. There, I would earn nearly Rs. 500 in a day, however, securing a job every day was not easy. I earned Rs. 8,000 a month and sent back Rs. 5,000. My expenditure wouldn't be more than Rs. 2,000. There are six of us in the family to take care of. The youngest sibling (my sister) is still in school. My father earns Rs. 400 in a day, although the monthly amount is never fixed as his injured leg does not allow for him to work regularly. The eldest sibling (my brother), earns Rs. 10,000 in a month. However, he too encounters irregularity due to limited employment opportunity. I did hear about the schemes and tried to find out more about it but was not assured by my sources.*

After some eye-opening and heart wrenching conversations we called it a day and hoped that a good night's sleep would give us the strength to listen to more such stories the next day.

The problems that these migrants had faced make one wonder, was it necessary? In my mind I can think of so many ways that this could have been avoided, however, it happened. Late at night my mind wandered as I tried to sleep. I couldn't get any sleep because all the people I had met, their faces kept flashing. Giving it more thought I realised that the Covid-19 lockdown was no more than a trigger to the migrant crisis.

What we call the migrant crisis has existed for years, decades if not centuries. However, in the 21st century when the world has progressed and most of the world boasts of egalitarianism, democratic governments, something like this happening is a real shame! And not only does it reflect on the incompetency of the administration but also us as a society. We have let feudalism become a part of our society and even with the knowledge and technology of the 21st century, we have either been unable to or unwilling to change the form of society from a feudalistic one to an equal one. As these thoughts haunted me, I decided to get up and have a look at the footage again. It is truly heart breaking to hear these stories, but what is more heart breaking is the fact that we as a society have allowed if not supported this to happen.

DAY SEVEN: 18TH JUNE 2020

Today we visited the village of Dhanauji where we met Birju and Hirawan. Birju Thakur and Hirawan Kumar would earn ₹ 10,500 each and would send back ₹ 8,500. They said that they would've preferred to work in Bihar but there are no employment opportunities.

Hirawan has been working in a factory in Tamil Nadu for about 15 years. He went there at the age of 8. He even got his father a job in the area and together they earn about 15,000 rupees. He has a loan of 4 lakh rupees. He took it to get his sister married and for his mother's treatment.

In Tamil Nadu six of them were living in a two-room house. They reported to the collector that they didn't get rice and after the collector left, two of the employers beat him up. They kept shouting, "Why did you tell her that?" While we do have some people in the administration who have been working hard to help people and make their lives easier, we also have exploitative employers who undo any good that anyone does.

The collector got them train tickets. She even fed them. However, once they left her area, she couldn't do much for them.

In the train, once they crossed the Andhra Pradesh border, they didn't get any food. The train stopped at a railway station in Madhya Pradesh; there was food for the passengers at the station, however, the policeman said, "Don't distribute to the Biharis, give only to the UP people." So, they didn't get any food there. Some of them got food at Jhansi station. He said, "Along with the food they gave us lashes as well. So, many of us decided not to have food." The train journey was four days long; it stopped innumerable times. It would stop anywhere in the fields for 4-5 hours at end. They got food only 3 times in these four days.

After four nearly impossible days they finally reached their station. They got down at Narkatiaganj railway station and reported to the authorities. "We were advised to stay at home for 14 days," Hirawan added, "I have gone through a lot because I'm poor but I never thought something like this would ever happen." He was extremely frustrated with the government, "nothing happens in the country without an exchange of money (corruption)".

When asked when he thinks Corona will leave us, he said "Modiji has said that Corona will go, we believe him."



Hirawan Kumar worked at the recycling part of the assembly line at a Papermill in Tamil Nadu for the past fifteen years. Twenty-two days of his arrival and the lockdown was implemented. Hirawan had no resources available. His contractor exploited him and beat him and the policemen were of no help either. At his breaking point, he reached out to his family and requested for a safe ride back.

Interviewer: *What information did you have of the virus before the lockdown? What incited your decision to return? Share your complete experience.*

Hirawan Kumar: *I use a smartphone to source information from applications such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Youtube, Aaj-Tak, and ABP News. That is how I initially gathered information on the Covid-19 virus in January. I refused to return to Tamil Nadu as there were indications of a global spread but my employer pledged the work will continue. I arrived in late February to continue with*

the work. Twenty-one days later, the lockdown was announced in the evening; work stopped, all the shops were shut and we were not allowed to leave the premises

For the twenty-one days I worked, the employer paid Rs. 5,335 for eight-hour shifts despite my working twelve-hour shifts. Furthermore, he intimidated us into waiting and accepting Rs. 175 a day. How was I supposed to send money back to the family, cover personal expenses, and repay my debt with this little amount? Each day I faced a new worry. I visited the police station to register a complaint but they denied seeing us and suggested not to leave isolation.

The company was mandated to pay us Rs. 1,000 during the lockdown. The supervisor would present us with Rs. 1,000 for the photograph and the contractor withheld the same on the walk out. I was scared; if he was capable of stealing my only source of survival, staying there will lead to only further abuse. There were 200 individuals from Bettiah, we all demanded the company to pay our dues, and let us leave right away. I could not have survived there like that. That evening the contractor visited me; he threatened me with two slaps and ordered not to leave.

I contacted my family for help. They were able to request for a collector to rescue us from Tamil Nadu. My friend and I were lathi-charged in the other room, as she communicated with the police officers in a different room. I fell and begged the policemen not to beat us. However, the collector succeeded in obtaining the ticket.

First, my friend and I were tested at the railway station, then the food was provided, the ticket was next and then we finally boarded the train. There were food provisions but it was not a sufficient

amount. During the journey, I was given food till Andhra Pradesh and not for the remainder of the journey. At the stop in Madhya Pradesh, the policemen were patrolling the food being distributed. The two of us waited as one of the policemen screamed from afar, "These bastards are from Bihar, do not give them any food. Attend to those from Uttar Pradesh first". Similarly, in Jhansi, we waited in a queue for more than an hour for a small portion of 'khichdi', yet the policemen began lathi charging since the crowd got too large. The policemen do not look where they hit an individual, they just swing. Throughout the journey, we received the food thrice.

The train arrived at Narkatiaganj, Bihar and we were guided to the quarantine center by the collector. All necessary testing was performed, there was paperwork to attend to and we were directed to quarantine at home for the next fourteen days. It was after quarantine we shared the entire experience with our families. Until now, we had been lying as we did not want them to be stressed on our behalf.

Interviewer: *How has this experience affected your lifestyle? What is your condition now in the village?*

Hirawan Kumar: *I have been in Tamil Nadu since I was ten years old. A contractor from Ramgarh, Jharkhand pocketed Rs. 10,500 to the two of us. I sent Rs. 8,500 back home and earned extra for personal expenses through night shifts.*

I have had no routine since I have been back. I looked around for work, but it is infrequent and pays Rs. 200 a day. I did not study either. I have five family members and four were earning. My father has worked at the same mill for the past ten years earning Rs. 8,000; one of my brothers is a mason worker in Tamil Nadu and the younger one is in his learning phase. The family earns

Rs. 16,000 a month, curbing the expenses at Rs. 2,000. There are recurring medical expenditures for my mother, along with my wife and father who take ill rather often.

In addition to all the ongoing expenses, we have a loan of Rs. 4 lakhs from an individual of the neighbouring village. We needed the money for my sister's wedding and the medical expenses of both my parents. Banks require too many documents and assets; we have neither. I have only one asset – the two-bedroom house the six of us currently reside in.

I will consider returning because there are not enough employment opportunities in Bihar. I cannot afford a third meal at the moment; any unforeseen expenses will starve us to death. No one in the village or outside is willing to hire, how do I pay for my family? The poor need to adapt to the circumstance. If we do not, the virus will attack us. No poor man can live through the virus, he is starving nevertheless.

I have lost interest in government schemes. We were assured Rs. 1,500, but where is it? I did register for it. I will wait for the virus to eradicate and then look for work. I trust Prime Minister, Modi.

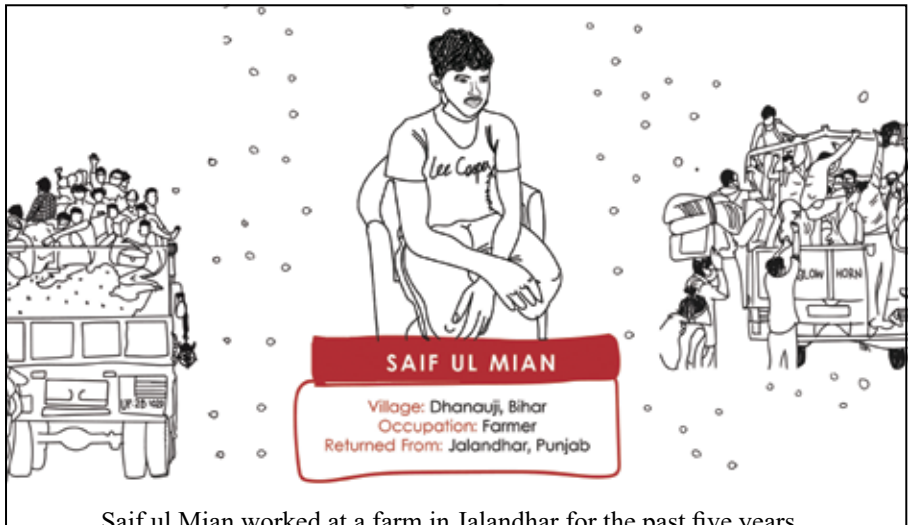
Birju Thakur said he needs at least ₹ 20,000 per month to run the house. The earning members are him, his brother and his father. The first time he heard of Covid-19 was on the phone when he called someone. He had absolutely no money when the lockdown was announced. The employer paid them 50% of the money and told them to stay. He forced them to stay and wasn't allowing them to leave. They even went to the police but they asked them to go back. "When my family would call and ask me how I am doing I would tell them my stomach is full, there is absolutely no problem," he said. He didn't want to burden his family with negative thoughts.

Even though the employers were giving them 50% income they were mistreated, mishandled and abused which is why they left. They were highly disappointed with what had been done with them but they said, "we are extremely disappointed but we want to forget everything, put it behind us and move on with our lives."

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Saif-Ul-Mia used to work in Jalandhar. He is 18 years old. He earns about ₹ 9,000 per month. He was working in Jalandhar with his brother. They both used to work as labourers in the farms. He was treated very well in Punjab. He came to know about Covid-19 when the lockdown was announced. He asked for money from home when the lockdown kept extending and used it to go home.

When asked how he is surviving now he said, "we have taken loans to survive, there is absolutely nothing else that we can do."



Saif ul Mian worked at a farm in Jalandhar for the past five years. While his earnings were not enough, they satisfied his reason to leave Bihar. The lockdown led to the work stopping abruptly and soon he was depleting his savings. Saif heard the lockdown was to be stricter in the next three weeks and with that information, he hastily decided to return to Bihar.

Interviewer: *How has the lockdown impacted your lifestyle? Share the details of your journey to Bihar.*

Saif ul Mian: *I have worked in Jalandhar for the past five years now. My earnings would be Rs. 9,000 a month, saving Rs. 4,000 and spending only on food and water as the accommodation was free. The income in Bihar was lesser than the expenditure. I made Rs. 100 or Rs. 200 a day and since there were no profits, I left.*

I have five brothers and my parents. One of the brothers is a driver, two are younger than me but are working, and I am eighteen years old. I started working at a very young age. It was the nine of us from

the village, including my brother and me, who went in search of work. Our employer was from the same village as us; however, the pandemic affected his farming and eventually impacted us.

While initially I only learned of the lockdown as the local businesses were shutting, it was on the 22nd of March I first learned of the Covid-19 virus. As farmers, not a lot affects us. We have to continue working regardless of the situation and only then will we be able to eat. Earlier I was working for eight hours a day, but now, there is no work; I sit and eat at our home. Eventually, the savings began to deplete, and money was sent from home. The employers were not paying either as their earnings were impacted; instead, they asked us to succumb to the situation but we wanted to be in our homes, eating our food. We contemplated the idea of leaving for about two weeks when it was inferred to me that the lockdown would be extended for another three weeks with higher restrictions. I hastily requested my family for money and rented a taxi home.

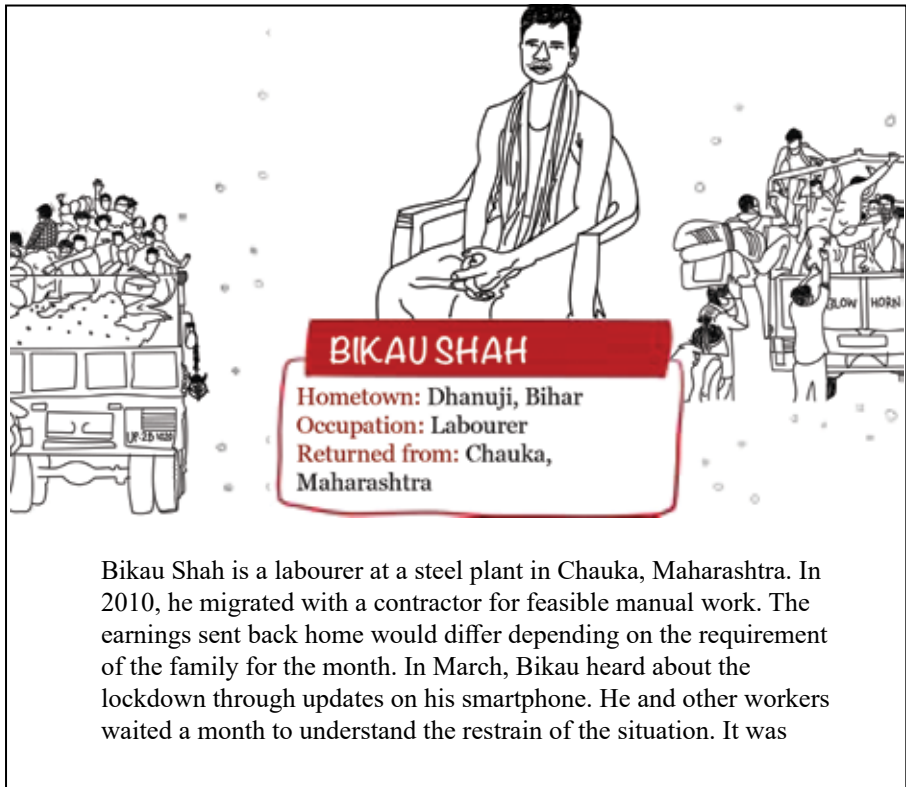
The nine of us paid Rs. 20 per km and left on the 22nd of May. There was not much struggle during the journey; food and water were provided by government camps on the way. The taxi dropped us off in Narkatiaganj, followed by a tempo ride to our block. I was checked at the centre and then told to home quarantine.

Interviewer: *What challenges did you experience upon your return?*

Saif ul Mian: *I have been sitting at home since my return since there is no work here. I will resume work in Jalandhar once the number of cases reduce. I cannot risk my life again; I would rather wait for the virus to eradicate.*

Bikau Shah (39) was a construction worker near Aurangabad, Maharashtra. He used to work overtime and earn ₹ 20,000. He used to send back approximately 90% of his income so that his family

was comfortable. His elder daughter and son go to a private school in the village. He said, “I have to earn to send them to a private school because government schools are not good. The teachers come sometimes and sometimes they don’t”. He is working hard to provide for his family. When he decided to go back to his village, he started walking on the highway. He paid ₹ 15,000 for 60 km on a truck. Then he walked about 60 km. He said, “I will not go back to Maharashtra. It’s too much of a hassle. I will stay in the village and try to make a living here. There are too many uncertainties out there. If at all I go out it’ll be within Bihar.”



finally the fear that broke them and they chose to to leave for the village.

Interviewer: *What was your initial reaction to the Covid-19 virus?*

Bikau Shah: *In the first few weeks, they reported 200 - 2000 cases a day in my neighbourhood. The company shut on 22nd March. During the one month I spent in Maharashtra, the ration stores provided me with oil, pulses, fruits, and other essential commodities. It was not a hassle. My flatmates and I discussed possible modes of transport back to Bihar. Since there were none accessible at the time, we began walking. Not right away though, we were first tested at the local government testing facilities.*

We set afoot at sundown, covering 60 km. The locals were comfortable enough to provide us with food and we rested on the footpath for the night. One of the policemen inquired about our current state and journey; he requested one of the truck-drivers for a complimentary ride to shorten our walk. While at first there were no struggles, it was after covering a certain distance the truck-driver demanded to be compensated or else he would drop us off. By compiling what was left of our savings, we paid the driver Rs 1,500. We were dropped 60 km. from Uttar Pradesh. The next ten days were excruciating due to the heat and lack of help by commercial vehicles.

Before leaving from Chauka, I used the internet to learn the quarantine procedure and other necessary precautions to be taken. Upon reaching Dhanuji, Bihar, I quarantined for fourteen days at the local school. The essential products: soap, water, clothes, etc., were given along with three meals. It was not as crowded either; there were eleven individuals in one room and two hundred in the building. The doctors would conduct routine inspections too.

Interviewer: *How was your life in Bihar before and after the lock-down? Did you inquire about government schemes?*

Bikau Shah: *I left Bihar sixteen years ago to look for my first job. I was twenty-three, had no education and no work experience. The conditions in Bihar did not provide me and other workers with sufficiently waged employment. I began by making Rs. 50 a day and today in Maharashtra, I can earn ranging Rs. 10,000 - Rs. 20,000 a month. When the unforeseen expenses arise, I work for night shifts as well. The contractor would charge a 20% commission, though housing was always provided. My expenses would be food extra, costing Rs. 4,000.*

My only reason to earn a fixed income is to provide my children with the education I was not given. The distress is avoidable. It costs Rs. 250 for one child in a private school. I have three daughters and a boy; the three siblings study in a private school and the third daughter is too young.

After the two-week quarantine, I was content being with my family. Now, I often rely on ration and labour work, bringing in Rs. 200 a day as opposed to Rs. 500 working at the steel plant. There are no viable sources of income here. In case the work resumes, I still would not choose to go back. I can pay for my children, and I must aid them with education; they will fend for themselves. The virus still frightens us. I know I will die; it could be anywhere. I'd prefer to be at home for it.

I am hoping the government could generate more job opportunities in Bihar to ease our struggle. I did not dig too deep; our days are spent at home or work. Being scared is a luxury we cannot afford in this crisis.

Speaking to many of the villagers we found out that all the labourers in the village earn about ₹ 200 per day for work, which is when they happen to find work.

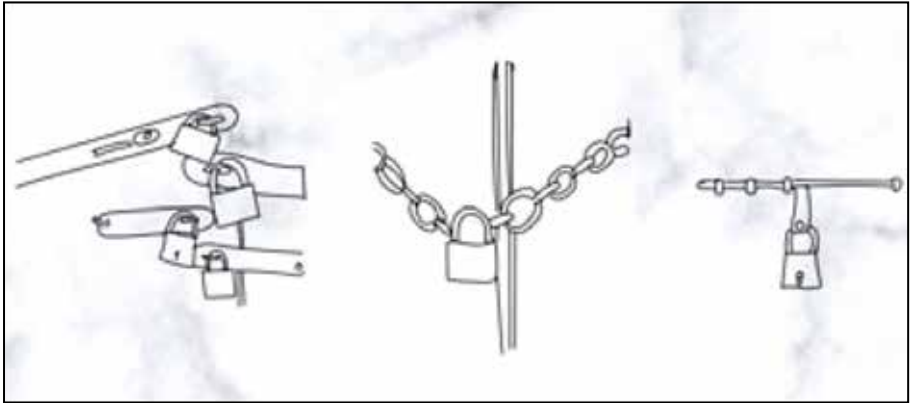
In the village of Dhanauji some of the villagers were very welcoming. We were welcomed into a house and they almost force-fed sweets to us followed by a cup of chai that could compare in the level of sweetness to the sweets we were offered. After talking to a few people who had returned from Tamil nadu we walked around the village to find other people who had returned home. People were extremely reluctant to speak to us; they thought we would throw them into quarantine centres again. The experience of which for most people has been bad and that is one place they are sure they don't want to go to. Seeing us come from outside, they were scared that we'll take them there.

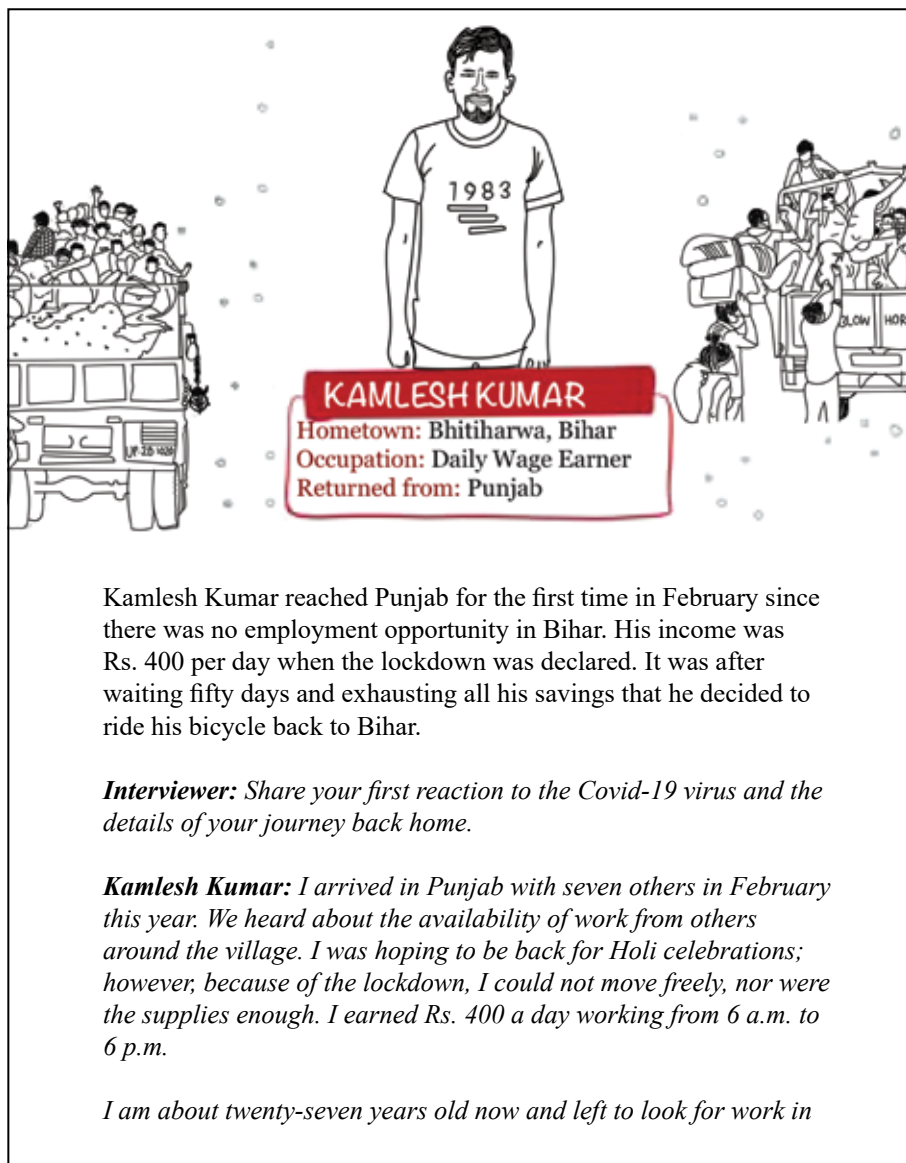
We met Kamlesh Kumar in Bhitirwa, Bihar. Kamlesh is a young boy, about 23 years old. He was working in Ludhiana. The boy's mother stepped in and spoke about the difficulty the family was facing. Her husband had medical problems so she got him treated in Patna, Bettiah, Muzaffarpur and Varanasi and her kids started working since. They left the village when they were very young and went to the city to work. She seemed proud of what her children were doing but regretted not being able to give them a normal childhood.

Now there are thirteen members in the family including the boy's uncle who is mentally challenged. The boy's mother cooks at a local government school and her salary is 1,500 rupees per month. Kamlesh and his brother also send back money every month.

Two months into the lockdown they left Ludhiana and near the UP border a Haryana policeman said, "Your cycles will be seized at the UP border so you should sell them. That way you will get some money also." He sold his cycle for ₹ 2,000 and then walked across the border. In Yamunanagar, Haryana they were tested and then sent to a quarantine centre. A Haryana DM helped; he wrote down their details and got their train tickets booked. He even went to the the

railway station to ensure they went safely. The train journey from Yamunanagar to Muzaffarpur took 3 days. There was sufficient food till UP at the railway stations. They changed trains at Muzaffarpur and reached Bettiah. From Bettiah they took a bus to Gaunaha at no cost. From there they reported to the authorities and they were told to home quarantine. He stayed at home for 14 days.





Kamlesh Kumar reached Punjab for the first time in February since there was no employment opportunity in Bihar. His income was Rs. 400 per day when the lockdown was declared. It was after waiting fifty days and exhausting all his savings that he decided to ride his bicycle back to Bihar.

***Interviewer:** Share your first reaction to the Covid-19 virus and the details of your journey back home.*

***Kamlesh Kumar:** I arrived in Punjab with seven others in February this year. We heard about the availability of work from others around the village. I was hoping to be back for Holi celebrations; however, because of the lockdown, I could not move freely, nor were the supplies enough. I earned Rs. 400 a day working from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m.*

I am about twenty-seven years old now and left to look for work in

2012 at the same location as now. A few of my friends were leaving for work, and I too made the sudden plan of leaving. The lockdown was imposed on the 22nd of March, and I remained stranded for the next fifty days. I wanted to return home on the first day itself, but instead, we waited for the trains to restart. We all reached our breaking points and decided to ride our bicycles home with the remainder of the savings.

We reached the border of the state where a policeman warned us of the Uttar Pradesh police force as they would possibly take our bi- cycles and not compensate us for it. Furthermore, they will beat us and not let us go ahead. He advised us to sell the cycles and quarantine upon reaching our village. We sold our bicycles for Rs. 2,000 each to the Sarpanch of a nearby town. The amount also helped us through the journey.

During the journey, the Haryana police suggested we quarantine for a day at a school in Haryana after the registration. The following day, we were transferred to a different centre, and then boarded the train from Jamuna Nagar, Haryana. The train took a longer route than needed and it was finally five days later, that I reached home. The food on the train reduced each day of the journey. I purchased food from the railway station, though the train did not stop frequently. A bus took us to our district where we were checked once again and dropped us home afterwards. I was instructed to home quarantine for fourteen days. Since my mother was concerned about me, she inquired about my well-being daily.

Interviewer: How has your life changed in the pandemic?

Kamlesh Kumar: I studied till the 2nd grade as my father had to leave and I did not have the option to continue my education; we needed to feed ourselves. I earn along with my father and brothers.

We own a bit of land, enough to produce for small scale consumption. My father manages the land alone because my brothers live outside and some are at home as well. Since my earnings vary depending on the work I find in a month. I send my parents Rs. 4,000 on an average. My wife lives at home with them. I usually rely on agricultural work in the village.

My mother is the only one with a stable source of income from the school, despite it being shut for now. My father does similar work at the farms in the village. The produce we harvest is only for consumption purpose since it does not yield enough. The earnings made by my siblings and I are often for personal consumption, while our parents rely on their income to manage the household. If given the opportunity for better work, I would take it here or there, it makes no difference because it is what I have to do. I have no hope from the government; they have not provided job opportunities, nor have they offered assistance. What reason do I have to have hope in them? All we have to do is earn for ourselves to feed ourselves.

The two villages we went to today were different in some ways and similar in others. The villagers of Dhanauji were unsure of the guests that had come; many of them were scared that we would get them quarantined again while the people from Bhitiharwa were relaxed. They didn't bother about the visitors; they went about their business as usual. The similarity in them was seen when we reached the second village. The people we spoke to there were open about the topic and were willing to give us the details. Just as we were done with one interview here, three boys rode in on one bike; they managed to flout two rules of two categories. The first category being traffic; three people are not allowed on a bike and they were going without a helmet. The second category being Covid; they weren't maintaining social distancing, nor were they wearing masks. But to me what was more important to see was their enthusiasm and excitement. They had heard that we had come to their village and spoken to some people regarding the mass migration that has taken place in the past few months. They were in the fields working when we were there. When they got back and heard about it, they called us, found out where we are and came to meet us on a bike. They were eager to share their stories. Arbaaz Khan was one of them.

“I had just given my class ten exams and the problems at home were burdening my family. I had to migrate at the age of 16.”

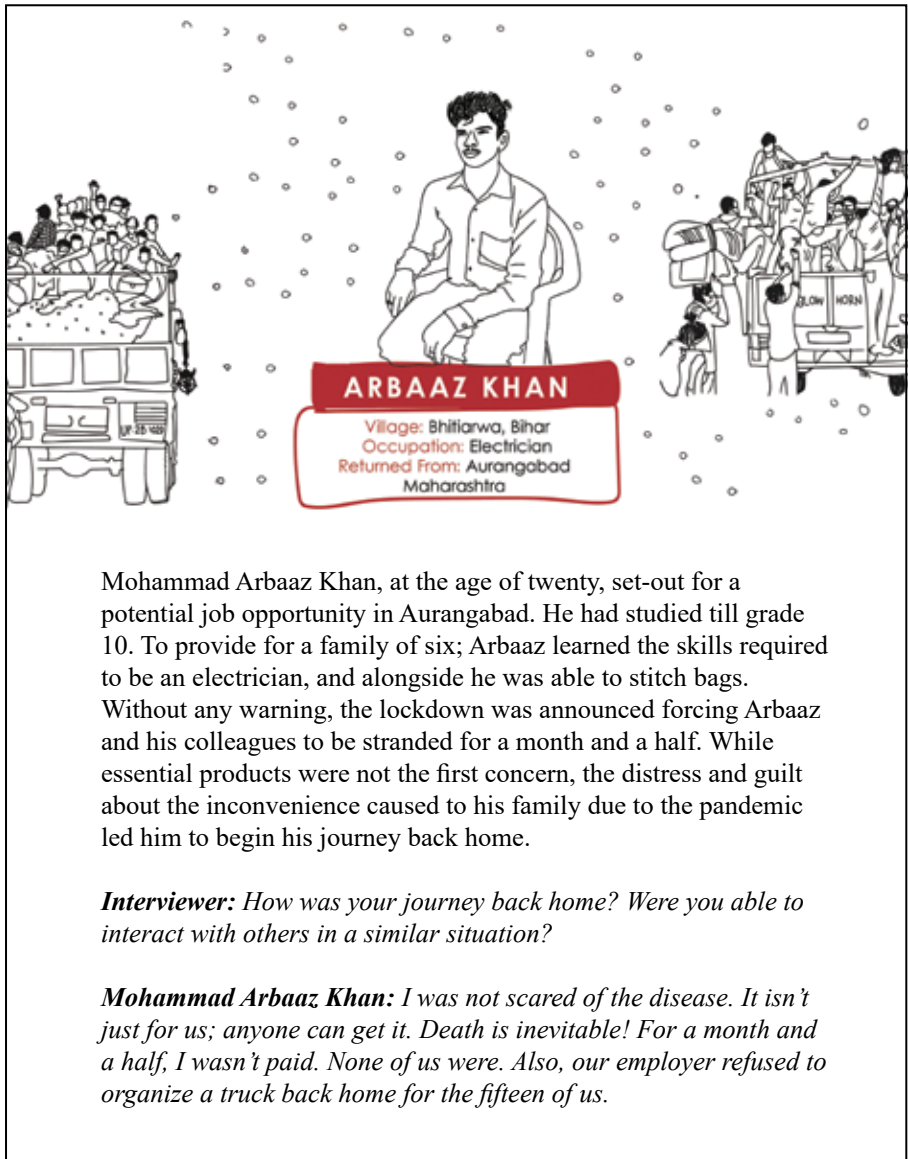
Mohammad Arbaaz Khan

Mohammad Arbaaz Khan (20) was working as an electrician in the district of Aurangabad, Maharashtra. I asked him why he had migrated to Aurangabad in the first place, he said, “I had just given my class ten exams and the problems at home were burdening my family. I had to migrate at the age of 16.” He migrated and worked as a helper in a bag shop for a few years and there he learnt electronics and now is an electrician. He said, “I used to earn 10,000 rupees per month and would send 7,000 to my family.”

He was the primary earner for his family of six. He has to support a younger brother, two younger sisters and his parents. His father works as a labourer in the village but that income wasn't enough to support the family, his father would also fall sick often. This pushed Arbaaz to move to Aurangabad.

When the lockdown was announced his employer asked him to continue staying and he gave him enough ration but unfortunately couldn't pay him his salary. So, I asked him when he was getting everything he needed, why did he leave. He said, "There was no problem for me, I was happily eating and living there but my family depends on me for everything. After a month passed, they had no money left to survive on. So, I decided to come back." Arbaaz's journey was nothing short of incredible; he started walking from Aurangabad and found kind truck drivers who gave him a lift for a few kilometres, he even paid truckers to take him a few hundred kilometres. He said, "I only had 500 rupees so I decided I would walk the whole way and not take a lift. I would stop when I felt tired and take rest under the shade of a tree. After a certain point I started feeling very hungry so I judiciously started spending my money on food and travel." It took him eleven days to reach his village.

I was especially impacted by Arbaaz's journey because I am older than he is and he is supporting his whole family while I still depend on mine. His story is not unlike most of the youth in rural India and those who have migrated to urban India; they have taken the responsibility to take care of their families at an age when privileged youth like me are still trying to figure out what we want from our lives.



Mohammad Arbaaz Khan, at the age of twenty, set-out for a potential job opportunity in Aurangabad. He had studied till grade 10. To provide for a family of six; Arbaaz learned the skills required to be an electrician, and alongside he was able to stitch bags. Without any warning, the lockdown was announced forcing Arbaaz and his colleagues to be stranded for a month and a half. While essential products were not the first concern, the distress and guilt about the inconvenience caused to his family due to the pandemic led him to begin his journey back home.

Interviewer: *How was your journey back home? Were you able to interact with others in a similar situation?*

Mohammad Arbaaz Khan: *I was not scared of the disease. It isn't just for us; anyone can get it. Death is inevitable! For a month and a half, I wasn't paid. None of us were. Also, our employer refused to organize a truck back home for the fifteen of us.*

On the day of the Covid-19 test, we encountered three others wanting to go back home to Bhitiharwa, Bihar. At six in the evening, we began our journey. The van person was able to give us a ride of 100 km for Rs. 4,000. We covered 100 to 150 km that day with minimal rest. Upon crossing the Madhya Pradesh border from Bhusawal, we were able to lease a truck close to Gorakhpur. Few kilometres of walking and we were able to hitch another ride. By train, the total distance is 1,600k.m. However, I did not calculate the distance on our route.

On the way, we managed to get water, biscuits and other such items to keep us going. Our initial plan was to purchase a bicycle since there was no definite date. Majority suggested we walk and try to hitch a ride whenever possible. I would have continued living there in isolation. However, I am my family's primary source of income. I was able to earn Rs. 10,000 a month, working eight hours a day with expenses of Rs. 3,000 a month. The accommodation and other facilities were provided by our employer allowing me to spend Rs. 3,000 on food and send back remainder of my income. The home expenditure wouldn't go above Rs. 6,000 in a month.

Our request to quarantine at home was not granted, thus, we spent fourteen days at the quarantine centre in a nearby school. At entering, we were provided with clothes, soap, oil, and strict guidelines to maintain a minimum of 1m distance. The food wasn't bad either. Twice a day we were given rice, some vegetables and lentils and rolled flat rice for breakfast. Fourteen days later, we arranged transportation back home. Through the journey, I had communicated with my parents through a small phone I had to purchase after losing my smartphone. I was concerned about my father's health. There was a sense of relief once I entered the house.

Interviewer: *How has the virus affected your lifestyle? What was your initial reaction?*

Mohammad Arbaaz Khan: *I wasn't aware of the virus before people in the neighbourhood were infected. I had heard rumours about the virus through my phone, nothing conclusive at the time. From time to time, I use my phone to source information from YouTube videos. I also watch 'Aaj-Tak' and use Facebook for entertainment purposes. I do nothing wrong with my phone. Now I know, the symptoms include coughing, fever, and headache. A person with following symptoms has the Corona Virus and might die in 8 - 10 days. You can't do much if you're infected with the disease. Maintain distance, and follow other guidelines provided by the authorities. In the village I resided in, Chauka-Chowki, the panchayat considered us a part of their community. Due to the increase in cases the locals began revolting our entrance to the village to protect themselves. I knew there was no escape from the virus, being with family would make the process easier.*

As the eldest son of the family, I had a responsibility to financially support my family. I left Bhitiharwa two or three years ago. I learned skills of an electrician in the village and stitching during my first time outside the village. I have a sister who is 18, two brothers who are 7 and 8, studying in grade 6th and 7th – respectively. Before my arrival, my father went through a medical procedure constraining him to the bed. Other than our house, we do not own any assets. As I mentioned, being stranded in Maharashtra was worse for my family than me. I was forced to borrow money from uncle for my father's medical procedure. He's a teacher who occasionally lends money to others in the village, he is also a grandfather figure in my life. I borrowed Rs. 8,000 with 5% interest, to be paid when possible.

***Interviewer:** Has your lifestyle altered since you have been back?*

***Mohammad Arbaaz Khan:** Since I've been back, I have spent most of the time at home. Although not possible, I had plans to continue with my education. I'd had hobbies, but I am the oldest son in the family. There is no time to satisfy my hobbies or wishes. There are a few opportunities for an electrician but none of bag-stitching. I was told to resume work once the lockdown would ease, yet I am continuing earning Rs. 150 to Rs. 250 here and there. Now that I know that government allows for loans without interest, I might consider opening an electric shop. I cannot go too far again. If required, I'd consider Hyderabad or Delhi for employment. It is 12 hours away as opposed to Maharashtra being 36 hours away.*

After speaking to a few more people in Bhitiharwa we made our way back to Bettiah to spend the night.

DAY EIGHT: 19TH JUNE 2020

We travelled from Bettiah to Gaya and experienced the backwardness of Bihar through its horrendous roads.

DAY NINE: 20TH JUNE 2020

A friend in Gaya asked us to have breakfast with him before leaving Gaya. We had a sumptuous meal of puris, chola and mutton. This was one of the very few times I was having mutton for breakfast. We left Gaya and went to Sherghati, about an hour away and met Zeeshan. He is a social worker who has been working with various organisations for the betterment of society. The DEF team in Bihar had contacted him when they heard that there was a bus full of migrants outside of Gaya. This group hadn't eaten food for two days. So Zeeshan was roped in to help them.

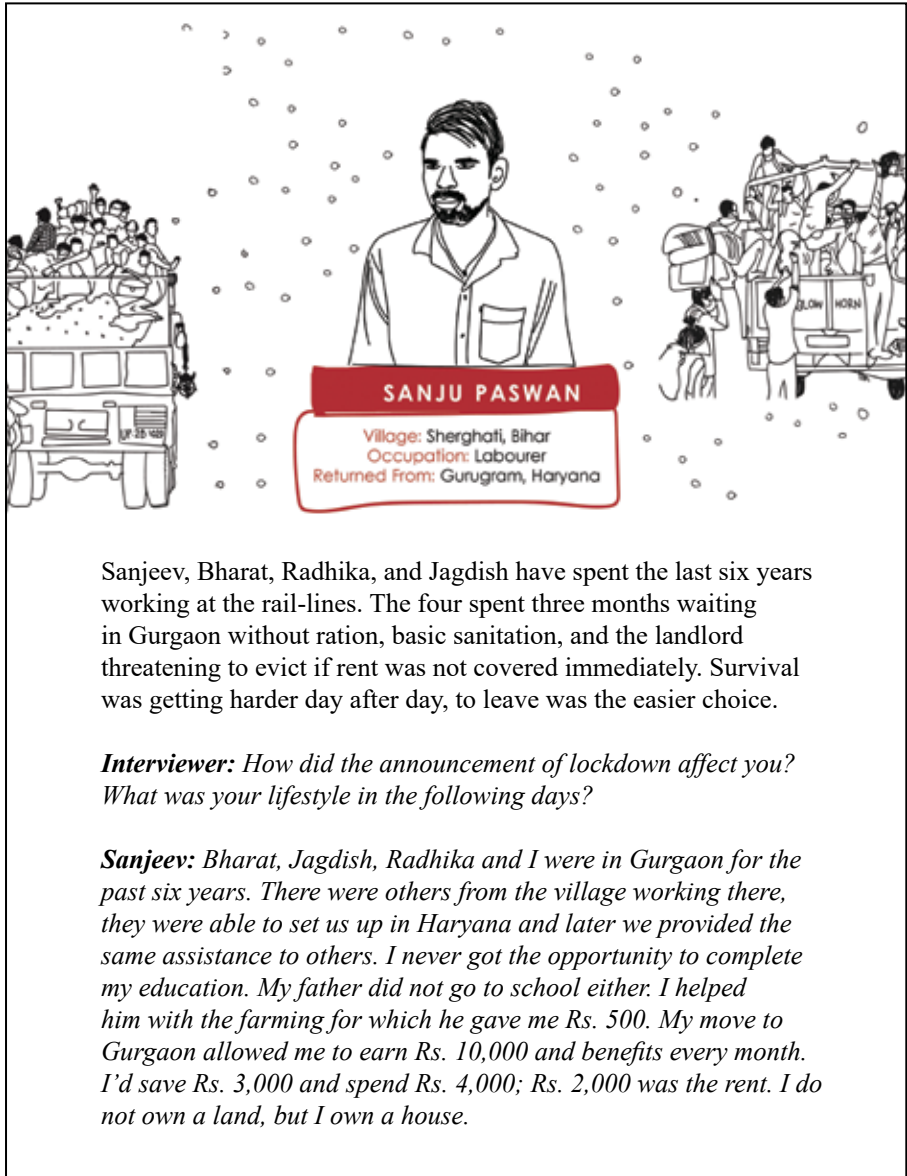
BIHAR

We picked him up and travelled to Bankey Bazaar, about 15 kilometres south of Sherghati. The plan was to meet Bharat, Sanju Paswan and Jagdish Paswan whom we had met in Delhi about a month back. Our encounter with them in Delhi was very troubled. They had left Delhi and were cycling to Gaya. Their employers had stopped paying them and their landlords were on the verge of kicking them out since they weren't paying the rent. When they started going hungry, they decided to leave and cycling seemed the only possible option. When we had met them before, they were helpless, hungry, tired and disgruntled.

Seeing them in Gaya was a different story altogether. We found out that their village is in a Naxalite area so we asked them to come to the main road, in the village of Bankey Bazaar. As they cycled towards us all of it suddenly came back to me. I had met them in Gurgaon, they were hungry and tired and today when I met them, they smiled at me; the smile was so warm that I could see it in their eyes, they didn't need to their masks for me to see it. Today they sat down comfortably and told us the story in detail.

"I had to leave even with my two young kids because for us there was no other option," said Sanju, the man who had made the journey with his wife and kids. Bharat added "we faced many difficulties but we also found a few people who helped us. Some policemen were brutal however, some even helped us find a ride for a few hundred kilometers. We were tracking their journey as well, they called us every two days to give an update; I sometimes stayed up late thinking about them; wondering where they are, how they are doing and what troubles they would be facing. When we met them this time, they looked satisfied, settled and calm, not happy however.

There aren't many job opportunities in Bihar, so while they have managed to return, they haven't been comfortable since they came back. I told myself that this will get better as we left from there but the truth is we don't know that for a fact.



Bharat: *I studied till 5th grade and my father did not study at all. He drove a rickshaw in Kolkata before he was diagnosed with a mental illness. My brother and I were obligated to help him. Nowadays he does labor work around the village. My family owns one 'Katha' (about 1360 sq. ft) of land. I earned Rs. 10,000 in Haryana in addition to my brother's earnings. The two of us are responsible for our parents, my wife, and my two-year-old son.*

Jagdish: *All of us did not live at the same spot in Gurgaon but in the same neighbourhood. I live with my wife and two children; the parents live separately. I did not study beyond 3rd grade since the problems at home worsened. My father's earnings from the farm would only be enough for the food. I inherited five 'Katha' of land. Both my children go to school; it costs Rs. 300 a month for one.*

Sanjeev: *Before the lockdown, the locals spread warnings saying, "Danger is coming!" The first lockdown was expected, it was further extensions that triggered frustration and shortage of food and wages. We were not able to leave our homes, there was no ration; the police were able to give food, but it was extremely inconsistent and the landlord was threatening to evacuate us. At that point, we needed to be at home.*

It was after three months of contemplation we agreed to leave. There was no mode of transport to bring us home safely. The train tickets were costing Rs. 4,000 and renting a vehicle was even more expensive. Thus, we began cycling back at eleven in the morning. It took us three hours to reach the Kapashera border. That first night we rested at a camp where the authorities provided food, water, and shelter. On reaching a camp in Agra, the policemen offered us to hold the cycles as they would provide us with a

train-ticket home. I was not too keen on that. When I did request assistance, I was ignored. Why would I agree now? Through- out our journey, not many were hostile. Some allowed us to rest at the medical-centres or the gas station, a few provided food too. We never imposed anyone; we shared the same fear.

Bharat: *We halted outside Agra for tea. A truck driver agreed to provide a ride to Radhika, her daughter and her father to Kanpur. The driver abandoned the three in the middle of nowhere. They waited a day till we arrived. Sanjeev and I were able to convince another driver to complete the remainder of the distance for a small amount.*

Radhika: *The driver shared his resources throughout the journey. He provided us with wheat, vegetables, and other material which I was able to cook into proper meals.*

Sanjeev: *The police delayed our journey for two days in Agra but provided a bus ride till Banaras. We advanced to Zamania on our bicycles. The policemen there were able to demand the truck driver to drop us till Dehri without charging. We cycled for a few kilometres when another commercial bus offered a ride for Rs. 150 each. The six-day journey ended when the truck dropped us near Sherghati. We covered over 700 km in six days riding an average of 150 km per day. We'd start at 4 a.m. and pause at 10 p.m. for rest. In case the temperature was unbearable, we'd stop.*

Bharat: *Only a few drivers were willing to offer a ride. The majority were afraid of facing consequences from the policemen. As we rested in Gazipur, we were given food, water and Rs. 200 for the five of us.*

All of us parked our cycles and headed to the quarantine centre for fourteen-days. There were 70 individuals at the facility. The mattresses were thin; one sheet for covering, clothing items, and other products to maintain hygiene were given.

Bharat: *They gave two meals a day.*

Sanjeev: *The meals were provided at inconsistent timings and it was tasteless. There was news about the labourers receiving ration and money, however, we received neither.*

Bharat: *I was not feeling well at one point, the center's staff was contacted; a doctor immediately responded.*

Sanjeev: *All in all, it was not too bad.*

Interviewer: *Has your lifestyle altered due to the lockdown? What are the difficulties you're experiencing?*

Sanjeev: *I would want to go back since there are no earnings here. Though, I am not sure if I can afford to reach there or spend on rent. My condition here is worsening too. The mud-house is unstable due to the rainwater flowing inside. We have to wait for the mattress to dry before going to sleep. The staff at the ration store refuses to supply us anymore despite having a ration card. I was not able to pay for the medicines my mother needed after her surgery. Two of my three sisters are still in school, I would like for my five-year-old daughter to study as much as she can.*

She too shared our struggle of cycling in the heat without proper food or water. Bharat's daughter covered the same journey with her grandfather who attended to her throughout.

There is no hope of us returning in the near future. Unless the operations are reopened to normal capacity, there is no reason for me to be there. I will continue earning through labour work.

Radhika: *I worked along with Sanjeev, earning Rs. 10,000 a month. Our employer paid for the school and food of our daughter. I would want my child to have a proper education but due to the situation, I want us to remain indoors. I cannot survive the same struggle again.*

Bharat: *There is no work here right now. The state is constructing canals all over the village which pays Rs. 150 a day. They have paused the work temporarily.*

Sanjeev: *We have no help. It costs a minimum of Rs. 10,000 for essential expenses and there are often unforeseen expenses that cannot be met at the moment. I requested the officials from the village to assist with the procedure of procuring a ration card as they demand a higher price, I cannot afford that. I did not wish to pay a bribe since the staff did not seem trustworthy.*

I have no expectations from the government. What have we received to build such expectations? There is no other option. My only need from the government is to provide a house we can live in or fund us to repair our mud house.

Will it get better? Can it be better? How should we make it better? There are many answers to these questions and yet those answers have remained theoretical. Implementing these ideas at a scale as large as India is going to be a herculean task.

As we started leaving, they asked us to come and have lunch with them. We couldn't go for safety reasons so we wished them luck, asked them to stay in touch and left for Ranchi. I had thought meeting them would give me some satisfaction but I realized that their problems are never ending and they are in a vicious cycle that is such that they have no option but to suffer. They started out in their villages, when they saw that there isn't enough employment in their village they went to Delhi where they worked for years. When the time came for their employers to take care of them, they were abandoned. So now they have come back to their village where they will again live in bad conditions. I believe the only solution that will be long lasting impact is to create job opportunities at the village level. Until that is done the people living in villages will either migrate from the village for a better income or they will stay in the village and earn a meagre amount. When they migrate most of them leave their families behind and separating families should not be the only solution we have for the large scale poverty and unemployment in our country.

After having lunch with Zeeshan in Sherghati we left for Ranchi. As we travelled on the Grand Trunk Road towards Ranchi I couldn't help but think of the way this road has been used over the years. It has been the lifeline of trade in India over centuries. Ashoka started its construction and then later Sher Shah Suri extended it. It has seen all types of movements. In 1947 millions of people used it to travel to today's Pakistan and Bangladesh and vice versa. That was one of the biggest migrations and atrocities that the world has seen.

Today we are at a similar stage; all the migrants from Punjab, Haryana, Delhi and Uttar Pradesh are using this road to go back to their homes in Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Assam and Uttar Pradesh. For us the partition is something unimaginable but what we see today is not too far from it either.

As we entered Ranchi, I started wondering how I'm going to meet my family there. In the evening I went to my grandfather's house, my aunt, uncle and their three sons are there as well. Everyone at home has a soft spot for the youngest one. He is 2 years old currently at an age where he has started saying some words. I went to their house and called them. I stood at a distance of four metres from the door as my grandfather walked to the door and greeted me. Hugging is a thing of the past and as much as it feels odd, it is something we have to respect. As my 1-year-old cousin came running in, my grandfather had to catch him before he ran to me. I thought seeing him from far would mean something more than seeing his videos. But seeing him from far was heartbreaking. I couldn't hug him and play with him. He looked at me suspiciously at first then as I lowered my mask he smiled, remembering me. As he waved a goodbye to me, I couldn't help but think of what the migrants faced when they returned to their homes. They had been away from their children for months and when they came back the kids were asked to stay away. Covid-19 is not only a physical illness; it takes a toll on our mental health as well. This illness asks to be void of emotions.

As my grandfather waved a goodbye to me, I couldn't help but think of what the migrants faced when they returned to their homes. They had been away from their children for months and when they came back the kids were asked to stay away. Covid-19 is not only a physical illness; it takes a toll on our mental health as well. This illness asks to be void of emotions.

DAY TEN: 21ST JUNE 2020

We decided to take it easy today and rest while assimilating what we experienced in the last ten days.

DAY ELEVEN: 22ND JUNE 2020

Anzar Raza and Suresh were the local coordinators of Digital Empowerment Foundation who were helping us with our work in Jharkhand. We left in the morning for the village of Khakhra in Ramgarh district, it is about 50 kilometres from Ranchi. Anzar spoke about the work that DEF has been doing in the area during the pandemic. He spoke at length about the way the Jharkhand government has handled the situation and seemed highly impressed. From my meetings in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar I was expecting Jharkhand as well to be in a state of

despair and hopelessness, however, I was wrong. The tribal people of Jharkhand were provided some amount of support from the state and the local governments and while it was not enough, it at least gave them the motivation and hope they needed to continue their lives.

He had left the village because there were too many loans on the family. It was taken to run the house since they weren't able to earn enough money to survive.

Deepak Kumar Munda, a 19-year-old from the village of Khakhra in Jharkhand was working as a daily-wage construction worker in L&T company in Bangalore when the lockdown was announced. He along with a few others registered online for a pass and ticket to go back home. They kept waiting and finally 3 months later they got a call from the local police station. They went there and their medical check-up was done.

Once it was all done, they sat in a bus that took them to the railway station. They maintained proper distance in the bus and the train. They were fed well and they were satisfied. The journey was peaceful and when they reached Bokaro they were quarantined for 14 days. Once their term got over the officials informed them of the same and asked them to organise transport to their village.

He had left the village because there were too many loans on the family. It was taken to run the house since they weren't able to earn enough money to survive. He wanted to stay in the village or at least in the state of Jharkhand and find some work. Before going out he would take tuitions for classes 1-10. If he had a choice, he would have studied further.

He told us that he loves Maths and thinks Maths and English are the most important subjects. He said in English, "I believe Maths and English are important to move ahead in life". I was honestly surprised that he was able to speak English!

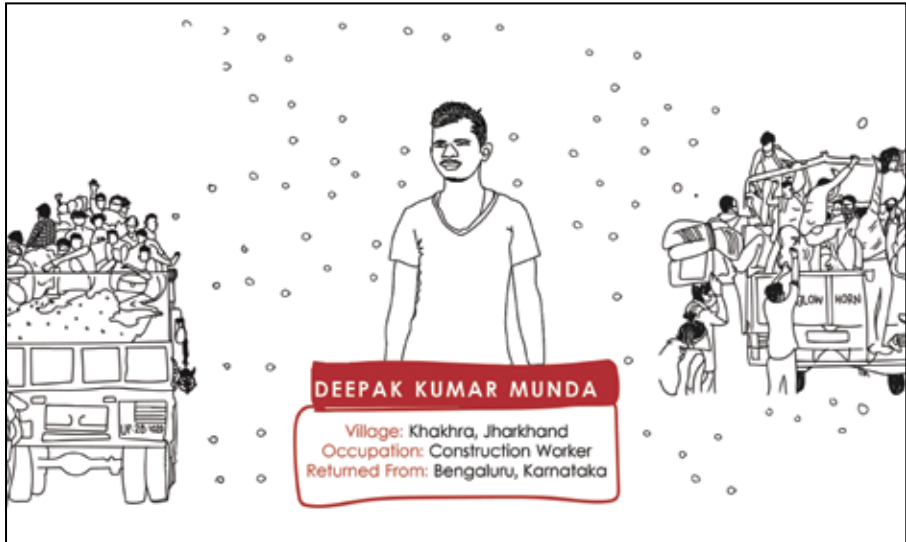
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His ideas were very forward. He said, “If I didn’t have a money crisis, I would have become a teacher and educated my fellow villagers. I believe in social work.” His parents however are unable to understand his dreams.

He now wants to stay in his village and help the villagers. “If we want to become *Aatmanirbhar* we have to stay in the village and be independent. I am ready to dedicate my life to children and their education if the opportunity comes,” he said. He loves his village and doesn’t want to go out again. He likes the village a lot better than the city; he said “the village is purer.” He has about 4-5 acres of land, so when we asked him why he doesn’t start farming he said that he doesn’t have money to dig a well or find a source of water so that land is useless.

He now wants to stay in his village and help the villagers. “If we want to become *Aatmanirbhar* we have to stay in the village and be independent. I am ready to dedicate my life to children and their education if the opportunity comes,” he said. He loves his village and doesn’t want to go out again. He likes the village a lot better than the city; he said “the village is purer.”

He doesn’t blame the government for the state his family is in. He said, “the state government is trying to do what they can but some of the things don’t reach us. I don’t blame them.” He has a question for the government, “Can I get some help to study further and educate more people?”



Deepak Munda and Rakesh Prasad arrived in Bengaluru before India declared the lockdown. Rakesh had given his 10th-grade examination prior to his departure from Khakhra, Ramgarh, Jharkhand along with Deepak; he quit his low-paying job due to the debt to pay. The two worked at Larsen & Toubro conducting the movement of pipelines. Since the lockdown, Deepak and Rakesh waited two and a half months before being able to safely return home.

Interviewer: *What was the urgency to leave right after your examination?*

Deepak Munda & Rakesh Prasad: *I (Deepak) have studied till class 10th. I was tutoring two subjects; English and Maths to children in 10th-grade or younger. I had thirty students, each paying Rs. 200. My earnings in a month would not cover all house expenses and contribute to the repayment of the loan. My father contributes Rs. 6,000, and the house income is Rs. 10,000.*

Besides, there are additional expenses; I have two sisters in school, the education expenses are not easy either. There was no work here or the minimum compensation was not close to satisfactory. I had hoped to continue my education, however, our current condition does not allow for that.

I (Rakesh) had the same reason. I had been waiting for the results of my 10th-grade examination and my family owed money; that was my reason to earn whatever possible while I wait for the results. My father earns Rs. 5,000 to Rs. 6,000 as a labourer in the village with our expenses requiring Rs. 11,000.

Ever since we have been back, there is no consideration to migrate for work. I (Rakesh) aspire to continue with my education and study with an aim to be a doctor.

I (Deepak) think I will become a teacher to educate the children of Khakra. If not for the loan, I would be walking in the direction I have planned. There are two most important subjects: English and Mathematics.

Interviewer: *Tell me more about your encounter with the virus? What were your initial reactions, and how has it impacted your life since you have been home?*

Deepak Munda & Rakesh Prasad: *I (Deepak) am not scared of the virus. Neither do I fully believe in its existence. How is it that we travelled from Bangalore without getting infected? There are many unanswered questions and rumours. News channels claim an individual who tested positive for Covid-19 in Mangalpur was admitted to the hospital, yet he recovered without a scar. What medication was used? Why cannot the same be used for others? After experiencing this unforeseen struggle, it was time for us to become 'Aatmanirbhar' in our village; at our home. This pandemic*

has taught us to brace ourselves for what's coming next. It is this virtue that will protect us.

Interviewer: *Tell us about your journey from Bangalore to Jharkhand in detail.*

Deepak Munda & Rakesh Prasad: *It was later into the lockdown that we realized we were to register to reserve a ride back home. Two and half months after the lockdown, we took an auto to the police station to get tested. There were instructions before boarding the Karnataka bus to the railway station; maintain social distance. At the railway station, we were given the tickets, some food and ration following another Covid-19 test. Throughout the journey, there were three meals on time along with ration. Upon reaching Bokaro railway station, we boarded the buses for our districts. They dropped us at Loguburo temple— the quarantine centre at the time.*

I (Deepak) was provided with a proper meal ('dal', rice, and green vegetables) twice a day and flat rice along with bread. I (Rakesh) got a banana instead of the flat rice. There were over 190 individuals in each quarantine centre, some facilities were public. At my (Rakesh) quarantine centre, there were three people in one room, and in Deepak's, there were thirty-three in one large space. The teachers and other members of the administration volunteered to help around the centre. There were regular doctor visitations through a window. Fourteen days later we received our certificate and arranged a ride back to the village.

Interviewer: *How has your life been since you came back? Have you explored any government schemes to ease your lifestyle?*

Deepak Munda & Rakesh Prasad: *I (Deepak) own 4 - 5 acres of land at different locations spread across the village. Khakra*

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offers exceptionally fertile land, yet, there is no consistent water source on our property. The possibility of digging a well causes another financial turmoil. The potential schemes we have heard about do not help us.

My (Rakesh) family owns about 2-3 acres of land. My father takes the responsibility of maintaining and obtaining maximum output from it with my assistance in the process when required.

Currently, our primary income is through my (Deepak) parents working under the MNREGA scheme at a Dobha. It gives me time to search for a suitable job and study further.

My (Deepak) family owns a shop that generates Rs. 700 a day. I will continue living with my parents and study further. The objective is to find the closest scheme that allows me to continue my education in the village, provide for my family in the village, and continue tutoring in the village.

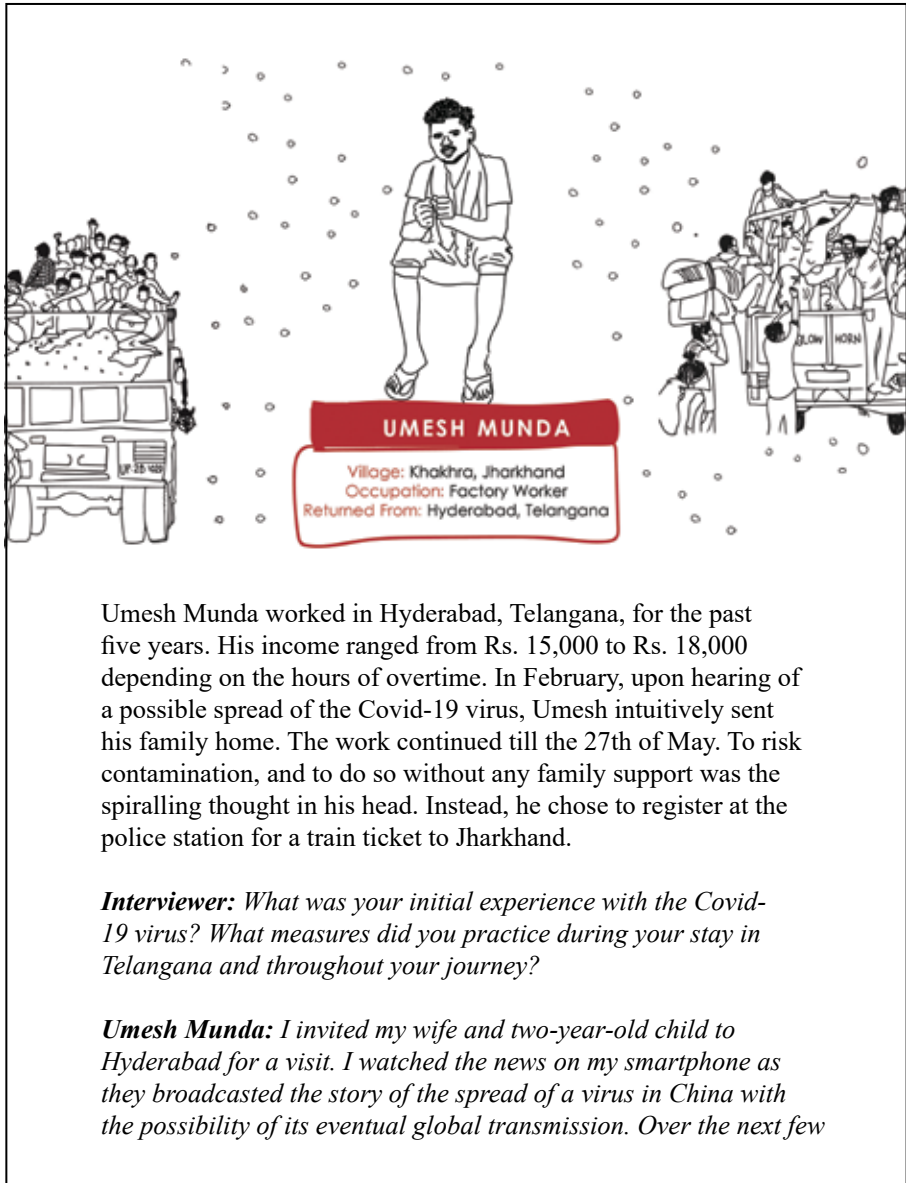
Umesh Munda went to the city after his father passed away. He said, “The environment in Hyderabad was very good. Everyone was nice to me. Over there the only drawback was that there weren’t open spaces and we had to be disciplined and careful since we were outsiders. The city was more expensive as well.” But he used to earn enough as well. He used to earn about ₹ 17,000 per month for an eight-hour shift. He used to save ₹ 14,000 since the contractor provided the shared room.

He chose to leave his studies and work since his siblings had decided to study further. He needed to provide for the family. He dedicated his whole life to, his siblings and his mother.

“If people don’t travel and work in different states the country won’t run. So, if I get economic support, I will go back again” he said. He says that the government has several things in place but they don’t reach the common man.

He returned to his village because he didn’t want to be separated from his family, not because he had a money crisis. He filled the form that the Jharkhand Government had released for migrants to return home. The officials were very polite, soft spoken and helped him a lot.

“If people don’t travel and work in different states the country won’t run. So, if I get economic support, I will go back again” he said. He says that the government has several things in place but they don’t reach the common man.



Umesh Munda worked in Hyderabad, Telangana, for the past five years. His income ranged from Rs. 15,000 to Rs. 18,000 depending on the hours of overtime. In February, upon hearing of a possible spread of the Covid-19 virus, Umesh intuitively sent his family home. The work continued till the 27th of May. To risk contamination, and to do so without any family support was the spiralling thought in his head. Instead, he chose to register at the police station for a train ticket to Jharkhand.

Interviewer: *What was your initial experience with the Covid-19 virus? What measures did you practice during your stay in Telangana and throughout your journey?*

Umesh Munda: *I invited my wife and two-year-old child to Hyderabad for a visit. I watched the news on my smartphone as they broadcasted the story of the spread of a virus in China with the possibility of its eventual global transmission. Over the next few*

days, I arranged for my wife and kid to return home to avoid any unnecessary trouble. I continued to work.

The company I worked for shut on the 21st March, but I continued working in four-hour shifts till the 27th March. I observed at least two-hundred rush to get tested; it was similar to Tablighi Jamaat.

I heard Hemant Soren and the Jharkhand government released an application for the laborers stranded throughout the country. I was hoping to receive Rs. 2,000 as told by the government. However, Rs. 1,000 and 5 kg of rice I received will suffice.

In the following days, I noticed an immediate increase in cases only to realize I will be alone if infected. With that in mind, I registered on the Jharkhand application and waited. Ten days later, the villagers instructed me to visit the police station and submit the necessary documents. It was eighteen days later, I received a call and requested to delay it until my shift ends. That same afternoon I performed another registration process, transferred to Ghatkesar Railway station and departed for Bokaro.

Once before the railway station, the bus stopped at a quarantine centre for water, biscuits, and bread. I reached the station at 7 p.m. and waited till 9 p.m. for the train to depart for Bokaro. The government provided three bottles of water and two packets of food on entering the train, the same once again the next morning, and some bread and water periodically. It was a 36-hour long journey since the route taken was Vishakhapatnam and Tata, as opposed to the Darbhanga - Barauni course.

Local buses awaited to drive us to our respective districts as we arrived in Bokaro. Since there was no one from Ramgarh district other than me, I shared the bus with forty others with all social-distancing norms violated in the process.

I contacted the Panchayat Sevak after reaching the village for the quarantine instructions. The quarantine centre did not have the appropriate facilities yet, so I waited for a solution. I messaged my information via WhatsApp and waited till 7 p.m. for the food. I attempted to call the number, only to realize it's switched off. It was fourteen-days later, the same individual instructed me to head to the Gola Hospital for a check-up. He sent a vehicle. I waited two days at the Mehla Engineering College for the reports without expressing my discomfort. A total of 120 individuals were at this centre, with one bathroom, a bottle of cleaning detergent, and a broom for each floor.

For breakfast, there'd be four slices of bread and one banana; and for lunch and dinner, some 'dal', rice, and a vegetable.

Interviewer: *How has the pandemic affected your lifestyle? Do you have any expectations from the government to assist you through the crisis?*

Umesh Munda: *There is nothing to do right now. I am waiting for work to resume in Telangana. It is not a choice, I will go to wherever there is work.*

I repaired air conditioning leakages with an unconventional method that could delay the damage by a year or even two. I pocketed Rs. 15,000 a month, the company covered the housing, and with overtime, I received a total of Rs. 18,000. I sent Rs. 14,000 back for my sister, brother, mother, and a friend. Not everything requires technology; certain things demand your hand.

The two continued with their studies as I took the financial burden of the family upon myself after our father passed away. My brother

has a mobile repair shop that earns him Rs. 9,000 allowing him to contribute to the electricity bills and land deeds, as I pay for the weddings, medical expenses, and other large expenses. After my father passed away, I dropped out of seventh grade to earn for the family. I worked as a driver in Tatanagar for the first years earning Rs. 6,000 per month. By 2014, they paid me Rs. 10,000 every month. My sibling replaced me at this job as I went to Hyderabad for a better opportunity. The contractor who guided me from Bokaro taught the skill set required for the job.

I invited my child to Hyderabad because I wanted him to have the education I could not get. Now, I am earning a maximum of Rs. 10,000. I will be able to sustain my family, but I will not be able to prepare us for the future.

I own an acre of infertile land. It will only amount to something through government aid. Although I believe the Modi government is giving necessary support to the people, the channels do not ensure large-scale reach.

After meeting Umesh we went to Dhermendra Kumar's house. His employers didn't give him the money they owed. However, they fed him for a few days. When he asked them for money to go home, they said, "We can give you food for a few more days but we can't give you money." Dhermendra added, "I first came to know about Corona when I heard people shouting at each other to keep distance. They were wearing these masks and roaming around".

When everything had stopped the company had stopped, so work had stopped. He said, "since I wasn't working they didn't pay me either." He had one or two meals a day, he couldn't afford more. "If we didn't get food we would have died of hunger. We'd much rather die on the road or in our village of Corona." So, he decided to buy a cycle in Nellore and leave for his village on cycle. He left at midnight to avoid riding in the hot sun.

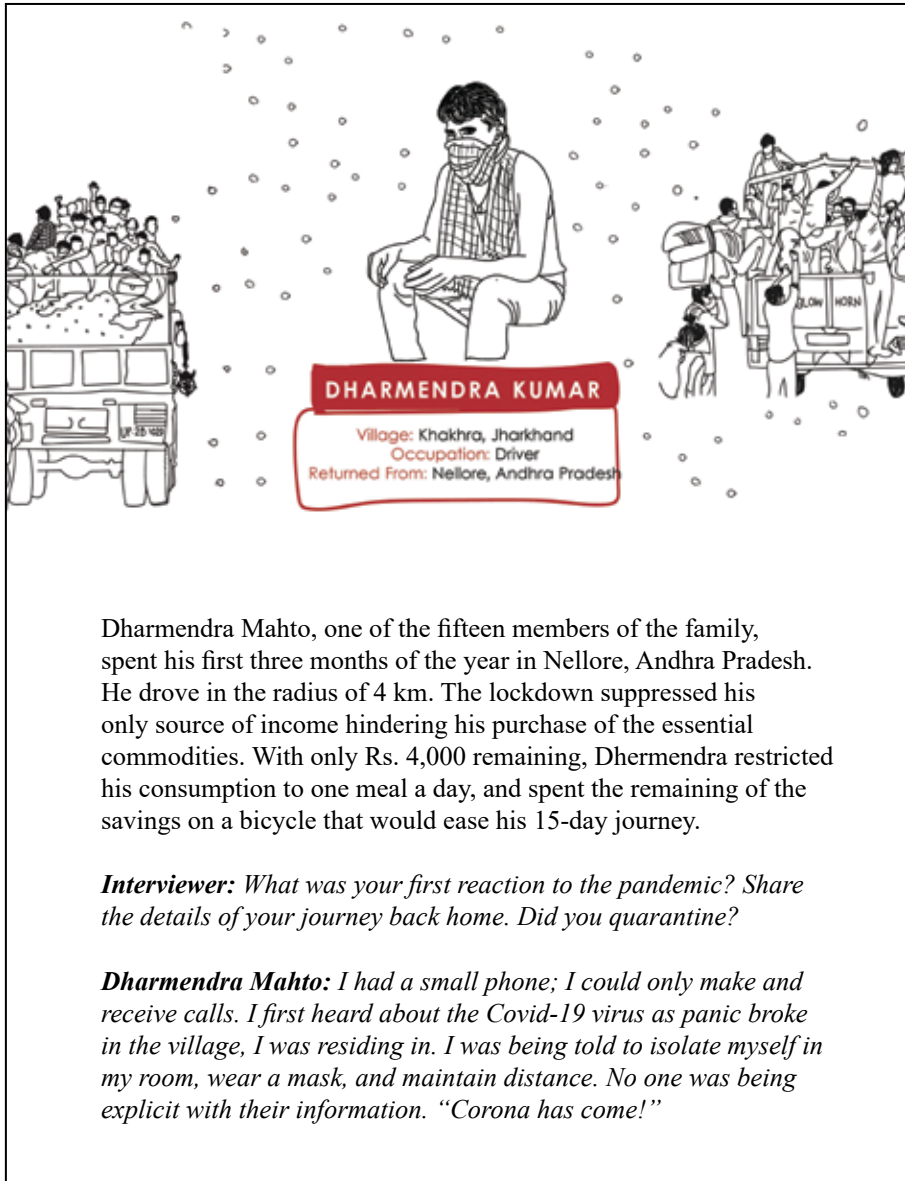
He wouldn't find a place to sleep or eat, the few places he found either had horrible food that was inedible or the restaurant owners would chase them away for the fear of Corona.

In one place they were promised by the police that the next restaurant wouldn't ask them for money. After they finished their meal, they were asked to pay. Since they didn't have any money, they asked the restaurant owners to keep their cycles. At this point the restaurant owner thought for a while and then allowed them to go for free.

At another place, the police called them closer saying they will give them food but they lathi-charged them. As they started running without their cycles the policemen asked them to take the cycles along.

As they moved forward in a village, the villagers asked them to leave and not stop as they'd spread Covid. When they didn't move out of tiredness they were threatened. So, they had to leave.

When asked if he will go back when called by his employers, he said he will not go back until a cure for this illness comes. A man from the side remarked, "We can earn money if we are alive. Not if we are dead!"



Dharmendra Mahto, one of the fifteen members of the family, spent his first three months of the year in Nellore, Andhra Pradesh. He drove in the radius of 4 km. The lockdown suppressed his only source of income hindering his purchase of the essential commodities. With only Rs. 4,000 remaining, Dharmendra restricted his consumption to one meal a day, and spent the remaining of the savings on a bicycle that would ease his 15-day journey.

Interviewer: *What was your first reaction to the pandemic? Share the details of your journey back home. Did you quarantine?*

Dharmendra Mahto: *I had a small phone; I could only make and receive calls. I first heard about the Covid-19 virus as panic broke in the village, I was residing in. I was being told to isolate myself in my room, wear a mask, and maintain distance. No one was being explicit with their information. "Corona has come!"*

was heard all around. The villagers voiced their concern by insisting all outsiders to leave the village and return home for their safety. I asked around for more information. I was told it is a pandemic that spreads by touching; continue maintaining 1m distance from everyone.

My only source of income shut down despite government asking all employers to continue paying salaries. The inconvenience was obvious as my food consumption had drastically reduced; I would eat one meal a day. After thorough deliberation, the ten of us from Hazaribagh decided to leave before we die of hunger instead of the virus. If I were to die, I would prefer to die at home. I was left with Rs. 4,000 after spending a portion of the earnings on food during the lockdown. We were all in a similar predicament. The wisest decision was to purchase bicycles from the remainder of the savings and begin our journey.

On 2nd May at midnight, we began riding our bikes. The sun was excruciating in the daytime, we had planned to cycle in the evening and morning hours and rest under shade through the afternoon. We covered 40 - 50 km from midnight to 10 am by cycling continuously. This was the routine for the next fifteen days.

Food was irregular. Every 10 km or so, we would possibly get a banana, not a proper meal. The restaurant staff would chase us away if we attempted to request for some food regardless of whether we paid or not. In Andhra Pradesh, a policeman stopped us and gave Rs. 2 biscuits for the fourteen of us. We were able to convince him to organise us one proper meal as we had been starving for days. He said, "You can eat at a restaurant 10 km ahead," he had contacted the owner. We sat and ate. We presumed the meal was free, however, the owner asked us to pay at the end. I spent my last dime on this cycle, there was nothing else to give. We offered our only

possession, and after a few minutes, he admitted our struggle and we continued our ride. There were numerous incidents concerning food. No stranger was comfortable allowing us inside their property. The decision to ride bicycles instead of public transport was solely based on avoiding contamination. The Odisha police lured us by offering food but instead lathi charged us and abused us. We tried to abandon our bicycles and run, nevertheless, they allowed us to take our rides and leave.

At reaching the Jharkhand border, we were relieved. There was a sense of safety. On the route, the villagers from Tatanagar were hostile threatening to call the police. We further pushed for them to call the police, hoping, perhaps they could assist us. I was checked at the quarantine centre in Gola, Jharkhand, followed by self-quarantine for the next fourteen days. The 'Mukhiya', 'Sarpanch', and other villagers were not troubled about the spread of the disease. I decided to isolate in a partially constructed room on our land for fifteen days.

Interviewer: *How has the virus impacted your lifestyle?*

Dharmendra Mahto: *I left for Andhra earlier this year, but I've been working outside for six years now. My parents aged taking care of me and my siblings. It was after finishing my 10th grade I was obliged to support my father along with my older brother.*

I worked for a small organisation that owned three vehicles for hire. I would be responsible for transporting from and to the mines. I first arrived with others from the village as a helper earning Rs.4,000. I concluded it would be higher waged if I worked directly avoiding all middlemen. I was able to bring in Rs. 8,000 to Rs. 10,000 depending on the requirement for the month.

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My family has counted on the one-and-a-half-acre land for a year now. Once a year, my father can harvest grain and during fitting season, potatoes. The crop is sold for oil and masala, and a portion of it for personal consumption. The fifteen of us can manage on Rs. 6,000 per month, however, I am not too sure about that.

Rajesh Kumar was the next person we met. He gave all his money for the bus ride – the sum of ₹ 4,000. He didn't have food for 24 hours. That's when he sold his phone to buy some food. He walked from Andhra Pradesh to Maharashtra. He then found a bus that was taking people from Maharashtra to Jharkhand. At one point in the bus, he was so thirsty that he bought a bottle of water with MRP 20 for ₹ 40. Finally, he reached Gola after a few days and then to his village. He home-quarantined for fourteen days. He added that the reason he had gone to Andhra Pradesh was to earn a living for his family but instead he had to ask his wife to take money from a self-help group she was a part of and send it to him so he could return to her.



Rajesh Kumar returned to Indra Reddy Nagar, Telangana on 17th March to resume his driving work. He was able to work for two days as the lockdown was implemented on the third. The contractor agreed to pay the amount it takes for him to reach home, however, he delayed it one day at a time, and two months on the whole; Rajesh was forced to borrow from his wife's self-help group. With the money, he and others from the village began their journey on foot.

Interviewer: *What was your first reaction to the virus? How did you adapt to the new lifestyle?*

Rajesh Kumar: *I came back to Jharkhand on 10th March to visit the family. I returned to Telangana on the 17th and resumed my work there. Two days later, the 'Janta Curfew' was announced followed by the lockdown. The contractor suggested the work would resume on the 29th March; on 29th March, he again asked us to continue wait-*

ing here as the work would resume on 15th April. According to him, police approval was required to drive without any unwanted trouble.

The virus continued to spread rapidly, and I was stranded with 7 others in a make-shift home. Neighbourhood shops refused to let us purchase items and imposed we isolate ourselves. The landlord provided with housing, but the second meal of the day was never assured. I slept early instead. The seven of us shared our struggle and need for money with the contractor; he agreed to pay our due the next day. The next day, he proposed another date. This lasted two months. None of us were compensated for the days we were told to wait in case work resumes.

My wife borrowed Rs. 6,000 from the 'Mahila Samiti' and transferred it to my bank account. Others too were able to gather necessary funds and begin our walk home.

Interviewer: *How was your journey back? What were the difficulties you experienced? Were you provided with any assistance?*

Rajesh Kumar: *The thirty-four of us left on the 8th of June for the 1,400k.m. journey at 6 p.m. covering 200k.m. in 12 hours. There were commercial vehicles we rented for parts of the walk. Prior to our departure, we contacted the Hazaribagh Police Station who noted our 'Aadhar card' details, and eased the walk with bus rides. We paid Rs. 2,000 on entering and another Rs. 4,000 was demanded before leaving Maharashtra.*

There was a hotel in Chandrapur, Maharashtra that agreed to provide us food for Rs. 80 per person. It was just dal and rice. From Maharashtra, we reached Andhra Pradesh on the same bus. The border authorities checked our temperature, sprayed disinfectant on all of us along with the bus seats, and allowed us to proceed with

our journey. I was hungry for the twenty-four hours we spent at the border. I only had Rs. 6,000, I spent it all on the bus ride. I sold my small 'Jio' phone at the Andhra border for Rs. 600; I had to buy food.

The bus broke down multiple times leading the 34 of us to push till it starts functioning again; shopkeepers did not let us purchase food or water, nor did anyone offer any of it. One of the break downs was a flat tire. While the driver arranged for a replacement wheel, we searched for food and water. Two kilometers down the road, a shopkeeper charged us Rs. 40 for a 1l bottle. The next two nights there was no food.

We contacted all necessary authorities in Jharkhand, provided all the details they requested, received assurance of a safe ride back home for the 34 of us, yet nothing was provided. Even during the two months in Telangana, no ration or money was given.

40 km before Ranchi, the police diverted us, forcing us to take the 300 km route instead. I slept hungry another night. Later, we arrived at the quarantine centre, were checked, and asked to leave. Some were picked-up on bikes from the village, I walked 10 km home. No one told me to quarantine, I stayed in a small room for 14 days next to the house. My family provided the food.

Interviewer: *How are you adjusting to the situation at home?*

Rajesh Kumar: *I have a mother, sister, a brother, my wife, a two-year-old girl, and a three-year-old boy. Our monthly expenses depend on the situation, although on average we can manage in Rs. 5,000. Recently, my wife had a medical expense of Rs. 50,000; I used the savings I had for my sister's marriage. I will now have to reclaim the amount and plan a different wedding. I own less than half an acre of land; I harvest rice there for*

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consumption and sale. My younger brother often works as a driver and helps the family when needed. My income in Telangana would be Rs. 20,000 a month, I'd send Rs. 15,000 back home and keep Rs. 5,000 for personal expenses.

I had to reduce my expenses to one-third of what it used to be. Coronavirus is likely to spread more, the contamination by touch terrifies me. If I were to return, I'd be risking my life. I want to be paid my dues before I return. I am aware that I can be infected in the village itself, but if I were to die, I prefer to die at home. This disease has no cure. I know a damaged kidney can be replaced, but not this disease.

I have no expectations from the government. They assured numerous facilities to assure safety; it was all a lie. I am more secure here with my family, there is no stress.

Meeting the people of Jharkhand was different to those in UP and Bihar. The people of Jharkhand narrated their tales of agony in a calmer way, probably because their experiences were better in terms of management of the crisis.

DAY TWELVE: 23RD JUNE 2020

The village environment in Hesatu was very pleasant. As I followed Pankaj Munda into his home compound with a camera, his entire family came out and looked suspiciously. They asked me why I was making a video and as I explained that we're documenting the lives of migrants and doing a research on them they understood and said, "Yes, he has come from very far. Please sit, we will tell you everything." The conversation started with Pankaj Munda but as he was hesitating, everyone else joined in.

His aunt came to talk when he was hesitant. She said that his mother had passed away when he was only 6 years old. His father also doesn't keep well and his grandmother has now grown very old. So, he had to leave his house at the age of 16 to earn money for the family.

This extended family lives together. The grandmother, her two kids, their wives and her grandkids. He used to earn about ₹ 10,000 per month in Tamil nadu. His own expenses were of food (₹ 2,000) and he used to send the rest of the money back home.

His aunt knows about Corona that, "the person falls sick and then dies. There are some symptoms like dizziness, fever and

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cough but in the end the person dies.” She added, however, that the solution is not to live in fear. The solution is to work as usual, take precautions and continue their lives. She said if that is not done there won’t be enough money to eat.

He found it very hard to speak. He kept hesitating. His aunt came to the rescue again, “He hasn’t gone out so much so he’s hesitating; we’ll call his companions who had taken him. They will speak well.”

Deepak and Govind joined in. They had all come back together. They had all filled in a form at the local police station to go back to Jharkhand. While work had restarted, they still decided to leave because the employers weren’t paying them even then.

She said that his mother had passed away when he was only 6 years old. His father also doesn’t keep well and his grandmother has now grown very old. So, he had to leave his house at the age of 16 to earn money for the family.

A few days after the work had restarted, they got a call from the police station, their tickets and passes were ready. They walked to the police station and got their passes and tickets and then a bus was provided for them to go to the railway station. The journey was peaceful; they reached Ranchi and were tested there. Then they organised a bus to Angada. When they came to the outskirts of the village, they were stopped by the Mukhiya (village headman) and asked to quarantine at the Panchayat Bhawan. There was no bathroom or toilet so they had to go in the open for it.



Pankaj Munda is a 17-year-old who works as a daily wage labourer in Tamil Nadu. He left with his uncle as his father was ill; his mother had passed away and he had to bear the financial responsibility. This was the first time Pankaj went out for work and he was stranded for three months without any income. Growing tired of surviving with the bare minimum, he decided to return to Jharkhand.

Interviewer: *What was your reaction to the lockdown? Share the details of your following days in Coimbatore.*

Pankaj Munda: *I left for work after studying till 9th grade as my aunt could not continue taking care of me; she had her children to attend to. My mother passed away when I was six and my father has been ill since. There was a financial responsibility on me. Hence, I went out to work with which, my uncle helped. He got me a job at the same plant where he works, doing rod work earning Rs. 10,000 a month. I saved Rs. 8,000 to send home and my own expenditures would require Rs. 2,000. The housing was provided by the contractor for me and others from Jharkhand. Since I use a smartphone, I heard of the virus on the news. I only*

use YouTube on the device. My company was shut abruptly and I realized, I am not cognizant of the severity of this virus. After the lockdown, I waited there for two months without any earnings.

Deepak: *The Mukhiya and ward members called us as the spread was increasing. Our employer suggested we wait for work to restart; however, we did not want to work anymore. We registered at the local police station and waited for a response. On the day of the departure, we walked to the police station to board the train to Bokaro. First, they checked us at the railway station, followed by food and we finally departed. The food was given when the train stopped at a major railway station. We got off in Bokaro and were sent here on a bus.*

Upon arrival, the Mukhiya took us to the Panchayat Bhawan, and we quarantined there for the next 14 days. There were some issues that I faced, such as, no provision of a toilet. We went to a nearby lake where people asked us to leave, and we could not go to the quarantine centre, nor our homes. I requested the Mukhiya to organise a toilet and some water for us. In the beginning, we were given 7 kg rice, 1 kg oil by the Mukhiya for food during the quarantine.

Interviewer: *How has your lifestyle been altered?*

Deepak: *Since then, there has not been any work. I will not think about returning; they refused to compensate me for the three months I wasted there, why will I go back? Instead, we will look for local work opportunities. I am not scared of the virus; I think the necessary precautions will protect me. I only know what I see on the news.*



After meeting a few more people in the village we returned to Ranchi and planned our visit to some administrative departments of the district to get an understanding of what they had planned in view of the crisis.

DAY THIRTEEN: 24TH JUNE 2020

The District Collector of Ranchi agreed to meet us today and we believed that getting the view of the administration on this would be very helpful for our research. They were the ones behind the show, trying to manage the crisis the best they could. DC Mahimapat Rai welcomed us into the room with a smile and soon we kicked off the conversation.

He said that during the crisis, they were asked by the Chief Minister to give special attention to the migrants and ensure that they are taken care of. In Ranchi district, the DC said he looked at the problem in two steps, the first was to provide immediate relief to them as they had reached the district after a lot of struggle and strife and the second would be to ultimately find and create long term livelihood opportunities for them.

He added, “The leadership provided has been commendable. Our CM leads from the front. Everyone was given a mandate to bring the migrants home safely and help them in the long term.” He believed that the more foresight leaders showed, the better their regions performed and this according to him was the reason Jharkhand and Ranchi were not struggling as much as some other states.



MAHIMAPAT RAI

Hometown: Ranchi, Jharkhand

Occupation: Deputy Commissioner

Interviewer: *How has the pandemic enforced change in Jharkhand?*

DC Mahimapat: *I think life has been altered without any warning for the most and not for the better since March 2020. The daily wage earners and migrant labourers have suffered the full extent of consequences from the lockdown. I cannot comment on the state of Jharkhand but as for the district of Ranchi I am responsible for, the primary learnings have been how proactively we can respond and how effectively can policies be revised for the crisis.*

Our first case was reported on the 31st of March, yet by the 25th of March, a Covid-19 hospital was set-up. We have been ahead of the curve with regard to the available medical infrastructure and also when it comes to contact tracing including other precautionary measures. With constant reinventing, we have provided aid to the migrant labourers and food through volunteer groups.

A large number of trains from Telangana arrived first in Ranchi with a herd of migrants. There were three factors to be attended to: to ameliorate their pain, to ensure relief aid and to provide sustainable livelihood opportunities to circumvent the need to leave. The districts and the state were nimble to free up resources and build infrastructure since the number of cases were rising. Ranchi happened to be one of the first to have a Covid-19 high-risk nephrology centre for dialysis patients from containment zones. Despite all actions taken, the limitations with the facilities are inevitable. As you might have noticed, the metropolitan cities have been overwhelmed with the current state of infrastructure and it does not bode well for us. Our only way to withstand the situation is to trace the contact effectively.

I think all disasters impact and change the way governance structures operate. A crisis of this magnitude is unprecedented. In some cases, there have been specific institutions created overnight to be able to cater the demands. It is vital to have a fluidic government structure to adapt to the situation.

Interviewer: *How is the preparedness of a state like Jharkhand different? Were there any challenges on a bureaucratic or political level? If yes, how did you attend to them?*

DC Mahapat: *One of the primary aspects that have made a difference in the leadership provided by the state executive is in*

the sense of the honourable Chief Minister who has led the fight from the front. Whether it is looking at migrant issues —ensuring the trains arrive, verifying that all Deputy Commissioners across the state have received the mandate to monitor the safety of every migrant, give a certain amount of relief and focus on long-term rehabilitation.

I am not aware of the political angle, however, from a bureaucratic level, the foresight of the leaders will be more suitable for the states when compared to others like us who did not grasp the severity till later.

In Ranchi, the older population is more vulnerable for which we launched volunteer support and a senior citizen helpline that recorded phenomenal success with providing relief and a sense of solace for having someone to reach out to. Ranchi was also the first to launch 'Bachpan Bachao' helpline— a child-abuse helpline that set a model for the country. Our immediate action had allowed us to focus more on our citizens.

Interviewer: *What is the state of digital intervention in Jharkhand since the pandemic?*

DC Mahimapat: *Ever since the shift to digital space, whether it be for education, work or just socializing, people have gotten impetus to avoid contamination. I am hoping Jharkhand can leverage this and circumvent with these advantages. I believe it is too early to conclude a future. The main task on hand is to stay safe and mitigate the effects of Covid-19 virus, whether it be at a migrant level or at an institutional or an economic level.*

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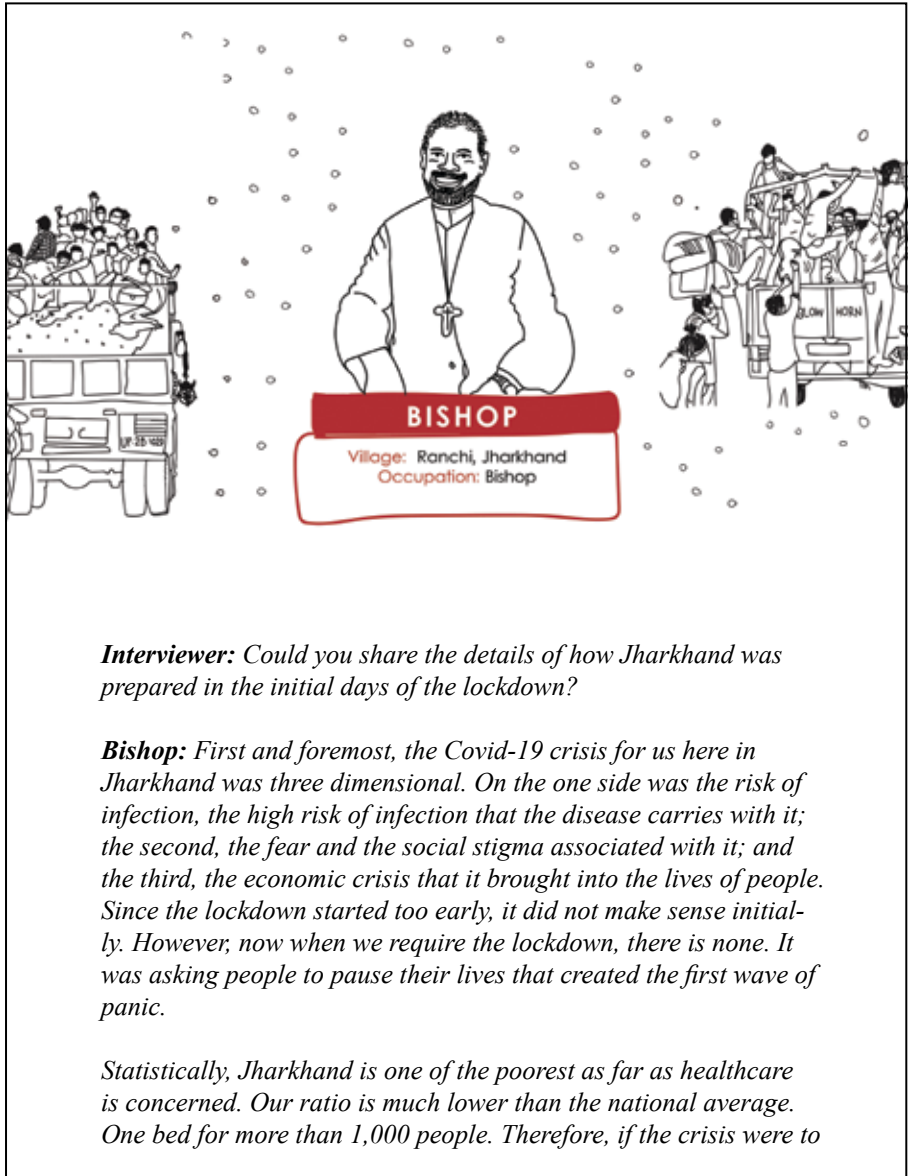
Speaking to the administration helped us get a better understanding of the crisis, especially in the district of Ranchi. The administration created a “tatpar helpline” especially for migrants; they could call on the helpline and within an hour they would be picked up and taken to a relief camp in Ranchi from where transport would be arranged for them to go to their respective states, districts or villages.

In fact, the Ranchi administration claims that because of how well they were managing the crisis, truck drivers and other informal transportation services that the migrants used to return to their homes actually would drop them in the Ranchi district as this ensured they would reach home safely. They were kept in Khelgaon for a day from where they would be sent to their respective villages. 86% of the migrants left within a day.

The administration added that many of these things were made possible because of efforts from civil society organizations and the catholic church that set up shelter homes in 14 locations across the district. We were also put in touch with the Bishop of Ranchi and a conversation with him helped us get another perspective. “These people were not beggars; they feel ashamed that they have to ask for something,” he said. He then gave an example, “I met a family who was sitting on the road, I would pass them on my way to the distribution centre and I saw them every day for four days so on the fifth day I stopped and asked them why they were there.

They said that they didn’t have any money left and they had to go to Odisha. They were hoping someone would sympathise and take them for free but unfortunately all the buses and trucks that passed were asking for money. I gave him some money and he lowered his eyes and took it, adding that he feels extremely bad that he is having to do this. If not for his family, he wouldn’t have taken the money”.

The bishop was extremely disappointed at the way the whole Covid-19 crisis was managed. “You can’t expect labourers to ‘work from home’; there should have been some amount of foresight and planning. But no, just lock everyone and everything down. These people don’t look at the consequences of their actions.”



Interviewer: *Could you share the details of how Jharkhand was prepared in the initial days of the lockdown?*

Bishop: *First and foremost, the Covid-19 crisis for us here in Jharkhand was three dimensional. On the one side was the risk of infection, the high risk of infection that the disease carries with it; the second, the fear and the social stigma associated with it; and the third, the economic crisis that it brought into the lives of people. Since the lockdown started too early, it did not make sense initially. However, now when we require the lockdown, there is none. It was asking people to pause their lives that created the first wave of panic.*

Statistically, Jharkhand is one of the poorest as far as healthcare is concerned. Our ratio is much lower than the national average. One bed for more than 1,000 people. Therefore, if the crisis were to

hit us, we would not be prepared at all, even today. I am absolutely certain about that. Although, we were prepared at a different level; as the community relationships are strong allowing to aid each other when in need. With regard to the economic crisis, we noticed all migrants were helped by their relatives. In addition, we were not prepared for the psychological aspects of the crisis because of the political climate at the time. For example, when a migrant came to Kalari from the border near Hazaribag, the villagers would not accept him so he ended up in our shelter, in spite of having his whole family at home.

When the migrant crisis hit the West, we approached the Chief Minister and the Deputy Commissioner -- Mahimapat Rai to offer our assistance. As a community, we offered the Mandal Hospital, the schools or any other infrastructure need that they may have before the migrant crisis, on the 21st of March. On the 29th of March, the Deputy Commissioner said, "Bishop, we are expecting 4,000 - 8,000 people who need to be sheltered, would you take care of that?" Since we offered the space, the religious leaders had a small meeting after taking appropriate permissions. It was then we decided not to let the virus frighten us, instead, we chose to take care of our people wherever they come from. Fourteen schools were chosen tactically on the borders of Ranchi district as any individual arriving or departing could shelter themselves without risking the whole village. There was a separate list for quarantine while this remained an isolating shelter. There were 100s arriving at all hours, 2 am, 4 am, and I, along with others, personally visiting from shelter to shelter to ensure every person was attended to. With a total of fourteen shelters, each shelter stocked food for a hundred people. This allowed us to house 1,400 individuals within a day.

The DC and other government authorities discussed the budget

with us and assured what was needed, will be provided. The budget demanded Rs. 68 lakhs for all resources combined, however, there were barely any funds coming in, the DC too was helpless. NGOs gave what they promised, there were donations from CSR, yet the PM Cares Fund was not distributed to or for the people here. I assured the DC we will look after our people with our funds. Every religious congregation here contributed and none of them asked for money in return. We ran two shelters from our Diocese and when others came to know about our work, they too donated generously. Without a problem, we provided those who returned with mats, buckets, mugs, plates, glasses and a proper meal. I did not wish to treat these individuals as beggars, they have dignity! Nor did we bother about how much the expenditure is. I said, God will give us what we need, we don't need to worry about that, that's the way we moved ahead. Not a single rupee was taken from the government for any of our services –the mats, the ration, the kitchen or the PPE kits. The church has done it on its own as a service of love and if another crisis were to come, we will not be able to do anything because we have almost spent our entire savings. It is the first of its kind that I have seen in my lifetime. Arch Diocese Church used Rs. 45 lakhs of its savings. We gave ration to almost 6,000 families in fifteen days.

Interviewer: *What were the challenges you experienced?*

Bishop: *At first there was the psychological shock on those arriving from around the country and our volunteers. There were large number of individuals entering the centre after being in the train for the past two days or so without any food. The children pleaded, "give us something, sir, give us something". The sister's tried to rummage whatever they could. In the next few days, we observed people arriving in trucks. With the help of the youth, we distributed 60,000 packets of flat rice, jaggery, fruit juice, 1L water bottles and fruits on the side of the road. Their desperation was obvious. As they would gather in large numbers, the policemen*

would ring the alarm causing panic, and the people would snatch and run.

The second battle was the fear upon arrival. I can proudly claim my volunteers and other helpers were never frightened. I went without a mask, but I know God will take care of me. The district administration gave us many instructions and rightly so, it was their duty. However, how am I to follow social distancing while serving the food. In addition to all this, the villagers feared entry of strangers into the vicinity. So, they blocked the roads with trees which forced us to take a longer routes while distributing ration.

The third challenge were the initiatives by the central government. They were rather broad with less focus on ground reality. The policemen constantly questioned the vehicles transporting individuals and demanded entry. The District administration too was told not to give curfew passes to too many vehicles as the meaning of lockdown would be reduced to irrelevant. These were the primary challenges along with others that I will not speak of, created by the central government.

This is an economic crisis which will transform into a social crisis which will be worse. The economic crisis is about money and it's only getting worse. I am visiting a village named Digya tomorrow where people are eating leaves for survival. The government remains in denial, yet that does not change the situation. The village relied by selling forest produce, and since the economic crisis is getting aggravated, there are robberies. The families are stressed. Now is a time where no one can manage and therefore the strain is on each earning member. The social fabric is breaking due to the economic crisis in the modern world and if appropriate measures are not taken, the social crisis will further worsen.

I believe an alternate approach would have prepared us better for the crisis. First, the central government should have coordinated with the states, instead of publicly announcing the lockdown without informing the state authorities. Second, if there were no migrations, individuals would not have to move clandestinely. Third, the lack of predictability in the decision making. This is a huge crisis, a humanitarian crisis, an economic crisis, and yet, the livelihood of the people was ignored! What is evident is that people lost their jobs and the migrants had nowhere to go. I say all of this from the reality I noticed in Ranchi. Allowing migrants to continue their work with testing would have resolved a large portion of the crisis.

I personally believe, the message by the media is – Covid-19 means death; the first message is the last message. Most people do not know what Covid-19 is. In a nation like India, you cannot socially distance throughout. I function on a religious principle, that is applicable in a sociological perspective too – do not make rules you cannot adhere to. Furthermore, the curse of social media spreading fake information and inviting fake remedies is deepening the phobia of the virus in many.

Interviewer: *How do you think the pandemic has altered the livelihood of the people?*

Bishop: *The only reason a migrant labourer leaves is for higher earnings. On the other hand, these individuals realised they were used as tools in a manufacturing cycle. For example, one of the factories here, I wouldn't like to mention the name, brought 31 people and kept them outside my shelter here at about 10 pm. They were young boys, and some of them were minors who were working for the factory owners. I saw them shivering outside as it had rained that day. The Sister's refused to bring them in as they had not been through the screening process, yet, I brought them in to a corner*

and gave them food. The attitude of the migrants had changed; most said, "Sir, If I have to die, I'd rather die with my people."

This was due to the fear created on social media. It is not a deadly virus, it is a normal flu. The percentage of people dying is the same as a normal flu. In fact, the infection rate of this disease is lesser than SARS because that spreads through the air while this does not. It is not as deadly as it is made out to be. And I repeat this, it is a sort of a social media creation. For the first time we have seen daily numbers being given for a disease. What is the need for that? We have different kinds of villagers. First, there are the daily wage labourers who have not earned since the beginning of the lockdown, the farmers and small-land owners that are not being allowed to sell their product in addition to unseasonal rain and people without ration cards, and widows who have no other source of income. Second, the villagers who fear the virus but do not follow the social distancing protocol. The third was the tribal mentality — things will pass, take it easy.

I think social relationships have broken because of digital media, I am speaking from a sociological perspective. Second, you want to buy something, I have to call our digital promoters to sit in one of our villages. Try and buy something from Amazon, after a few minutes, few seconds your internet connection breaks and you start all over again. Third, you have not given education to people and now you ask them to go digital. The middlemen do this digital business, charge these people; it's worse than cheating. Rajiv Gandhi was very wise in this when he brought the computers, I remember I was still a child. He said make sure that the computerization does not throw our people out of their jobs. A country like India cannot afford digitalization and I repeat, we cannot afford digitalization because of our labour market. The future seems uncertain not just because nobody knows what is going to happen, but worse, nobody has a plan! There is an immediate need of healthcare in India and without it, we are doomed.

I realized that the response to the migrant crisis was prompt and positive in Jharkhand because of which the people that we met were calmer and still had hope, unlike the people of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar who were feeling disgruntled and hopeless.

DAY FOURTEEN: 25TH JUNE 2020

We left for Delhi on the 25th of June, this was the end of our journey.

CONCLUSION

Many believe the migrant crisis to be a thing of the past, something that happened in the months of April and May 2020 because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The fact however is that the migrant crisis did not start in April 2020 nor did it end in June 2020, it has existed for centuries and seeing the way society has been moving forward, it probably will remain for centuries to come. The difference between the earlier times and today is that the rural population was much higher earlier and therefore most of the exploitation of labourers happened locally. As urbanization increased, the people with less land or no land became migrants who moved to cities in search of better employment opportunities and lesser exploitation from the landed people.

The cities gave them better wages and they settled in the cities and sent money back to their families. They were paid better than in the village however their rights were not acknowledged. Since these migrants were not permanent residents of their place of work,

they didn't have voting rights either so they remained largely politically unrepresented too. Exploitation of the workers takes place regularly however they remain in cities because they know that the place they come from is no better. What Covid-19 has done is triggered the migrant crisis to boil over and now everyone has started to take notice of the sheer number of migrant workers that worked in their cities. The people who built the buildings we live in, who drive the cars we sit in, who clean our houses, all of them have been kicked out and it is not the government alone who is to blame, it is us as a society, we have failed our fellow human beings! The least we could have done is made sure that those who depend on us are well taken care of. Instead, we stopped paying them and told them to take care of themselves.

The Covid-19 migrant crisis has had an impact on the migrants, but the perpetrators of this crisis are none other than you and me. "We did so much for them, served them, fed their children, took their dogs for walks, drove their cars, and see what they have done," these words were spoken by a person who had just loaded his entire family of twelve onto the back of a truck. These were his parting words, and these are my parting words as well.

DATA STORY

The Covid-19 lockdown led to large-scale unemployment, especially amongst people earning daily wages. The unemployment rate saw a sharp spike from 8% in March 2020 to 23.5% in April and May. This led to distress for 40 million migrant workers who were now stranded in urban centers without a source of income with their expenses increasing. Digital Empowerment Foundation did an ethnographic study on the migrant crisis in the month of June. Two team members travelled to the states of Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand to speak to migrant workers who had returned to their homes. They met 200 migrant workers from 17 villages in 4 states.

74% Employers Didn't pay

One of the reasons for the reverse migration was non-payment on the part of employers. The government asked employers to continue paying wages to their employees however 74% of the interviewees said their employers did not pay them anything since the lockdown was announced. Only 10% said they got sufficient help from their employers, the remaining 16% said the employers tried to help but it wasn't enough for them to survive and support their families.

Mohammad Arbaaz Khan from the village of Bhitirwa in the district of West Champaran in Bihar said “they were giving me food, but I had to support my family back home. They survive on the money I send them every month. How could I not return? I had to do something for them.” Hirawan Kumar from Dhanauji, Bihar said “the company would give me 1,000 rupees and take a picture, then once the picture was taken the money was taken away. This is the support we got.” In fact, Hirawan was also beaten up by his employers because he asked for the help of the district collector to return home and told her that he wasn't getting enough from his employer to continue staying there. Amit Kumar from the village of Bansa in the district of Barabanki in Uttar Pradesh expressed his disappointment with his employer “we are there for them always, we serve them day in and day out and when we were in trouble they refused to even listen to us. I am never going to go back to the same person.”

80% Landlords Didn't Waive the Rent

However, the employers were only one of the factors that pushed the migrant workers to leave the cities, the landlords were also strict with their demands. Ram Kripa Kumar from Gonauli, Bihar said “the landlord would cut the electricity supply or he wouldn’t start the motor that ensured we got water supply. He did all this so that I would pay him. But I had absolutely no money, what could I do?” His story was not very different to most of the other interviewees; 80% of them said their employers refused to waive the rent. In spite of these difficulties 63% of the interviewees still stayed for more than two months in anticipation of work restarting.

35% Migrants Travelled for More Than a Week to Reach Home

When they saw the number of cases rising and the subsequent lockdowns coming they realized this was a long haul and they could no longer continue. Pahlaj Patel from Bhitiarwa, Bihar said “I waited, I knew this virus was dangerous. But then the second lockdown was announced, then the third, then the fourth. When the fourth one was announced I decided to go home. And since there weren’t any transport services I cycled back home.” Dharmendra Mahto also went through a similar train of thought and finally decided to leave from Nellore, Andhra Pradesh on his cycle and made his way to his village Khakhra in Jharkhand, a staggering 1,600 kilometers away. The journey was extremely difficult; he chose to travel mostly at night to avoid the blistering heat. It took him eleven days to reach his village, he was part of the 35% interviewees who took longer than one week to reach their homes. In the age of airplanes that transport people across the world in less than 24 hours, these migrant workers took several days to travel within their own country to return to their homes from a land that they would now call cursed.

25% Experienced Police Brutality

The journey in itself was arduous but the police added to their problems; 25% of the migrant workers interviewed said they faced brutality from the police. Arjun Paswan was travelling back to his village Bhitirwa in Bihar through Uttar Pradesh when the police stopped him at various places, he said “we were stopped at four check posts, at two of them the police officers were understanding; they understood our plight and let us go through. However, at the other two check posts we were beaten up. One was especially bad, they beat us with lathis, we begged them to stop and let us go but they wouldn’t. They were just doing their duty though.

We broke lockdown rules so we were punished. And we had to break the rule otherwise we would die. So we did what we had to and the police did what they had to, I don’t blame them.”

45% Didn't Find a Government Quarantine Facility

The sudden lockdown had led to a lot of panic amongst people and 42% of those interviewed said they don't know anything about the virus and the other 58% believed they had a minimal amount of knowledge. Mohommad Aadil from Saidanpur, Uttar Pradesh said "I know what happens if you get the Coronavirus- you die." With limited information and a lot of fear, the migrants didn't want to infect their family members and neighbours so they wanted to quarantine. About 45% were not able to go into institutional quarantine because the facilities were unavailable; they then quarantined in a separate room at home. However, the 55% that did quarantine at a government facility did not have a pleasant experience. Harinder Paswan from Jogapatti, Bihar said "I got food twice a day, that is ok because we are used to that. But there wasn't any water. We went four days without water and that's when I protested. I along with other people at the quarantine center made noise and asked for water. Some government officials came and they started beating me up. They twisted my arm and it is still hurting, but it was worth it, I got water after that." Umesh Munda from Khakhra, Jharkhand also expressed his disappointment at the situation in his quarantine center "there was no cleanliness. There was one toilet for forty people and there weren't any cleaning facilities either. I asked them to give one broom for four people which would mean twenty brooms for the whole center. But they said they didn't have funds for it."

65% Haven't Found Any Employment

After finishing their quarantine, the migrant workers returned to their homes, happy to be with their families. But their happiness was short-lived. People migrate to cities in search of job opportunities to better their quality of life but the lockdown led them back to their villages that have fewer employment opportunities and this was evident in the study; 65% of the interviewees said they hadn't found any form of employment while 16% said they were able to earn some money by farming on their land. The remaining 19% said they found some labour work however it wasn't paying them enough. Harinder Paswan from Jogapatti, Bihar said "Now that I have come back there are few opportunities. The rate is 200 rupees per day but there is hardly any work. I have been home for a month and have found work on ten days, so just 2,000 rupees in one month as compared to the 25,000 I would earn outside."

50% Want to go Back

In spite of facing hardships at home 50% of the interviewees don't want to go back yet. Tijabul Ansari from Awaharshekh, Bihar said "I will not go back until we find a cure for the virus. I don't want to go through the problems I faced while I was in Jammu and even on the way back. I will wait, even if it takes a year." Tijabul was fearful of what was to come but that was not the only factor, Niyaz from Bansa, Uttar Pradesh said "I will never go back. I don't want to be mistreated and my employers whom I served like family have broken my trust. I can't go back now." Pain was another major factor. But the other half of the interviewees wished to go back as soon as things start to reopen. Kamlesh Kumar from Bhitariwa, Bihar said "How will my family survive if I don't go back? Everyone is scared of the virus, even I am. But if I stay fearful my family will go hungry, so I must go back."

Conclusion: The Way Forward

Digital Empowerment Foundation is using this research to make policy changes in their projects in rural India. With a network of 10,000 people across 2,000 locations, DEF will implement programs for the benefit of people who have returned home from the cities. A few steps that will be taken are to enable them with digital skills to increase their employability and also spread awareness amongst them about the various programs that the government has put in place for them. This will add to their skill set and make them aware of their rights and entitlements so if they return to the cities they will be in a position to demand what they deserve, not only from the government but also their employers. Nearly 81% of those employed in India are in the informal sector, the aim of this program will be to raise awareness amongst them about their rights as employees and also as citizens of this country.

CENTRE FOR DEVELOPMENT POLICY AND PRACTICE (CDPP)

The Centre for Development Policy and Practice (CDPP) is a research institute that works on development concerns and contemporary public policy challenges. Working with a team of research professionals and expert consultants, under the guidance of eminent public intellectuals, CDPP conducts research studies, develops policy papers, publishes a peer reviewed quarterly Journal and hosts Conferences, Seminars and Workshops.

DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT FOUNDATION

Founded in 2002, Digital Empowerment Foundation has been working to empower marginalised and unconnected communities living at the edge of information by enabling them with digital capacity, access and rights across the pillars of education and entertainment, livelihood and finance, health and agriculture, culture and heritage, with a special focus on digital rights for women and adolescents. With a 10,000 strong cadre of digital foot soldiers across India, DEF has interventions in 2,000 locations in 135 districts across 24 states in India.

