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Labour out-migration and Covid-19 Pandemic in India: A case study of Murshidabad district of West Bengal

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Abstract

This article outlines the patterns of internal migration from Murshidabad district of West Bengal during the Covid-19 Pandemic. We found that seasonal/temporary male migration from the study area has been evolving continuously over time. More than half of the total migrants move within the state boundaries. The inter-state migrants are often destined to economically better off states than the study area. We have shown that landlessness, lack of jobs, low wages, decaying of traditional craftsmanship and household pressure are among the factors leading young males to migration. These moves are motivated by jobs and income and movers often shift from agricultural work to building and construction and petty businesses. Migrants and their families are almost exclusively dependent on domestic remittances to meet the household expenditures, repay loans and meet children's educational expenses. Social networks, especially friends and relatives, are crucial in facilitating the migration process. Covid-19 Pandemic raised essential questions about the future of these vulnerable sections of the population as migration became difficult and remittances dropped significantly.

Keywords: *Migration; Covid-19; state boundary; economic motive; social network; distress*

Introduction

In the absence of secure sources of income, migration plays an important role as a coping strategy in developing countries. Human mobility is a process by which the factors of production (workers/labour force) relocate across the regions or geographic spaces for economic and human resource oriented development. Migration or circular mobility has now become an integral part of the alternative livelihood strategies for large numbers of impoverished people living in destitute conditions in the countryside (Deshingkar and Farrington 2009; Bhagat 2018). Large scale village-level studies in major states of India by Deshingkar (2006b), Deshingkar and Anderson (2004) and Mishra (2016) documented the vast and growing number of temporary and seasonal migrants. Earlier, Deshingkar (2003) estimated that every year about three lakhs of labourers used to migrate for work from drought-prone Bolangir district of western Odisha. Srivastava (1998) and Byres (1999) found that from the 1960s onwards, seasonal migration for manual work from rural areas has been increased tremendously (Bhagat, 2018). Rogaly et al. (2001) estimated that each year over five lakhs of people seasonally migrate to the rice-producing district Bardhhaman, West Bengal from the surrounding districts and neighbouring Jharkhand state (erstwhile South Bihar) in eastern India. A longitudinal study conducted in Murshidabad district of West Bengal indicated changes in the meaning and course of migration from transplanting and harvesting

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paddy to brick kiln, urban construction work and road building and other earthworks (Rafique et al., 2006). Employment related male out-migration in India, particularly from Murshidabad district (inter-district and inter-state) has become dominant (Rogaly et al., 2002; Rafique et al., 2006).

The literature on the economics of migration emphasised the 'push' factors at places of origin and 'pull' factors at destinations (Bork 2019; Bhagat, 2018; Lee, 1966). Landless agricultural labourers in rural areas belonging to a particular class and caste migrate to earn the household's expenditure in comparison to those who are economically well-off (Choudhary, 1991; Chand et al., 1998; Gupta and Prajapati, 1998; Naik et al., 2009). The main reasons for male migration in India are seasonality of employment, low wage rate, small land holdings, low incomes and indebtedness (Singh and Kaur, 2007; Saha et al., 2018). Rafique (2003) reported half of the migrants who experienced routine out-migration from Murshidabad district had possessed no agricultural land or had very small landholdings. The New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) proposes that households rather than individuals make migration decisions in developing countries (Saha et al., 2018). Social networks of migrants are conceptualised as a process of building social networks, reinforcing social relationships across space (Vertovec, 2002). Improved access to communication and transportation infrastructures and social networks in any location act as driver and facilitators in the circulation of populations between the places of origin and destination (Deshingkar and Anderson, 2004). The remittances literature suggests that money sent by labour migrants is used for the expenses of marriages of daughters/sisters, meeting daily family expenditures, and as a result, aspirations for better well-being encourage migration (Dhar, 2014; John, 2018).

At present, Murshidabad district is crippled with innumerable socio-economic, demographic constraints, e.g. seasonal unemployment, underemployment and chronic rural poverty. It is one of the poorest districts of West Bengal and overwhelmingly dominated by the Muslim minority population mostly living in rural settings. Around 80 per cent of households are economically dependent on the primary sector, i.e. agriculture, animal husbandry and other allied activities (Naskar et al., 2011). In all the Indices of Human Development Index (HDI), the district appears lower than the state average. Many low-income families seasonally or temporarily migrate for an alternative source of livelihood, mostly in urban areas for building and construction work. Although seasonal or temporary migration from the study area became regular perennial phenomena, and research is rare. The existing national data sources (NSSO and the Census of India) captures information on migration. But either the growing numbers of short-term migration are not up to date or ignored. Rogaly et al. (2003) seems the only study that estimated over five lakhs people (parents and children) seasonally migrate. Therefore, our study is an important contribution to fill this gap.

Data and methods

In the present study, a *migrant* is defined as any person from a particular household who had stayed away from his present place of origin for more than one months for occupation-related reasons. Thus, included both short term vis a vis long term migration from Murshidabad district (West Bengal) during the Covid-19 Pandemic.

The initial field survey was carried out from August to November 2016 in the Murshidabad district (Place of origin of migrants) of West Bengal. A total of 450 migrant workers through purposive snowball sampling techniques were interviewed. In-depth interviews with 25

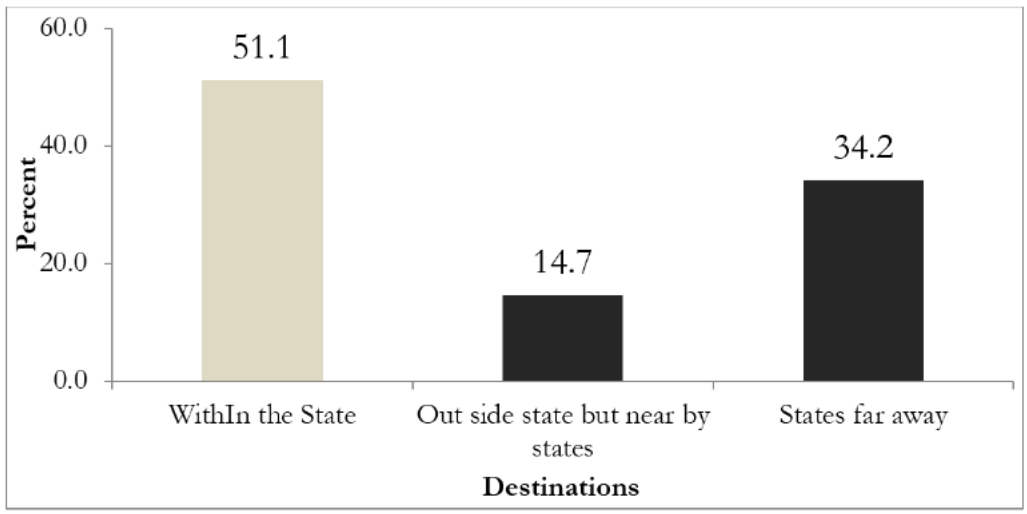
migrants were completed to get insights. To take into account the impact of Covid-19 Pandemic, a total of 45 migrants (one-tenth) were also randomly telephoned and interviewed in 2020. Further, informal visits to a few households in November 2020 was carried out.

We have used descriptive statistics, i.e. rate, ratio and per centage distributions along with bar graphs to present the results. The Multiple Responses Technique (MRA) is used to analyse and present the push and pulls factors for migration in the district. We used the SPSS software.

Findings and discussion

First, we have examined the patterns of migration from the study area and found that more than half of the migrants (51%) move within the state boundaries (i.e. intra-state) and the remaining 49% were inter-state migrants (including those moving to states far away: 34.2% and to the neighbouring states: 14.2%) (Figure 1). Among the intra-state migrants, Kolkata and its surrounding new emerging urban centres are the most attractive destinations. Kolkata, being the state capital as well highly urbanised district of West Bengal, accommodated more than 60 per cent of the total intra-state migrants from the study area. These migrants mostly work in the building and construction sector. Kolkata is followed by Bardhhaman, Midnapore, North and South 24 Parganas. Interestingly, 70% among the inter-state migrants opted for far away destinations, as opposed to 30% who were destined to the neighbouring states and Bihar, was the most preferred, followed by Odisha and Jharkhand.

Figure 1. Distribution of migrants by destination



Source: Computed by author from field survey (2016). Sample size: (450)

In Bihar, most of the migrants are moving within the districts like Araria, Katihar and Purnia for petty business[3]. In other neighbouring states, Odisha (Balasore, Jagpur, Jharsuguda districts) and Jharkhand (Deogarh and Ranchi) are the most favourable destinations where migrants either work as construction workers or hawker mixed households items. Others who migrate long-distance mostly go to the state of Kerala. In Kerala, the most desirable

[3] That is, hawkering of mixed households items: selling of plastic and stainless steel utensils, sconch bangles business, hawkering clothes, purchasing and selling of agricultural products, collection and selling of scraps materials.

destination districts are Ernakulum and Aluva. The second most chosen destination state is Gujarat. In this state, the most favourable destination district is Surat. Other Southern States, i.e., Tamil Nadu (Chennai) and Karnataka (Bengaluru) are also favourable destinations for long distance migration from Murshidabad district.

Secondly, we focused on the socio-economic characteristics of these migrants to understand why labour out-migration from Murshidabad district suddenly emerged as one of the important Bengali migration streams. First, we found that most migrants were young males. Among the working-age young males, the propensity of out-migration for work reaches its peak and declines as they get older (Table 1). Notably, more than 70 per cent of our sample were in the age group of 20-39 years. The median age of the migrants was about 29 years. This reflects that working-age young males have a higher propensity to migrate than the rest (Pattanik, 2009; Narain, 1972). The young male migrant workers travel long distances by taking risk independently to select destinations that are culturally and linguistically different from their native place. Migrants over 50, possibly due to family affairs and engagements, either migrate within the state boundaries or into the neighbouring states (Oberai and Singh, 1980). It has emerged from the in-depth informal interviews that age, family or social ties or responsibilities to look after agricultural and allied work discourage them from long-distance migration.

We found the highest rate of illiteracy and the lowest levels of education among the migrants. A thumping majority of respondents (68.4 per cent) were *'not literate'*. This is in line with the previous micro-level studies (Rao, 2004). About less than 30 % of migrants had education *'up to primary* (till year 5) and *middle and secondary* (year 10)' (Table 1). Since migrants were destined for heavily manual, labour intensive works in construction and petty businesses, the role of education seemed less relevant. The type of family and family size may influence the decision to move as families are arguably the principal agents of migration decision-making (Stark and Levhari, 1982; Stark, 1984a; Stark and Bloom, 1985; Katz and Stark, 1986). Nuclear families[4] (68.7 per cent) and joint families (31.3 per cent) were prevalent among migrants. More than 65 per cent of migrants reported family sizes between 3 and 4, followed by family sizes 2 and 3 (20%) while the rest reporting family sizes 5 or more (14 per cent) (Table 1).

Rafique and Rogaly (2005) found that half of the households migrating for work do not possess any agricultural land and 17 per cent with micro-landholdings in Murshidabad district. The land is often considered as an asset offering different economic securities (e.g. providing food or safety during unexpected economic shocks). Only 29 per cent of the migrants had possessed some agricultural land and the rest did not possess any. Thus, migrant households are economically and socially deprived (also see Mukherjee, 1980; Chatterjee, 1991; Chand et al., 1998). Interestingly most of the migrants who possessed land bought the land recently. Yet, the land they possess were usually very small (i.e. smaller than 1.0 hectare) with the largest being 0.481 hectares (3-4 bigha) (lower than the average land holding size of 0.73 hectares in the district) (District Statistical Handbook, 2014). More than half of the land owned were in size class 0.160 hectare (1 bigha). It is followed by those with lands in the size class of 0.321 hectares (2 bigha). Only 8.3 per cent possessed land in size class 0.481 hectare (3-4 bigha).

[4] Nuclear families typically defined a *married* couple and their children. In a *joint family system*, the number of dependents living is larger. In the present study joint family may include parents, sisters, wives of sons, grandsons, granddaughters.

Table 1. Background characteristics of out migrants from Murshidabad district (West Bengal)

Background characteristics	Number and percentages of total sample
Age Groups	
Less than 19	5(1.1)
20-29	179 (39.8)
30-39	133(29.5)
40-49	88(19.5)
50 and above	45(10.0)
Level of Education	
Not literate	308 (68.4)
Up to primary (till class V)	74 (16.4)
Middle and secondary (class X)	58 (12.9)
Higher secondary	8 (1.8)
Graduate and above	2 (0.4)
Family Size	
2-3	93(20.6)
3-4	294(65.3)
5 and above	63(14.0)
Land Possession	**132(29.3)**
Size class of land(hectare)	
0.160 (1 bigha)	68(51.5)
0.321(2 bigha)	53 (40.1)
0.481(3-4 bigha)	11 (8.3)
Indebtedness	
Friends or relatives without interest	176(48.4)
Friend, and relatives with interest	33(9.1)
Money lender	28(7.7)
SHGs/Bank	107(29.4)
Mortgage (gold/land)	20(5.5)
Social Network	
Relatives	163 (36.2)
Friends	181 (40.2)
Villagers and neighbours	41 (9.1)
Middle man or labour contractors	35 (7.8)
Own Self	24 (5.3)

Source: Computed from the field survey data, 2016. N=450.

Migration is also frequently linked to debt cycles and money needed for repaying debts incurred in facilitating initial migration (Deshingkar, 2003). Sometimes migrants enter into the labour market through intermediaries from whom they borrowed money and more likely being locked into a debt-migration cycle and use remittance to repay debt (Reja and Das, 2015; NSSO report-2007-08; Mosse et al., 2002; NCRL, 1991). Different forms of borrowing and clear strategies for managing outstanding debt were observed among the migrants in this study. Remittances not only used to repay existing debts but also to repossess mortgaged assets and to cover consumption expenditures of families left behind. We found that 80.8 per cent of the sample migrants in the study area were indebted. Table 1 indicates that the most common source of borrowing was *friends or relatives lending money without interest* (48.4 per cent). The second most popular source was *government institutes (Self Help Groups/Bank)* accounting for 29.4 per cent. This was followed by debts from *friend and relatives with interest* (9 per cent).

Still, there was a considerable group (7.7 per cent) of migrants borrowing from *money lenders*. Deficit-induced debt (i.e. mortgaged land or pawned jewellery) accounts for 5.5 per cent of the migrant families we have surveyed.

During the discussion with the migrants, the facilitating role of the microfinance (Self Help Groups) emerged in the migration process. It gives credit to its members in rural Bengal without any guarantor with the condition of weekly or monthly repayment. Thus, in fact, it forces adult male members of the households to move out from their native place for any jobs with a regular income so the beneficiaries would be able to repay a certain amount of money regularly. Uncertainty of income in agricultural work and allied sectors make borrowing risky and thus many people opt to migrate for work in construction sectors or petty (merchant) businesses which generate a regular income and higher wages. Our finding of migrants being tied to *'debt cycle'* through government institutes or other sources rather than money lenders is in line with earlier studies (e.g. Breman, 2010).

The borrowed money is often used to acquire physical assets (e.g. leasing agricultural land, building houses, buying livestock, and setting up petty businesses). Many migrants use remittances to repay outstanding family debts incurred to cover marriage expenses, healthcare costs and households consumption. The migrants we interviewed reported that in the past, they used to borrow from money lenders with high interest rates, but now they borrow from self-help groups (microfinance) with low interest rates.

Thirdly, we focused on social networks' role in migration process. Migration itself can be conceptualised as a social network building process and the development of interpersonal relationship across space (Vertovec, 2002). Social network plays a crucial role in finding accommodation, jobs, circulating goods and services, as well as providing psychological support and continuous social and economic information. Two fifth (40.2 per cent) of the migrants selected destinations where they had *friends* with experience of that particular destination (Tilly and Brown 1967; Walker and Hannan, 1989). The second most common influential social network was *relatives* (36 per cent). Many migrants reported how their relatives motivated them to migrate, gave them financial support covering transportation costs, and helping them to choose destinations, arranged accommodation, offered occupational guidance and psychological support (Rogaly et al., 2006; Reja and Das 2015). The next most important social network was composed of people coming from same *villages and neighbourhoods* who had first-hand information about the destinations (about 9 per cent). Around 8 per cent of migrants used *middlemen or labour contractors* in deciding their destinations. This was very common among the migrants who migrated states far away. The migrants who used middlemen shared that middlemen used to come during the lean agricultural seasons to hire them and there was security of jobs despite being exploitative in nature (Breman, 1978 and 1985; Deshingkar et al., 2006). Only about 5.3 per cent of migrants selected destination states on their *own*.

Fourthly, but not necessarily indicating a rank order, we have looked at the main motivations behind male labour migration. Labour mobility across the geographical space consists of shifts into a set of jobs (occupational mobility) or occupational diversification (Al-Ali, 2004). The analysis of occupations before and after migration indicates an occupational shift from primary sectors to secondary and tertiary sectors. Most migrants moved from a diverse set of jobs into a limited set of jobs (either in construction sectors or petty businesses). Respondents, prior to migration, were *hired for causal wage work in agricultural and allied sectors* (45.5 per cent),

or in *cultivation work* (14.5 per cent), whereas about 12.8 per cent were involved in *petty businesses* and 11.2 per cent were in *building constructions labour and masony*. Those who were in traditional craftsmanship[5] were forced to switch to other jobs due to a lack of government policy to protect these jobs. It is observed that about 16 per cent of migrants' principal occupation was *weaving Gamcha, Lungi and sharee (cotton), Silk sharee, and Khadi cloths*. However, after migration, they switched to jobs in building and construction sector (Srivastava, 2012; Deshingkar et al., 2009; Rogaly et al., 2006).

Fifth, we have examined the reasons associated with the place of origin and the destinations. During the field survey, migrants were asked about the reasons that pushed them from their places of origin and the reasons that attracted them to particular destinations. Since most of the migrants cited multiple reasons for their present move out and selection of destinations, multiple response analysis techniques have been used in this section of the analysis reasons. The participants were asked to list their top three reasons. Table 2, prepared by using Multiple Response Analysis (MRA) shows a total of 1350 responses. The most commonly cited push factor at the place of origin was *'in search of employment/better employment'* followed by being involved in *petty businesses*. The migrants engaged in petty businesses reported of lack of markets, low profit margins and high competition as the leading push factors at the place of origin. *Seasonality of work and low wages* was the third most important push factor. *Decline of traditional craftsmanship* was another commonly cited push factor along with *landlessness*. These findings are in line with the previous literature (e.g. Todaro, 1976; Dasgupta, 1979; Oberai and Bilsbarrow, 1984; Singh and Iyer 1985; Das, 1993; Krishnaiah 1997; Gill, 1998; Mosse et al. 2002; Dubey et al., 2006; Reja and Das, 2016).

Table 2. Push factors in the place of origin

Reasons	N
Less number of work days and low wage rate	515
Petty business	300
In search of employment/better employment	226
Decline of traditional craftsmanship	155
Landlessness	104

Source: Computed from the field survey data, 2016.

Selection of destinations were also largely shaped by income and work related considerations (Table 3). The most commonly cited reasons were the possibility of *employment throughout the year and regular income* in destinations, better markets for petty businesses, and higher *wages*. Respondents also often mentioned the importance of *cultural affiliation and geographic proximity*.

Table 3. Pull of the destinations

Reasons	N
Employment throughout the year and regular income	506
Market for petty business	352
High wage rate/ wage differences	242
Cultural affiliation and geographic proximity	154
Other	46

Source: Computed from the field survey data, 2016

[5] *Weaving Gamcha, Lungi and sharee (cotton), Silk sharee, and Khadi cloths.*

The sixth aspect considered in this study was remittances and their use. It is widely accepted that the *use of remittances* is influenced by several factors. Migration is considered as a way to achieve aspirations (Bohme and Glaser, 2014) and remittances have a key role in this. Most of the respondents in our study reported that, every month, they used to send around Rs. 8,000 to 10,000 remittances to their families, by using informal channels (e.g. via a friend's account or a neighbour's account). As shown in Table 4, the major chunk of remittances was used to cover *household expenditures,* followed by *repaying old debt/loan*. Building *pucca houses* is another primary use of remittances (see also Thorsen, 2007; Reja, 2015). Finally, covering *children's education expenditures* accounted a small fraction of total remittances.

Table 4. Use of remittances by migrant's households at the place of origin

Sl.	Heads of remittance use	per centage
1	Household expenditures	40.1
2	Repay old debt/loan	21.6
3	To buy or lease land/built house	15.6
4	For health related expenses	14.9
5	Children education (sons/daughter/sister/brother)	6.0
6	Festival/ other ceremonies	2.0

Source: Computed from the field survey data, 2016.

Effects of Covid-19 on out migrants from Murshidabad district

Most migrant households exclusively depend on remittances to cover household expenditure whilst very little is left for saving. Therefore the sudden lockdown imposed in March 2020 meant cutting off a major source of income for those dependent households. During telephone interviews in November 2020, most of the returned migrants recounted their agony, mental stress and hardship of life that forced them to return to their native villages. With the lockdown, many migrants across the nation with no exception those from Murshidabad district, were held captive in a way by their respective far-away destination state's administration. Most of the migrants we interviewed over the phone stated that during lockdown phase 1 (25 March-14 April 2020) and phase 2 (15 April 2020-3 May, 2020) they were not allowed even to buy food. There was clear discrimination between local and outsiders in all places to benefit from any services. One of the returnees stated that as outsiders, they were treated as superspreaders of this deadly virus.

The migrants also recounted how they spent days and nights without food or sometimes on just a single meal. During the lockdown, most of the worksites were shut down resulting in loss of work and income. They have suffered from high degrees of anxiety and fears, felt lonely, and the fear of death from Covid-19 without seeing their family members was immense. On the other hand, those who migrated to the nearby states or within the home state stated that they did not face many hurdles in returning back to their respective villages. When the Government of India imposed the lockdown, they took locally available means of transport to reach their native villages, which was relatively easier and inexpensive compared to others who were in far away states.

The announcement of the extension of the nationwide lockdown until 17th May (lockdown 3.0) by Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India (GoI) with some conditional relaxations for migrant workers, tourists, students and other stranded people was happy news for many of our participants as they were able to return to their respective villages. Most of

the migrant respondents returned back to their respective villages by the end of July 2020. The Chief Minister of West Bengal announced by the first week of June that almost one million migrants had already returned to the State (The Hindu, 4th June, 2020).

Migrants we interviewed stated that they had different experiences in different destination states. Most migrants who recently returned from Kerala praised the Kerala government's treatment of migrants as the government had relocated them in safe places from their work sites and provided them with food and other basic needs. The Kerala government had opened 4,603 relief camps to house migrant labourers, who were officially called as 'guest workers' (Mar 27, 2020, Livemint). On the other hand, those who returned from Gujarat (Surat and Ahmedabad) and Maharashtra (Mumbai) shared bitter experiences marked by mishandling by the local administration and police. Most migrant workers also shared how they overcame the stigma in their home villages after they returned because local residents had suspected that they might be the potential carriers of Covid-19.

Returning home and sitting idle without jobs also created a livelihood crisis as their earnings declined and saving gone. The Covid-19 had a disastrous impact on migrants as many saw their remittances locked up during lockdowns, and they had to return home without money subsequently. Many had to borrow money from relatives and neighbours to cover their travel expenses and other costs. 'Special trains' arranged by the Indian railways were not enough to accommodate all of them.

Although the government of West Bengal announced MNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) jobs for return migrants but most of the migrants complained the administrative and official hurdles discouraged them from MNREGA jobs and as a result most of them were still without jobs. In the absence of regular jobs, many respondents told us that they were planning to return back into their respective destination states, especially in Kerala, where construction activities started again. There were regular announcements and pamphlet distribution by the local middlemen who arranged buses for Kerala from regular pick points such as Raninagar bus stand (Raninagar block), Juginda (Domkal block), Jalangi bus stand (Jalangi block) and Daulatabad (Berhampore block). As a result, we have observed that there were large crowds of migrants gathering in these locations to register their names and book their journeys. Bus tickets were too costly, charging around Rs. 5000-6000 per person but still acceptable for potential migrants who were looking for the security of higher wages and huge demand of labourers in the destination.

Conclusions

Migration from Murshidabad district (West Bengal) in whatever forms is an on-going long-term economic strategy in the absence of secure means of livelihoods. Over time, migrations seemingly shifted from being intra-state gradually to inter-state movements. Given the sheer poverty and absence of opportunities, migration from this district is dominantly economically motivated. We have observed multiple push factors forcing especially young males from the study area to other places with better options and possibilities. Wage differences, better payment systems, better job opportunities, and markets for goods were key pull factors in respective destinations. We have found remittances to be of central importance in household strategies. Nevertheless, socio-economic characteristics such as low level of literacy, landlessness, debts people commonly referred to indicate that migration from the study area was distress induced (Avis, 2017).

Social networks play a crucial role in selecting destinations, finding accommodation, jobs, circulating goods and services, as well as providing psychological support and continuous social and economic information. These networks were also important in tackling the difficulties of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Our findings indicate various challenges that the government may initiate policies to alleviate. Traditional crafts (silk, copper-brass, bidi and conch) of the Murshidabad district, for example, need to be protected. There could be government schemes to facilitate creation of small- and medium-scale industries in the district which will not only retain some of those who are migrating out, but also will enhance the overall sustainable development of the district. We also suggest that central and state governments should come together to form proper mechanisms for the management of inter-state migration of labourers to alleviate adverse effects of similar crises in the future. There is also a clear up to date legislation to protect the rights of migrants as the 'Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act, 1979' is outdated and invisible in practice.

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