

## **Covid-19 and Migrant Labour: Report from Khariar**

**Ajit Panda**

Thousands of migrant workers have started returning to their villages in Nuapada and other districts of Odisha even as India entered a lockdown to counter the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. As per government information, the number of migrant workers till now is about 4000. This large-scale reverse migration has sparked fears among villagers in Nuapada — a district that has above thirty thousands of migrant workers in metropolitan cities and other urban areas — that workers may also bring back the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) infection to villages. Villagers in every village demanded health check-ups for the workers to find out if they carried the virus infection. This fear was compounded by the fact that the mechanisms to accurately observe the exact numbers of those returning were either inadequate or not in place, at the district or block level.

Around 50 migrant workers returned to Liad village in the district's Sinapali block from Mumbai, Chennai and places in Telangana on March 23 and March 24. The gram panchayat office at Makhapadar village was made aware of the arrival of 38 migrant workers. The rest, however, did not inform local authorities of their return. Around eight workers suffered from cough and cold, according to the village head (sarpanch). Tension prevailed in the village after the sarpanch called for the shelter of the workers in a school, a move opposed by residents of a Dalit colony located near it. The workers were forced to stay near a river overnight until their health check-up was conducted at a community health center nearby. They returned to their homes after the check-up. Most of the labourers were employed in the construction sector, while two had fled from a brick kiln they were working in.

The residents of Badi village in the district's Khariar block feared the spread of the disease after one migrant worker returned to his home there. The villagers informed the block administration and the local MLA, after which an anganwadi worker gave the worker a clean bill of health, pacifying villagers.

Around 16 workers returned to their villages under Gudal panchayat. A team from the Sinapali community health centre, along with ASHA workers, conducted a check-up of 12 workers and found them safe. The rest, however, were unaccounted for. A total of 40 migrant workers returned to their villages under Komna and Bhela panchayats from Mumbai, Delhi, Raipur, Chennai, etc. All were found to not be carriers of the virus, after health check-ups. The district police said the return of workers from outside the state had stopped ever since the borders of the district — which is next to Chhattisgarh — were sealed on March 21.

Labourers working in Chhattisgarh capital Raipur, however, continued to arrive clandestinely. People got down near the border from private vehicles and crossed it by walking, according to villagers in the district. This happened despite a ban on public transport

as a lockdown measure. Most of the workers belonging to the villages of Sinapali block preferred a route that ran from Manipur to Sinapali to avoid surveillance. Many other construction workers from the Nuapada district, who were working in Mumbai, consulted their family members on returning. Family members, however, advised them to stay back.

Kailash Nag from Amguda village of Nuapada districts one such migrant worker, who along with other 83 workers of Odisha (79 from Nuapada, 3 Koraput, 1 Kalahandi and 1 from Balangir) are stranded in different places of Chennai. Kailash informed me in the first week of April that the workers were not getting any food after the lockdown was declared. “We



have exhausted all the stocks that we had purchased before the lockdown was announced. Now we are in distress” he had informed over the phone to me.



Likewise; 19 workers of Nuapada and Kalahandi District stranded in Worli West, Mumbai reported that the contractor had given them ₹.500/- each, whatever ration they had was exhausted within a week.

We had tweeted about the distress conditions of these workers, which was taken up at the government level in Odisha. The workers were provided with food and ration, which helped them manage two weeks.

#### **Migrant workers stranded in Khariar:**

Above 300 peddlers are now stranded at Khariar of Nuapada dist, Odisha. They are from Saharanpur and Muzaffarnagar (UP) (33 workers) and 250 persons (with their families



including children) from three districts of Madhya Pradesh. A few are also from Nuapada district, who returned in the first week of April and have been kept in quarantine.

The workers (250 people) from MP were staying in temporary camps (Tents) near Khariar Autonomous College. They have shifted to the ITI hostel three days ago. Khariar NAC has made provisions for their food and lodging. The workers are insisting that they should be allowed to go.

#### **Status of daily wage earners:**

DhanurjaMajhi and BidyadharNaik of Lachhipur village in Nuapada district are daily wage earners. By working in tractors, they used to earn Rs.200 on an average per day."If the lockdown due to corona outbreak continues for long, we will be in trouble," they say. They have not yet got the advance three-month rice under NFSA, not even Rs.1,000 assured by the Government for ration cardholders. "Still, we have to manage with our existing stocks," says Bidyadhar.He says that rice is not a problem. "Because in addition to the rice provided under NFSA, I also have additional stock of 150 kg of rice that I got from sharecropping. However, Dhanurja is worried because his wife was in the advance stage of pregnancy during the last Kharif and now they have a child that did not allow her to do wage work. "I hope the shutdown will end soon," says Dhanurja.RadheJued is a petty vegetable trader of Malpada hamlet of Mundosil village under Khariar block. He collects vegetables from farmers of the area and visits different weekly markets to sale those with a little margin of profit. He visits six markets in a week and earns four to five hundred rupees per day on an average. "The sale in Boden and Khaira markets is higher than all other haats. I earn about six to seven hundred rupees there" he says. In the last two weeks, I have lost at least Rs.8000/-" adds Radhe who has a family of five persons including his old parents. He has received 75 kgs (3-month quota in advance) of rice last week from PDS. He says that the monthly requirement of rice for his family is about 70 kg. "Things will be difficult for us after a month," says he. Radhe has one and a half acres of agricultural land, which he cultivates during Kharif. "I save a little amount

of my earning from vegetables selling every month to spend in agriculture and to meet other expenses like festivals and medicine etc. I have already spent my savings, I would have to take a loan to buy inputs to cultivate the land season," he further adds. These two cases explain the situation of hundreds of poor wage earners of Nuapada district.

ChupeswarRana is a Masson. His daily earning is Rs.350/-. As a large number of construction works are going on under PMAY, work is available regularly. "But the lockdown has forced me to stay indoors. I have a small family of four persons, the children are very small, so I can manage my existing stocks for a month. However, I will feel the impact during the rainy season when the construction works will stop" says he.

LokanathMajhi of Kusmal village of the district has a family of eight persons. "We depend on wage work. One of my sons, who was earning Rs.450/- per day as a painter in Mumbai has returned after the Corona outbreak. He was the major source of our sustenance", says Lokanath. Manoranjan, Lokanath's son says that he will return to his workplace again as soon as the Corona outbreak is over. The family spends around a hundred kgs of rice every month, but the stock they got from NFSA is 90 kg for three months. "Two of my sons have not yet been included in the ration card due to Aadhar problem I was planning for the marriage of my son this year, that's why Manoranjan left home to earn something, but this unknown disease has changed everything," said Saberi, wife of Lokanath.

Above one-third of the total 1.5 lakh, main workers in Nuapada District are seasonal migrants. As per the report of district administration, 3869 migrant labourers have returned to the district after the Corona outbreak. This is the figure collected by the ASHAs and Anganwadi workers. Most of the migrants are employed in Construction works and get paid on a daily wage basis. ASHAs are surveying to know the number of migrants working outside, who are about to return after the lockdown is over. The administration expects the number to be between fifteen to twenty thousand. It will be a big problem for these labourers, if employment opportunities are not available at this juncture.

These labourers would have returned home anyway at the beginning of the upcoming Kharif season, but their early return two and half months in advance would be a big problem if employment opportunities are not available at this juncture. The problem actually would be threefold.

- First, the families which were dependent on the migrant members for their sustenance would face food scarcity in the long run.
- Secondly, if there is no significant effort by the government for employment generation, it will affect the livelihood status of these migrants families, and
- Thirdly, there is a possibility of a significant reduction in investment in agriculture in the upcoming Kharif season if there is a lack of wage employment.

This can be better understood from the case of RadheJued, who cultivates about two acres of land of another farmer on a sharecropping basis. He spends at least Rs.15 thousands towards the cost of inputs for cultivating the two-acre land. Lockdown has already robbed him of his savings. The possibility of earning money to meet the expenses of Kharif operations seems to blink. I might be unable to do sharecropping this year" says Radhe.

### **Frontline workers:**

The role of community health workers assumes special significance in s district like Nuapada in the context of covid-19. When KamlaTandi, an anganwadi worker of Mundosil village, got to know that coronavirus is gripping various states, chills ran down her spine. Soon, she heard that 15 youths who had migrated to Mumbai in January last year had returned to the village. Fearing that the youths might have contracted the disease, Tandi rushed to their houses accompanied by Asha worker Subhashini Pan. "Thirteen of them are from Mundosil, while two are from the nearby Chachrabhata hamlet. We noted down their names and enquired about their health. Since one youth had a cold and was sneezing, we advised all of them to stay indoors," recalls Tandi. Their next step was to inform the village sarpanch and the community health centre (chc) at Khariar block.

The youths, however, did not abide by their advice. Tandi, who has been working at Mundosil for close to 30 years now, says, "We repeatedly requested them to stay isolated but their parents abused us saying the youths are in perfect health. We did not take it to heart. Doctors at the Community Health Centre have trained us on how to stay calm during such situations."

In neighbouring Badi village, migrant labourers have also returned home following the lockdown. "Though the youths are living in self-isolation, doctors have asked me to keep a tight vigil on them," says asha worker Janaki Sahu, adding that the village residents are strictly adhering to all preventive measures against coronavirus. Most have developed the habits of maintaining social distance and washing hands with soaps. "This is the result of awareness advertisements on television and our efforts to motivate them," says Janaki. However, she says, the paranoia against the disease is so strong that people have stopped taking bath in village ponds and canals fearing that it might spread through the water bodies.

The government now plans to keep the migrants, who will return after the lockdown is over, in quarantine. The Panchayats with the help of the ASHA and AWW is conducting the survey. "Each Panchayat will have about 150 to 200 such persons, there are 131 GPs in the district, so the total will be above 20,000," says AmareshPattnaik, Sarpanch of Pendrawan. "It will be a horrendous task for us to keep 200 people in quarantine for 14 days" adds pattnaik. He says that it is his duty as the Sarpanch to manage the situation. "This is the reason why Naveen Pattnaik has declared that the Sarpanch will have Collector power because he knows the officials would not be able to tackle the problem," said Pattnaik.

### **Support from local people and civil society groups:**



People in the society irrespective of class, caste and creeds are coming forward to put their efforts in the fight against Corona virus. It is even evident in a small and backward district like Nuapada. When some are contributing in terms of money to the PM care fund and Chief Minister Relief Fund, others are providing food to migrant workers stranded in different places of the district due to lockdown. Most encouraging is that the Self Help Groups (SHGs) of women, who are engaged in small businesses to earn their livelihood have come forward in large numbers to contribute towards the fight against Corona. SHGs from different parts of the district have contributed Rs.1.92 lakhs to the CM Relief Fund as support to fight COVID-19. One to two SHGs in each Panchayat have taken the responsibility to provide hot cooked meals to indigent and destitute people, who at present are above eleven thousand in number. The amount spent by the SHGs to meet the food expenses is being reimbursed on a regular basis by the district authority from the State Disaster Management Fund. One of the SHGs has made masks and distributed them to the people of their locality.

A good number of people and institutions like the block level Sarpanch Associations, Raja AT High School 1981 batch, Agrawal Samaj, Khariar Road, ChandrakarSamaj, Nuapada; private technical institution, KhariarVanik Sangha, Artists forums have also contributed to the CMRF and PM Care funds, which amounted to Rs. 20 lakh in total till 19 of April. Artists of NuapadaZillaChitraSilpi Sangha are making wall writings all over the district to enhance



awareness amongst people to fight Corona. Several other forums like KhadiyaMuktaBicharManch, a forum of intellectuals and Raja AT High School 92 batch warriors are engaged in distributing milk, bread, chuda and sujiupma as breakfast to above 550 migrants of UP, MP, Rajasthan, Chhatisgarhetc, who are stranded in Khariar town after lockdown. One youth club is providing food to street dogs. Two persons of Nuapada town have contributed about eleven thousand rupees to the CMRF and PM care fund by sewing and selling masks to town people. Such active involvement of people in the fight against COVID-19 has made the efforts of the district administration more fruitful.

### **The situation of Paharia tribe:**

SatrughanPaharia, 65 of Bendrabahal village under Khariar block is a bamboo basket weaver. Despite his old age, he makes six to eight baskets of different sizes every week and earns between Rs.200/- to 250/- by selling those in weekly haats located at Bargaon and Sanmaheswar villages. "This is the only source of my living, but due to lockdown, I am unable to sale my products these days. Had the government not given three months rice and pension in advance, I would have starved", says Satrughan.

DebriaPaharia, 65, has four members in his family. His son Abhiram migrated to a brick kiln in Secunderabad in mid-January. "He was forced to go there to repay a loan of about Rs.20 thousand incurred for the surgery of his wife in the district hospital. The doctors said that the baby was dead in the womb," says Debria. The family got 60 kgs rice in advance for three months and Debria got Rs.2000/- as four months advance old-age pension, which brought great succour for them. "We cook two kg rice every day and the stock provided by the government in advance will help us manage till the end of this month, but what after that," asks Debria. "We are unable to fetch bamboo due to lockdown, not able to produce things. It will be difficult for us to manage after two weeks when our food stocks are exhausted" adds he.

Rupkanti, 45 has a family of six members. Her husband is unable to work because of a health problem. "He has not yet fully recovered from the kidney element, thus the burden of managing the family falls upon me and my daughter", says Rupkanti. She had produced ten "Kurli" (small baskets) earlier this month but could not sale those as the lockdown was a declaration. Laxmi, the 18-year daughter of Rupkanti is working in a brick kiln in Andhra Pradesh. She took ₹.30 thousand from the labour Sardar in advance and spent the amount for treatment of her father. The only succour for the family now is the rice provided under NFSA. "We have heard that government will give Rs.1000/- to each ration card holder, it will

be a great help for us during the lockdown, but we need employment opportunities after that," says Rupkanti.



For most of the Paharia artisans the story is similar. The earning from basket weaving is meager, the advance allotment of rice under NFSA and SFSS has assured most of the food at least for three weeks, but for all of them, the question is how would they manage after a month, when the rice they have got in advance is exhausted.

Bamboo is no more available in nearby forests. Most of the Paharias buy that from farmers at Rs.60/- per piece. "My weekly requirement is 3 bamboos for which I spend Rs.180/-, you calculate what I get" explained Satrugan. "It is between two to three hundred per week. In case of an emergency, things become extremely difficult for us, forcing our sons and daughters to migrate to distant places," adds Rupkanti. According to these artisans, the real impact of lockdown will be felt after the lockdown is over. The Paharia tribes of Nuapada District, who eke out their living from basket weaving are the worst affected people during the lockdown. Their main source of living is weaving and selling bamboo baskets. The price of different items they produce ranges from a minimum of Rs.20 to a maximum of Rs100/- depending upon the size and shapes. They move to different weekly markets near their villages to sale their products on haat days. Another way to sale the products is through middlemen, who visit the village at regular intervals. However, the lockdown due to the



outbreak of Corona has now brought an unprecedented change in their situation. Neither the weekly markets are running, nor the middlemen are turning up to procure their products, as a result, they are grappling under distress. "I have 80 baskets in my house ready for the haat, but unable to sale those due to lockdown," says GuriBanbasi of Baijalpur village in Gorla Panchayat of Sinapali block. She would have sold those products for Rs.3000/- in normal time. JujestiBanbasi of this village has products worth Rs.1380/-. There are fourteen Paharia households in Baijalpur and all of them are in the same condition. The total number of households reeling under such conditions would be about two thousand. "We would have bought rice and grocery after selling these products, but lockdown created the problem," they say.

IndraPaharia of Bargaon village had informed me that the paharias in Phulchhi of Sinapali Block, Katphar, Garjanpen, Bhaismundi, Sahajpen, Bhaisadani, Babeipada and Dudunjhola of Boden block are in similar condition.

Various records and research work undertaken during British rule reveal that the Paharias is one of the nomadic tribal groups of India. The kith and kin of the Paharias of Odisha living in the neighbouring villages of Chhatisgarh have been accorded vulnerable status, whereas in Odisha the Paharias are considered as OBC. Odisha Government has recommended for inclusion of Paharias in ST Constitutional Order, which is yet to be considered by the central government. As a result, above two thousand Paharia households living mostly in different parts of western Odisha are reeling under poverty. Immediate proactive action, if not taken during the lockdown, most people will slide into a state of distress.



Exclusion from NFS Scheme: NareshGahir of Malpada hamlet of Tukla village gets Rs.700/- disability pension. But he was excluded from NFSA because he did not have AADHAR registration. He does not have a good house. After being informed, the MI today assured to include him in AntodayaYojana.



SambariGahir, 40 yr, is living single in Tukla village. It can't work for a longer period due to ill health. Gets only 5 kg of rice, no other support. She should be included in a pension scheme and should be given 35 kg of rice under AAY.