



Bengali Migrant Workers in South India: A Mixed-Method Inquiry into Their Earnings, Livings and Struggle During Covid Pandemic

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Abstract

This study has tried to compare the earning and non-earning aspects of migrant workers from West Bengal engaged in different types of work in Karnataka and Kerala based on survey of 111 Bengali-speaking migrant workers and a number of in-depth interviews and FGDs. The study has found that most of the migrant workers landed in south India only after working in Kolkata, northern or western Indian cities. Lack of regular employment opportunities and low-wage rate in rural as well as urban West Bengal are the dominant reasons for their migration. Hostile social environment and increasing earning uncertainties in northern and western Indian cities along with higher-wage rate in south India are reasons for the migrant workers shifting to south India. On an average, they earn Rs. 1.7 lakhs annually and are able to send almost two-thirds of their earnings as remittances. Except the rag pickers in Bengaluru, all other migrant workers live without their families at destination locations. The living conditions of the migrant workers, especially the rag pickers, are poor. Continuous inflow of migrant workers from eastern and north-eastern India is now a challenge for the incumbent Bengali migrant workers in south India; however, majority of them are not willing to return to West Bengal in future. The pandemic and successive rounds of lockdown in destination and home states have unsettled their lives. Not only their income has fallen, getting job and movement across different destination locations has become uncertain too. They have now hardly any resource to cope up with this continuing uncertainty.

Keywords Migration · Employment · South India · Pandemic · Lockdown · West Bengal

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1 Introduction

In India, there exist large regional disparities in employment opportunities across the states and across different districts within a state (Mukherji, 1991; Deshingkar and Akter 2009; Deshningkar and Anderson 2004). According to Census of India, 33 million people had migrated for employment-related reasons in 2001 which further increased to 51 million in 2011 (Census of India 2001, 2011). The annual growth rate of labour migration has nearly doubled, from 2.4 per cent between 1991 and 2001 to 4.5 per cent between 2001 and 2011 (Census of India 2011). National Sample Survey Organization estimated 32 million people migrated primarily for employment-related reasons in 2007–2008, of which 80 per cent were males (NSSO 2010). Out-migration from rural areas is greater in the poorly developed agricultural areas and particularly high among the landless agricultural labours (Keshri and Bhagat 2012; Panda 2016). Migrating males work as semi-skilled and unskilled workers and mostly as contractual labours at various informal and service sectors (Kar 2019).

West Bengal, the fourth largest state of the country in terms of population, was a major recipient of migrants since the late nineteenth century (Ghosh 2013). Over the past two–three decades, with the relative slowing down of the economy, West Bengal has experienced higher intensity of male out-migration from economically and agriculturally depressed areas (Das et al. 2016). Literature abounds with evidences that the increasing number of out-migrants from West Bengal, mostly from rural areas to other states over the decade, is due to shortage of work opportunities (Debnath and Nayak 2018). As per Census of India (2011), West Bengal, ranks fourth among the States from where people have migrated in search of work. According to Census 2011, nearly 5.8 lakh people migrated for work from West Bengal (from both rural and urban areas), next only to states of Uttar Pradesh (37.3 lakh), Bihar (22.6 lakh), and Rajasthan (6.6 lakh). Figure 1 shows out-migration among working age population (i.e. 15–64 years) from West Bengal to select states and union territories in India.

2 Migration to Southern States

According to the Economic Survey (2017), although states like Delhi, Maharashtra and Gujarat attracted large number of migrants, mostly from the Hindi-speaking states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, over the years internal migration rates have surged in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, reflecting the growing pull of southern states in India's migration dynamics (Government of India 2017). The economic development, job opportunities and daily wages in the southern states are considerably higher (Reja and Das 2018; Prakash 1999: 141). Kerala, which thrives on the remittances of its more than 2.5 million strong diasporas in the Gulf and Western countries, became an attractive destination for migrants from other Indian states (Zachariah and Rajan 2012; Narayana et al. 2013). The

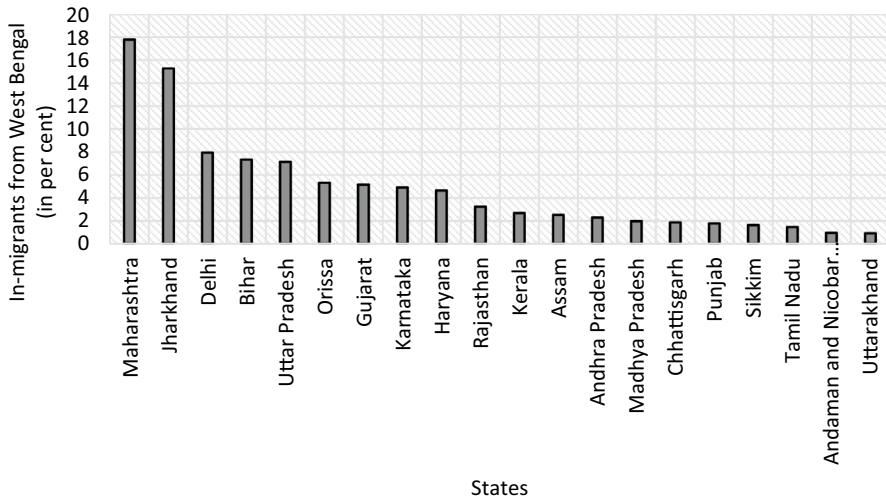


Fig. 1 Out-migration among working age population (i.e. 15–64 years) from West Bengal to select Indian states and union territories. Source: Census of India, 2011

vacuum created in the manual labour and other works is filled by the migrant workers from northern and eastern states (Martin and Philip 2019). Though labourers from Tamil Nadu and Karnataka used to fill the labour shortages in Kerala until 1990s, in the last two decades migrant labourers from West Bengal, Odisha, Assam, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhnad have occupied that place (Reja and Das 2018). According to a study by Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation (GIFT 2013), there were around 2.5 million internal migrants in Kerala with four states—West Bengal, Assam, Bihar and Orissa accounting for 62 per cent of the migrant workers, with West Bengal in the crest (20 per cent). Karnataka is also a recent entrant among net in-migration states (Martin 2017). It is useful to note that Bengaluru, the state capital, which has been touted as the silicon valley of India, attracts large-scale migrants from the northern and eastern states and other states which are relatively poorer. More than half of the people living in Bengaluru are migrants—a whopping 50.6 per cent of the population. It is second next only to Greater Mumbai, in terms of the proportion of in-migrants to total population (Census of India 2011). Apart from attracting skilled workers to its high-wage sectors, i.e. IT and other business sectors, Bengaluru has also witnessed a boom in real estate sector, majorly supported by the humongous migrant population from the different states of India (Sridhar and Smitha, 2018; Reimeingam 2016).

This paper aims at understanding the nature and causes of migration of Bengali workers to south India. It further tries to look into their earnings-spending-remittances and living conditions. By Bengali migrant workers we mean Bengali-speaking male migrant workers from West Bengal. We also tried to document their experience during the pandemic and lockdown mostly in the first half of 2020 as well as in 2021.

3 Data and Methods

We interviewed 111 Bengali migrant workers found in select pockets in two southern states—Thiruvananthapuram and Thrissur in Kerala (62) and Bengaluru in Karnataka (49). The survey pockets included road junctions, construction sites, scrap collection centres and manufacturing units. Only those migrants were considered who were staying in the destination places at least for 3 months in the last one year. The selection of sample workers could not be made purely random, but there was no bias by design. A semi-structured questionnaire was prepared with both open-ended and closed-ended questions. To complement the quantitative and qualitative information collected through the questionnaires, 4 in-depth interviews (IDIs) and 2 focused group discussions (FGDs) were also conducted. The names of the respondents have been changed. The survey took place in two phases—January–February 2019 and June–July 2019. Telephonic interviews were carried out among 34 migrant workers during pandemic and different phases of lockdown and unlocking in May–June and August 2020, and June 2021.

4 Characteristics of Sample Migrant Workers

Bengali migrant workers were found to be engaged in a variety of works. Table 1 presents select summary statistics of the sample workers classified into a few broad categories—construction workers, helpers, rag pickers and others. The construction workers include masons, helpers to mason and others who are completely involved in construction work. Helpers include those workers who are not primarily involved in construction work but can be hired for any unskilled work including temporary helpers in construction work. Others are a residual category of workers and include light manufacturing workers, petty shopkeepers, painters, car drivers, carpenter, pipeline worker, marble worker, scrap sellers, etc.¹ Except others, on an average all types of workers are in their early/mid-thirties. Education-wise, more than three-fourths (78.6 per cent) of the rag pickers are illiterate and little more than half of the others category of workers are having education up to secondary level and above. Almost two-third (65.0 per cent) of the helpers are literate but below secondary level. Most of the rag pickers are Muslims (89.3 per cent), but in our sample among the construction workers, helpers and others, Hindus dominate. The average age of migration of the current construction workers, rag pickers and helpers is early twenties. The average year spent in the current place is highest for the construction workers (6.4 years), followed by others (6.2 years), helpers (4.1 years) and lowest for rag pickers (3.4 years).

¹ Though migrants who are currently petty shopkeepers or scrap sellers should ideally be considered as self-employed and not workers/labourers. But they all came to south India as workers and their current status of self-employment is not stable or permanent. If one looks at their hard work, earnings and standard of living, they are perfectly comparable with other migrant workers.

Table 1 Select sample characteristics by type of migrant workers

Background characteristics	Construction workers	Rag pickers	Helpers	Others	Total
Sample	45	28	20	18	111
Average age (years)	34	32	36	29	33
Education (%)					
Illiterate	28.9 (13)	78.6 (22)	20.0 (4)	11.1 (2)	36.9 (41)
Literate but lower than secondary	46.7 (21)	21.4 (6)	65.0 (13)	33.3 (4)	41.4 (46)
Secondary and above	24.4 (11)	0 (0)	15.0 (3)	55.6 (10)	21.6 (24)
Religion (%)					
Hindu	53.3 (24)	10.7 (3)	75.0 (15)	61.1 (11)	47.8 (53)
Muslim	46.7 (21)	89.3 (25)	25.0 (5)	38.9 (7)	52.2 (58)
State of current residence (%)					
Kerala	77.8 (35)	0 (0)	95.0 (19)	44.4 (8)	55.9 (62)
Karnataka	22.2 (10)	100 (28)	5.0 (1)	55.6 (10)	44.1 (49)
Mean age of first migration (years)	22	24	23	19	23
Average number of years in the current place	6.4	3.4	4.1	6.2	5.3
Migrant workers under contractor (%)	68.9 (31)	100 (28)	25.0 (5)	33.3 (36)	63.1 (70)

Figures in the parenthesis indicate frequencies

Source: Primary survey, 2019

In most of the cases (73.0 per cent), it was their fellow villagers or friends (who had already migrated) who informed them about the opportunity of work and helped them getting the work. For another 19 per cent, it was the labour contractors who directly got in touch with them. Getting a job through a network of friends or villagers is highest for the helpers (90 per cent), followed by construction workers (77.8 per cent). A large section of the others (27.8 per cent), who are relatively better skilled or equipped with more capital than rest of the workers, seem to find the jobs without depending on villagers, friends or contractors. Almost one-third (32.1 per cent) of the rag pickers found their job only through contractors. Though majority of them got their jobs through the network of villagers or friends, later most of them became part of different contractors' workers group. All the rag pickers and only a quarter of the helpers are working under contractors. Figure 2 shows places where the migrant labours worked before shifting to south India.

5 Earnings, Expenses and Remittances

The annual earnings, expenses and remittances sent back home are presented in Table 2. The others category of workers has the highest annual income (Rs. 2.03 lakhs), followed by helpers (Rs. 1.70 lakh), construction workers (Rs. 1.68 lakh) and

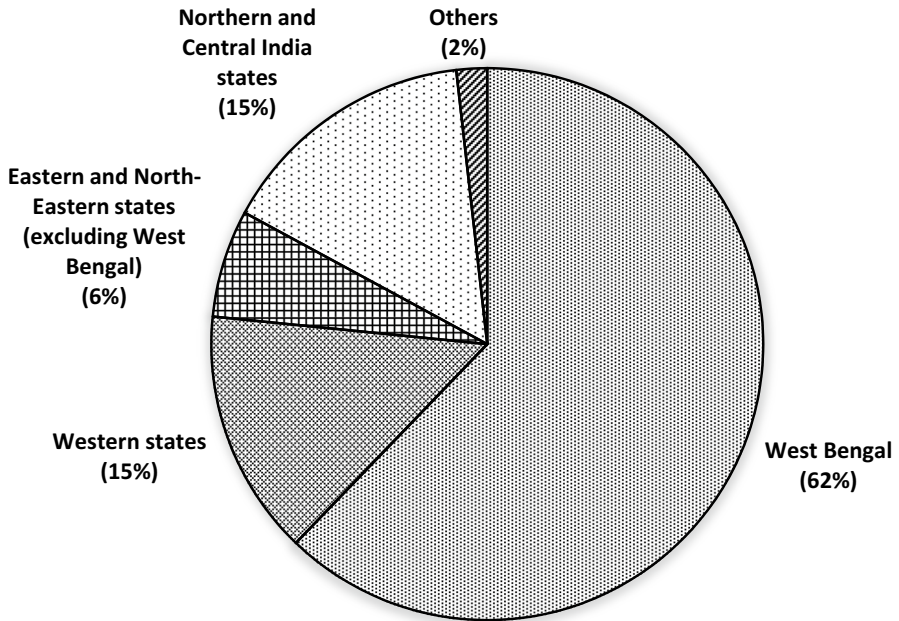


Fig. 2 Distribution of places where migrant workers worked before shifting to South India. Source: Primary Survey, 2019

Table 2 Average annual earnings, expenses and remittances (in Rs lakh)

	Earnings	Expenses ^a	Remittances ^b
Type of work			
Construction worker	1.68	0.59 (35)	0.99 (59)
Rag picker	1.52	0.65 (43)	0.61 (40)
Helper	1.70	0.61 (36)	0.99 (58)
Others	2.03	0.55 (27)	0.99 (49)
Destination state			
Kerala	1.81	0.61 (34)	1.06 (58)
Karnataka	1.56	0.59 (38)	0.69 (44)
Religion			
Hindu	1.77	0.58 (33)	1.02 (58)
Muslim	1.63	0.62 (38)	0.78 (48)
Living arrangement			
Without family	1.72	0.58 (34)	0.92 (54)
With family	1.55	0.79 (51)	0.68 (44)
Total	1.70	0.60 (35)	0.90(53)

^aFigures in the parenthesis show reported expenses as percentage of reported earnings. ^bFigures in the parentheses show reported remittances as a percentage of reported earnings

Source: Primary survey, 2019

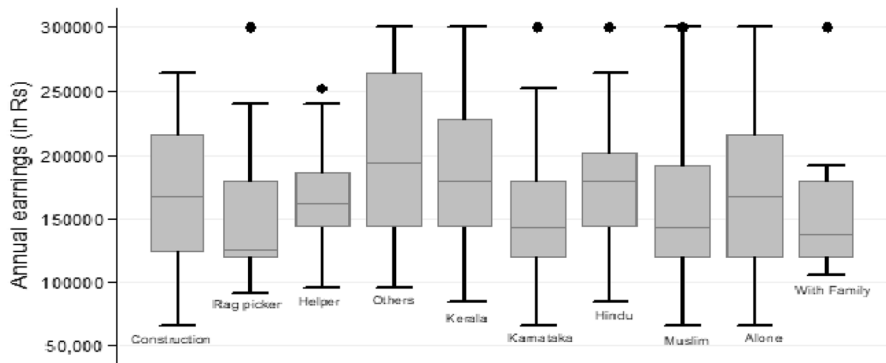


Fig. 3 Box plots showing the distribution of migrant workers' earnings. Source: Primary Survey, 2019

rag pickers (Rs. 1.52 lakh) having the lowest average income.² The annual earning of the migrant workers is nearly Rs 25,000 higher in Kerala than in Karnataka. The Hindu workers are found to be earning more than the Muslim workers.³ Workers staying alone are found to earn more than those staying with the family at the destination place. The distribution of earnings for different types of workers, by destination state, religious groups and workers' living arrangement status is presented in Fig. 3. Although others group has higher median earnings, the inter-worker disparity in earning is also high for them. Only among the rag pickers and helpers, there are upper outliers (i.e. workers earning exceptionally high compared to the rest of the workers in their respective worker groups). Although median earning is higher in Kerala compared to Karnataka, the latter is characterised by higher range of earnings and presence of upper outlier. Compared to the Hindu workers, Muslim workers have higher range and also presence of upper outlier. If we exclude one upper outlier, the range of earnings is found to be substantially lower for the workers who are staying with their families.

To have a closer look at the earning pattern of the migrant workers, we have estimated an earning equation (a linear regression model using OLS) by considering experience, educational level, type of work, religion and location of work as predictors. The annual earning of the worker is considered as the dependent variable. All the predictors are considered as categorical variables. The variable 'experience' has been categorised into three values—no or short experience (0–4 years), moderate experience (5–10 years) and long experience (more than

² It is worth noticing that on an average, helpers earn higher than the construction workers because construction workers in our sample are a mix of both mason and helpers to the masons. Though mason always earn higher than their helpers, it was difficult to isolate them at the time of interviews because some helpers to the mason reported to have worked as masons too whenever demand for masons remained high.

³ This is not to indicate that there is religion-based wage discrimination for the migrant workers in south India. It is because large section of the Muslim workers are engaged in low earning jobs such as rag picking. Our multivariate analysis also clearly shows that religion does not make any difference in earnings when other characteristics are controlled for.

Table 3 Results of the OLS regression of yearly earnings (Rs. '000) on workers' characteristics

Background characteristics	Coefficient	P-value	[95% Confidence Interval]
Experience (Ref: 0–4 years)			
5–10 years	19.7	0.106	– 4.3, 43.7
More than 10 years	39.3**	0.001	16.4, 62.2
Education (Ref: Illiterate)			
Literate but less than secondary	23.6*	0.049	0.1, 47.1
Secondary or above	50.1**	0.001	20.5, 79.7
Occupation (Ref: construction worker)			
Rag picker	38.3*	0.027	4.5, 72.2
Helper	– 1.4	0.914	– 27.9, 25.0
Others	46.3**	0.002	17.2, 75.4
Religion (Ref: Hindu)			
Muslim	5.6	0.599	– 15.6, 26.9
State (Ref: Kerala)			
Karnataka	– 38.4**	0.004	– 64.5, – 12.2

** , * significance at 1 and 5 per cent level, respectively

Source: Primary Survey, 2019

10 years). Educational level of the worker is divided into three categories—illiterate, literate but below secondary level and secondary level or above. The results of the regression are presented in Table 3. Long experience and having education makes a significant positive impact on the earnings. However, with reference to a construction worker, being a rag picker and other type of worker increases the earnings. The finding might look surprising, especially for the rag pickers since we know that the average earnings of the rag pickers are lowest among all types of migrant workers. It must be noted that the positive coefficient we observe for the rag pickers is a net effect when we control for the linear effects of all other predictors. A closer look at all characteristics of rag pickers reveals that they are mostly workers with short experience, illiterate, living in Karnataka and are Muslims. A worker having all or most of these characteristics earns less as construction workers, helpers or others.

On an average, the migrant workers spend roughly one-third of their earnings as living expenses. For obvious reason, living expenses are higher for those who are staying with their families, which is mostly the case for the rag pickers. For rag pickers, the total household income is much higher than what is reported by their individual earning because in most of the cases, their wives are also working as maid servants in nearby localities. Table 2 also presents annual expenses and remittances reported by the workers. Since the questions on earnings, expenses and remittances were asked independently, there are discrepancies in remittance figures when we look at remittances as reported by the workers and remittances calculated by taking a difference between earnings and expenses. The reported remittances are always lower than the residuals of reported earnings after deducting reported earnings. For most of the sub-groups, remittances as a percentage of earnings calculated by

alternative ways differ by 6–9 per cent. Going by both measures, the migrant workers in Kerala are able to send higher remittances than migrant workers in Karnataka.

6 Other Dimensions of Migrants' Life

The majority of the sample workers live without their families. For a worker, living far from the family members definitely inflicts a cost, though it may be more psychological in nature. If such psychological costs were stronger enough, they would have preferred to bring their wives and children to their current place of residence provided they had opportunities at work place and favourable situation at home. The nature of work, type of accommodation provided and living environment do not allow most of the workers to bring their families. Only little less than a quarter of the workers (26 out of 111) have reported a scope for bringing their wives and children to their current work places. These workers are mostly rag pickers (19) or living in Karnataka (22). Not all workers who reported scope for bringing wives and children have actually brought them. Out of 26 who reported opportunities for bringing wives and children, only 17 have actually brought them at some point.

How they spent their leisure time can be a revealing dimension of a person's life as migrant workers outside their own state where culture and language are different. Are they only engaged in idle socialisation with the fellow migrant workers (such as gossiping, chatting) within their own groups? Or do they have a life beyond their work and work place? The picture is not very rousing. Less than 40 per cent of the workers watch television. Only a quarter of them have gone to some place for sight-seeing or pleasure trip in the last three months. Rarely (only 7 out of 111), they have gone to cinema hall to watch a movie. About 43 per cent of the workers have reported smoking or chewing tobacco on a regular basis, and only 18 per cent of the workers have reported regular drinking which seemed to be an under-reporting (statistics not shown in tables). Careful observations during the survey made us believe that under-reporting of drinking has been probably lower when wives of the migrant workers were also present during the time of interviews.

At a destination place, a migrant worker lives a life which is very different from the life he could have spent at his own village in West Bengal. His higher earnings might have improved the financial situation of his family at home but that has come at a cost—the cost of missing his own people, many festivities and other occasions of social gatherings. The lives of the unskilled and semi-skilled migrant workers at destination places are different from the lives of the educated and skilled migrants in many aspects. The latter often have the freedom and opportunities to bring their immediate families to the destination places, which is almost absent for the former. Further, the educated and skilled migrants may not experience a huge change in the quality and standard of life in the new destination places. This cannot be said for the unskilled and semi-skilled migrants. In response to the question of preferred relocation from their current place of work, two-third of the migrant workers clearly revealed their strong preference for staying back at their current places (Table 4). Only one-fifth of the migrant workers want to return to West Bengal, whereas another 13.5 per cent want to move to other locations if that provide them better

Table 4 Opinion of the migrant workers regarding moving from the current place of work (state)

	Going back to West Bengal	Staying in same place (State)	Others
Type of worker			
Construction worker	11.1 (5)	71.1 (32)	17.8 (8)
Rag picker	32.1 (9)	57.1 (16)	10.7 (3)
Helper	20.0 (4)	65.0 (13)	15.0 (3)
Others	22.0 (4)	72.2 (13)	5.6 (1)
Destination state			
Kerala	17.7 (11)	69.4 (43)	12.9 (8)
Karnataka	22.5 (11)	63.3 (31)	14.3 (7)
Religion			
Hindu	18.9 (10)	69.8 (37)	11.3 (6)
Muslim	20.7 (12)	63.8 (37)	15.5 (9)
Living arrangements			
Alone	18.2 (18)	67.7 (67)	14.1 (14)
With family	33.3 (4)	58.3 (7)	8.3 (1)
Total	19.8 (22)	(66.7) 74	13.5 (15)

Figures in the parenthesis show frequencies

Source: Primary survey, 2019

opportunities. The preference for staying back in the same place by a large segment of the migrant workers only indicates that they are neither hopeful nor certain about their job prospects (quality of job, job stability, wage rates) in their home state. Their preference for staying back also indicates that they are ready to bear the psychological costs of being far away from families, friends and culture in order to have secured, stable and higher earnings.

7 Personal Narratives of the Migrant Workers

Subir (34) a construction worker from Medinipur district, who has congregated to Thiruvananthapuram in search of livelihood recalls '*...previously I was working in my native place as an agricultural labourer where I was paid Rs 200 a day. The work was irregular, and also the wage was not enough to run the household...I have three children. Two of them are in school now. I have to feed them...have to bear their educational expenses... I have also worked in Kolkata as a mason, but I was underpaid. One of my village friends informed me about work in Kerala and I accompanied him a year back. Here wage rate is high. They pay me Rs 800 a day*'. Afzal (31), a migrant worker before moving with the contractor to his work place, recounts '*...there is always work available in Kerala*'.

Though earning is high in Kerala, the cost of living is also high. But, the migrant workers are still left with good amount of money to send back home. Satya (28), a migrant from Uttar Dinajpur, narrated '*...even though earning is high here, the cost*

of living is also very high. We have to pay Rs 1000 per month per head as house rent apart from spending for maintenance and food. We incur a minimum expense of Rs 200 a day. The remaining amount that I send back home is although not enough, but it works!'. Abdul (28), a migrant from Murshidabad, revealed that now he can send a considerable amount of money to his family and hence need not to think about educational expense of his daughter. Some of the migrant workers said that the local workers are getting paid more for the same job than the migrants. The migrant workers in Thiruvananthapuram live in cramped shelters, mostly in shared rooms, where sanitation is a big issue. In many cases, the rooms are overcrowded. Maniul (24) from Jalpaiguri narrated '*...I am living in a room with 30 others. We cook food in the corner of the room and use shared toilets...the room do not have enough space to breathe*'. We found that a number of health benefits were provided to the migrant labours in Kerala. In 2017, the government announced a health insurance scheme (Aawaz Insurance Scheme, Labour and Skill Department, Government of Kerala) for migrant labours which includes free treatment worth Rs 15,000 per year and insurance coverage of Rs 2,00,000 for accidental death. However, Aawaz enrolment is found to be problematic and full of impediments. In spite of the efforts by the government, it has been pointed out that the enrolment is still incomplete due to a variety of reasons (Sreekumar 2019; Peter et al. 2020).

Though Kerala offers much higher earnings to the migrant workers compared to other states, there are new challenges cropping up due to continuous inflow of migrant workers from different parts of the country. Moreover, the psychological cost of staying away from family with limited opportunities to visit home and meet the children is an aspect of life which one cannot ignore for a long period. Jaidul (31) from Murshidabad narrated '*...earlier I worked in Chennai as a mason. I came here four years back with the contractor and some of my village friends to make money. Here wage rate is high....Even after spending for living, I use to have Rs 10,000 to Rs 15,000 with me from which I can send a considerable amount to my family... However, as the number of migrants is increasing continuously, we are getting lesser working opportunities than before*'. Dhiren (29), a migrant from Purba Bardhaman, narrated '*...who wants to stay alone in this place leaving families behind? I have two daughters. I cannot look after them and my wife has to handle everything alone. She even do not let me know about their needs and problems. What can I do from here?*' Studies have found that migration of male member considerably transforms intra-household power relations resulting in large changes in women's roles and responsibilities in the domestic and socioeconomic spheres (Rajkarnika 2020). However, husband's absence heightens the parenting stress level of left-behind wives, as the wives have to take the responsibilities of the household as well as the children at the same time (Heller and Kaushik 2020).

The story of migrant workers in Bengaluru is somewhat different. In the last few years, Bengaluru also witnessed a boom in the real estate sector and majorly supported by the migrants from various states of India (Reimeingam 2016). As one delves deeper in the major construction sites of Kempapura, Bengaluru, one can see the tin barracks which are homes to the migrant workers from various districts of West Bengal. Deepu (42) from Malda, West Bengal, recalls how he landed as a construction worker. After having worked as a painter and waterproofing mechanic in

various sites of Kolkata and Delhi, he arrived at Bengaluru via connections made in previous jobs. He earns Rs 400 per day and works for 22 days a month. His wife Minati (40) also works with him and earns Rs 200 per day. Minati reveals ‘...*here everything is costly, but the company provides the accommodation for free. Rest, we have to arrange at our own expense. We have two children who stay in the village. Our son studies in school, and daughter, being elder than him, takes care of the household. We want to earn more money so that they can have a good life*’. Munul (37) from Murshidabad also recalls how the company contractor brought him along with other fellow villagers to work in the construction site. Though his family still resides in the village, he is able to send them a considerable amount of money. When asked about his whereabouts on weekends, Munul blushes and says ‘...*I go to the nearby mall*’. It is probably a luxury for him which he could never dreamt of in his village life. We come across Malati (27) and Banani (35) who work in the canteen of the construction company. Malati’s child stays in her village back in West Bengal along with her parents.

7.1 Bengali Rag pickers in Bengaluru: a Different Story

The rag pickers’ story is very different from the stories of the rest of the migrant workers in many ways—earnings, nature of work, hazards associated with the work, quality of life, living arrangement, religious composition and their locations of stay. In the last decade Bengaluru’s population increased enormously, i.e. from 6.5 million in 2001 to 9.6 million in 2011 (Census of India 2001, 2011). Along with that the production of solid waste in the city has doubled. The city currently produces 5757 tonnes of waste per day, which was 2500–3000 TPD in 2014–15 (Ramachandra 2016; Time of India, December 1, 2017). However, only 68 per cent of the wastes generated are collected by municipal bodies and the rest is scavenged by the rag pickers (Ramachandra 2016). The activity of rag picking which requires no skill is a source of income for a growing number of urban poor as well as for people who are migrating from rural areas in the absence of alternative livelihood (TidkeNone 2014).

Like other fellow migrant workers, landlessness, unemployment, uncertainty of work, indebtedness and poor wage rate in the source region are the usual impetus streaming through the saga of migration of the rag pickers. The workers who were earning only Rs 150–200 a day in West Bengal get attracted to shift to Bengaluru when they see opportunities for more regular and much higher income, even though the nature of work is different and not very attractive. In this sense, one can say that shift to Bengaluru by many Bengali migrant workers is quite a planned move. Saiful (32), a migrant from Nadia, who is engaged in rag picking for the last 3 years rued ‘...*previously, I used to work as an agricultural labour in West Bengal where I was paid Rs 200 per day, which was not sufficient to run a household of six members. One of my fellow villagers who used to work here informed me about this work and as a consequence I accompanied him to Bengaluru. Although this work is not of my choice, they pay me Rs 250–500 per day; and thus I can send more money to my family...*’ When asked about the reasons

behind choosing rag picking and not any other informal works, the respondents reported that they make more money by rag picking. This is also supported by quantitative evidence where it is found a construction worker or a helper with similar characteristics of an average rag picker (short experience, low education, living in Karnataka) earns much less in their work compared to a rag picker. In an FGD with seven members of both men and women at Hebbal in Bengaluru the respondents revealed '*...we can easily work in the construction sites, but in kabaddi (rag picking) income is more. Here, we can earn Rs 500–600 per day. Sometimes, if we get good scraps, we can earn up to Rs 1000*'. The rag picking job has certain advantages such as they do not need to work every day and can take advance money from *thikadar* (contractor). In another FGD with 10 members of both men and women at Hebbal, the rag pickers stated '*...the work is very dirty as we have to collect the materials out of rotten things and carcass. Although, work is available in the construction sites, the work is not of our choice as we live with our families. Also, income is higher in this line of work and work timings are flexible as well...we can take advance from thikadar in amount of Rs 50,000–1,00,000 and pay him back as per our capacity by collecting and providing the materials...*'. Moreover, as the contractors provide the rag pickers with accommodation facilities, they can bring their wives/family who can also earn by working. Mahiful (37) from Murshidabad recalls how bringing his wife for rag picking has doubled his family income. He stated '*...earlier I used to earn around Rs 10,000 by rag-picking...now both of us together make about Rs 20,000 in a month and after spending around Rs 6000, we can send a considerable amount of money to our children in the village*'. Papiya (24), wife of a rag picker and a domestic worker by profession, stated '*...I used to live in the village, but then I heard that other women were earning Rs 15,000 by working as domestic servants in the nearby apartments in Bengaluru and hence have migrated here...*'.

The living conditions of the rag pickers are unsafe and unhygienic. They live in *jhupris* (squatters) provided by the contractor, where they have to adjust through make-shift toilets and live in a constant insecurity of being displaced by municipal authorities. With a lack of basic services such as electricity and water, their living conditions are quite deplorable. Jharna (27), wife of a rag picker and a domestic worker from Murshidabad, West Bengal, stated '*... we had problems in staying at this place as it is surrounded by dirt all over. A pungent smell is always present in this area.... We had problems in making arrangements for food and water and there is water shortage in this area, and hence we have to use water very carefully. However, after working here for a month and making Rs 700–800 per day, we are now slowly adjusting to this place*'. Kalipada (51), one of the contractors, stated '*... in Bengaluru, the type of work that I am engaged is shrouded with anxiety and uncertainty. The owner of the land can ask me to vacate the property at any given time ... In the last 9 years of my stay in Hebbal, I had to change places for 3–4 times ... with every shift, my labourers also shifted with me...*'. The rag pickers stated that they were often harassed by the public officials during their day-to-day work. Since the rag pickers move around the city for collecting materials, in some cases of theft they are often suspected by the local people. Police also visit the godown and inspect their collected materials. Montu (37), a rag picker from Nadia, stated '*... sometimes*

at night when we go to search and collect materials, local goons harass us and take our money. At times we are also harassed by the police ...'.

Rag pickers are always at a higher risk of being affected by numerous infectious diseases as they spend most of the time in the dumping sites shifting through the mounds of rotten, unhygienic and germ-rich scraps which is not only a source of daily bread for them but also a source of diseases. We found that most of the rag pickers as well as their children are having skin disease like scabies. When asked about medical care, Aznarul (34) from Nadia said '*...medical vans come and conduct check-ups once in a month. They also provide free immunization for the children... But if we fall ill in between, for seeking regular medical care, we visit a nearby private doctor who takes a fee of Rs 100 and the total cost of the medicines prescribed by him accounts for Rs 600–700 approximately'.*

8 Migrant Workers During Pandemic and Lockdown

Almost one year after the first survey had been carried out in 2019, we conducted telephonic interviews with a sub-set of same migrant workers (34) in May–June and August 2020 and in June 2021. These interviews provide us a vivid description of how their conditions changed during different phases of pandemic, lockdown and unlocking stages. Governments' delayed response to their requests for making arrangement for their return to homes undermined their real sufferings and stress. In the initial stage of the pandemic, while most of the states were experiencing a rise in COVID-19 cases, Kerala could manage the pandemic reasonably well and started allowing some businesses to re-open in May 2020. As a result, some of the migrant workers could start working from the middle of May. But not all of them were getting work every day as the work sites were allowed to operate with a smaller number of workers than what they would have employed in normal time. Rabi (27), a migrant worker from Purba Medinipur, told us '*Situation is much better here. Some of us have even started to work. But we want to go back home now. I cannot hear about my family finding it difficult to arrange food'.* From June 1, 2020, after lockdown restrictions were eased and a few trains resumed, most of the Bengali migrant workers that we spoke with have either returned to their villages or waiting for the next available train. Surprisingly, some of the workers still preferred to stay back in Kerala. The pandemic had dwindled their livelihoods for more than two months by then. Returning home without any money was not an option for many of them. As most had returned to their home states, due to shortages of labour the migrants started getting work daily and daily wage was also hiked. Arun (41), a migrant worker from Murshidabad working in Thiruvananthapuram, told us back in June 2020, '*We are getting 50 rupees more per day'.* On the other hand, those who have returned, life has not become free from distress and anxiety. Asim (32), a migrant from Purba Medinipur, returned to his village in June. He was then worried about how to run the family with five members and how will he repay the loan that he had taken from the Bandhan Bank. Another returned migrant, Akash (27) from Jalpaiguri, revealed '*..I am worried about how to feed my family. Shall I get 100- days work in this rainy season? Work was available in Kerala when I returned in the beginning*

of June. *I want to be back in Kerala soon*. The desperation to see their families in this time of crisis is strong, but they are equally worried about post-return work opportunities.

By the end of June, Kerala started witnessing a resurgence in COVID-19 cases, resulting in many localised lockdowns, identification of hot spots and demarcation of containment zones. By August 2020, situation changed for these migrant workers. They became too scared to go for work even if it was available. Jiban (32), a migrant from Purba Medinipur, told us *'Two people in my workplace were tested covid positive and the place was sealed. I am not going to the work for the last three days. My company is talking about sending me to some other workplace but I am scared to go anywhere'*. Another migrant worker Rafikul (24) said *'...as the number of workers are less now, work is available daily. But for the last few weeks I am working not more than four days a week. We heard that some workers in a different worksite got infected with this virus. I am scared. I am dying to see my family in my village but I do not want to return now. Here even if I get work for three days in a week, it will be fine to feed my family'*.

A quite similar situation was observed among the Bengali rag pickers of Bengaluru. They too stayed without income for nearly 2 months in the initial lockdown period of 2020. Surprisingly, when the migrants all over the country were keen to go back to their home, the Bengali rag pickers of Bengaluru did not think in similar line. *'I don't want to return home now...there is no work available in the village. Those who went to their village before lockdown are now worried about how to come back here!'* revealed Ravi (31), a migrant from Nadia who came back to Bengaluru from his village just 2 months before the lockdown began. Aznarul (33) from Murshidabad was staying along with his wife and two children in Hebbal for the last 4 years. The first phase of lockdown made Aznarul stay for two months without work. His wife Amina (25) works in a nearby apartment as maid. Though her work was temporarily stopped, she was getting some money from her employer. Aznarul's and others' families were keenly waiting for the day when everything would become normal and they could start work.

We carried out another set of telephonic interviews in June 2021. The second wave of the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns worsened their lives not only by reducing their incomes but also by bringing more uncertainties about the future of regular work. Amal (39), a migrant from Purba Medinipur, working as a marble worker in Kerala after having a short visit to his family in Bengal, planned a return on 10 June 2021. However, the second wave of the pandemic and lockdown in Kerala and West Bengal has put him under uncertainty about his planned return. He shared with us what he gathered from his friends who were still in Kerala. He said *'...now the working situation is not that good in Kerala. My friends are getting work once in 3 or 4 days. But since the number of workers is very less they are getting an extra pay of 100–150 rupees per day'*. Another migrant from Jalpaiguri, Sajjarul (33) told us *'I am scared of getting back to Kerala now but I will definitely return after one or two months. Most of the workers in our site have returned. Last year I faced lot of trouble while returning home'*. Ranjak (28), a migrant worker from Jalpaiguri in Thiruvananthapuram, also had a similar story to tell. He is also eagerly waiting to return after the lockdown restrictions ease.

Mubarak (29), a rag picker in Bengaluru from Murshidabad, told us in June 2021 that *'due to lockdown we are not able to work every day. Our income has drastically come down and now we earn only Rs 150–200 a day'*. However, Amal (41) another rag picker, living in a different location in Bengaluru, told us lockdown this year (2021) has not imposed any restriction in their movement. They can still earn Rs.500–Rs.700 daily based on the number of materials they are able to collect. Hardly any rag pickers returned to their villages because of the pandemic and lockdown in the last one year.

9 Summary and Conclusion

Lack of regular employment and low-wage rate have mostly forced many unskilled and semi-skilled Bengali workers migrate to south India. However, many have reached the southern state of Kerala and Karnataka only after exploring and experiencing many possibilities in nearby towns, Kolkata and north Indian cities. A flourishing urban sector, lack of adequate local unskilled and semi-skilled labour has placed these Bengali migrant workers in vantage position. High-wage differential between West Bengal and southern states, especially Kerala, is also supported by data published by Labour Bureau (2018). Majority of the migrant workers are currently working under contractor. On an average, earnings are higher in Kerala. Our empirical analysis shows that earnings of the migrant workers depend on type of work, educational level and experience of the worker, and place of work. On an average, migrant workers send two-thirds of their earnings as remittances. Most of them do not have any opportunity to bring their families to their current work places except the rag pickers in Bengaluru. The wives of the rag pickers find employment in nearby buildings as maid servants or helpers. The living conditions of the migrant workers are generally poor with rag pickers living in most unhygienic and precarious conditions. The picture of access to health care for the migrant workers is mixed across pockets but seems to be better in Kerala. Majority of the migrant workers do not want to return to West Bengal.

The pandemic and successive rounds of lockdown in destination and home states have unsettled the lives and magnified several pre-existing problems faced by the migrant communities. Not only their income has fallen, getting job and movement between destination state and West Bengal has become uncertain. With the exception of rag pickers in Bengaluru, majority of the migrant workers returned to their villages. Many of them went back to Kerala and Karnataka when first wave of the pandemic was in decline. However, the second wave of the pandemic has brought the same uncertainty back. They hardly have any resource to cope up with this further uncertainty.

The migrant crisis divulges that India's patchy social protection system does not necessarily address the requirements of mobile workers in the informal economy. According to the ILO, India had the lowest percentage of migrant population with at least one social protection benefit coverage in Asia and the Pacific in 2015 (Asian Development Bank 2016). The social protection measures in place were focused more towards the rural population, leaving a much larger gap in covering the urban

poor and migrant labour. This crisis, therefore, should be taken into consideration and more migration-inclusive social protection policy encompassing public employment programmes, food, health and cash transfer is needed. However, to note, Kerala is one of the few states which has had proactive policy for migrant labours (Srivastava 2020), and some of these dates back to 2008.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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