



Journey without a choice – A report on reverse migration in Odisha



BAIF Institute of Sustainable Livelihoods and Development – Odisha

1. Background

The unprecedented nation-wide lockdown imposed to control the spread of COVID – 19 has affected all levels of the society. The primacy of lives over livelihoods has tilted the trade-off in favour of the former with the optimism that our collective will and efforts can not only overcome the health challenges posed by the pandemic but also revive the growth trajectory. The exodus of labourers resulting in reverse migration has to a large extent strained the rural economy which otherwise relied on remittances to augment earnings from agriculture and allied vocations. The situation thus posed a humanitarian crisis and required concerted support from all sections to supplement the efforts of Union and State Government.

Odisha has also seen a high influx of migrant labourers returning to their homes. The first line of action was to reach out to the most affected and vulnerable. Imminent need was assessed to provide relief crucial to survival. The immediate measures with support from program funding agencies included distribution of grocery and hygiene kits to over 1,000 underprivileged families in 04 districts. Going beyond relief, it is pertinent to focus on revival and resilience for creating a vibrant rural ecosystem. Livelihoods from farm, off-farm and non-farm domains with optimal use of resources can prove to be sustainable in the long term. The returned workforce can be engaged in strengthening rural economy through appropriate capacity building and / or productive engagements with existing skill sets. This will enable to overcome the compulsion of distress migration.



Fig 1: Relief distribution to migrant households

It was hence felt important to collect and analyze information on migration patterns. The exercise in this regard was carried out across BAIF's program areas in the State to understand the situation better and thereby explore developing contextual solutions.

2. Methodology

The study covered 8,214 migrant households from 1,326 villages of 68 blocks in 16 districts where BAIF has working presence. Data collection in the form of structured questions-responses was undertaken by In-charges of BAIF's 287 Cattle Development Centres (CDCs). The process involved getting the data directly from the migrant households in the service areas of these CDCs or accessing the data from the Gram Panchayat database owing to restrictions on mobility and interactions. Data collection was carried out remotely over phone as far as possible and a mobile phone application was used for recording the responses. The survey spanning during June – September 2020 tried to understand key migrant destinations, work sectors and other relevant information.

The data collection was possible with support of CDC In-charges as well as respondents across locations. We hope that the report and insights can make contribution in bringing out their voices and for us as an organization to better plan programs and design long term sustainable solutions in response to the crisis.

3. Limitations of the Study

While the study has attempted to be representative with a spatial spread, it faces the limitation of being restricted to the areas where BAIF has its livestock development program. Considering the lockdown restrictions, it was neither feasible to conduct a house to house survey nor desirable to engage in such an exercise at this stage. As a result, certain inaccuracies or inconsistencies due to communication gaps or differences in comprehension might have crept in. Though care has been taken to weed out these, the possibility of residual errors cannot be ruled out.

4. Key Findings

The findings throw light on multiple aspects of migration, its extent, incidence, preferences and so on. It also gives insights into spatial context of regional spread as well as temporal aspect of seasonality. Summary of key findings are illustrated in the below sections.

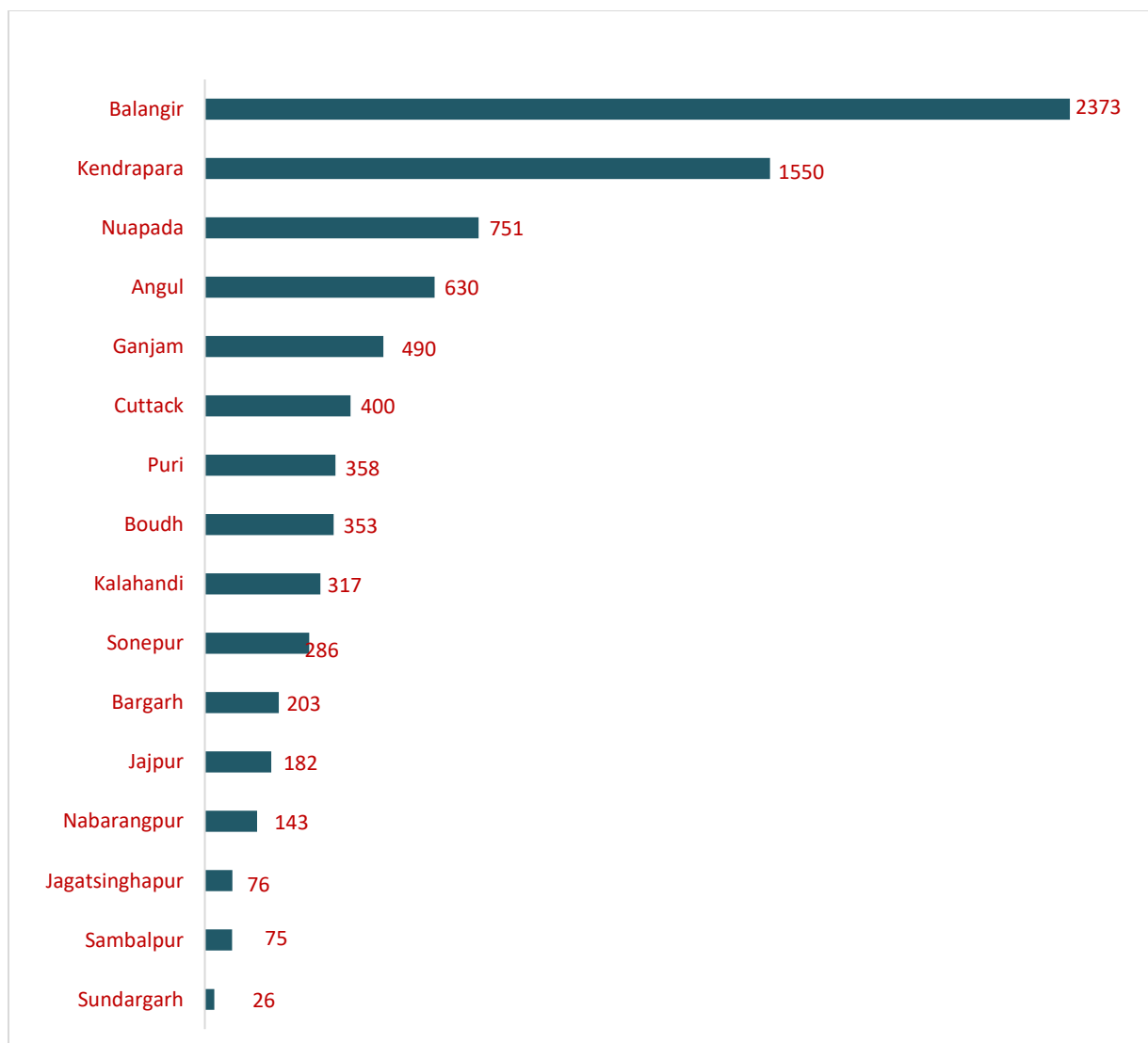


Fig 2: District-wise migration (n=8214)

Known to be one of the key migration source state, Odisha has close to a lakh migrating to other states. Balangir (2,373) with the highest number of people migrating was followed by Kendrapara (1,550); both these districts are also prone to extreme weather events like drought, cyclone etc. triggering distress induced migration. Nuapada has a significant migrant population working in brick kilns of south India.

Increase in migrants from Odisha is widely attributed to the natural calamities and lack of sufficient livelihood opportunities. Suffering from constant disruptions of destruction and devastation to lives and livelihood, people choose to move out to support their families.

An analysis on block-wise migration among districts was done to understand migration pattern.

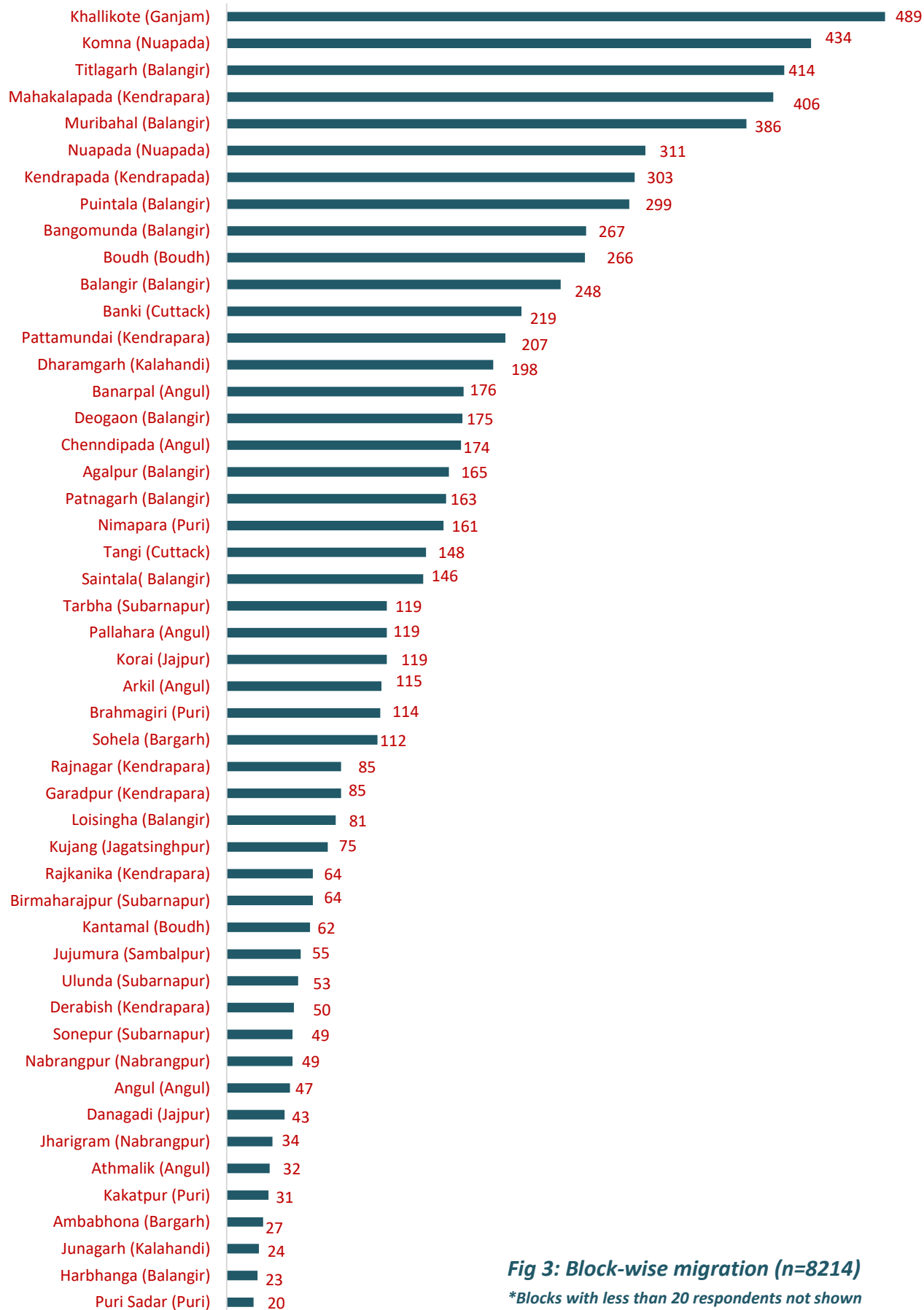


Fig 3: Block-wise migration (n=8214)

**Blocks with less than 20 respondents not shown*

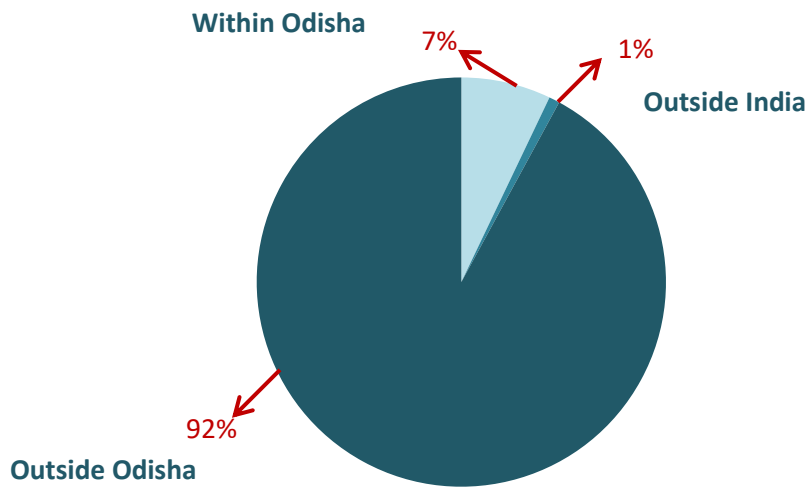


Fig 4: Migration within & outside Odisha

Most people migrate from Balangir to south India to work in textile industry and even though cotton is cultivated in Balangir there is no textile factory in the region. Kendrapara is known as plumbing capital; migrants from this region dominate the plumbing labor force in other cities and international labor markets as well yet do not find work in the region. The pie chart shows that nearly (92%) of the migration is outside the State. A small proportion (1%) migrates to international destinations primarily to work in the construction sector.

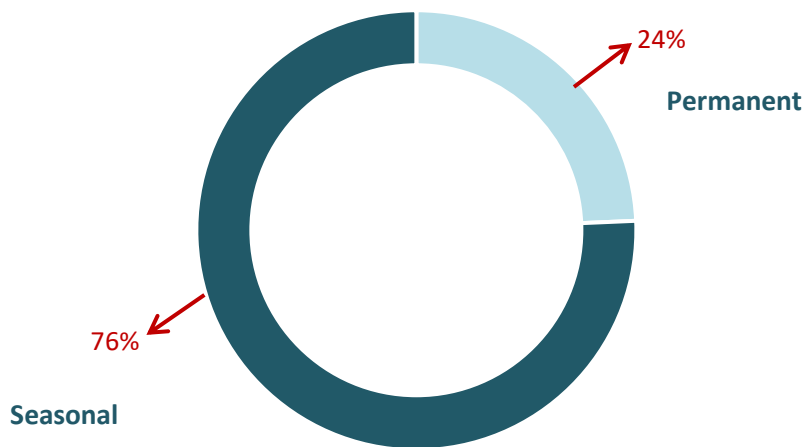


Fig 5: Nature of migration

As evident from the graph, over three-fourth of the migration is seasonal in nature as migrants are unable to support themselves with agriculture during the lean period. Households diversify their economic activities outside agriculture by migrating to urban/industrial areas during the post-monsoon period. Most of the migrants leave every year around October and November to work for six months until the monsoon.

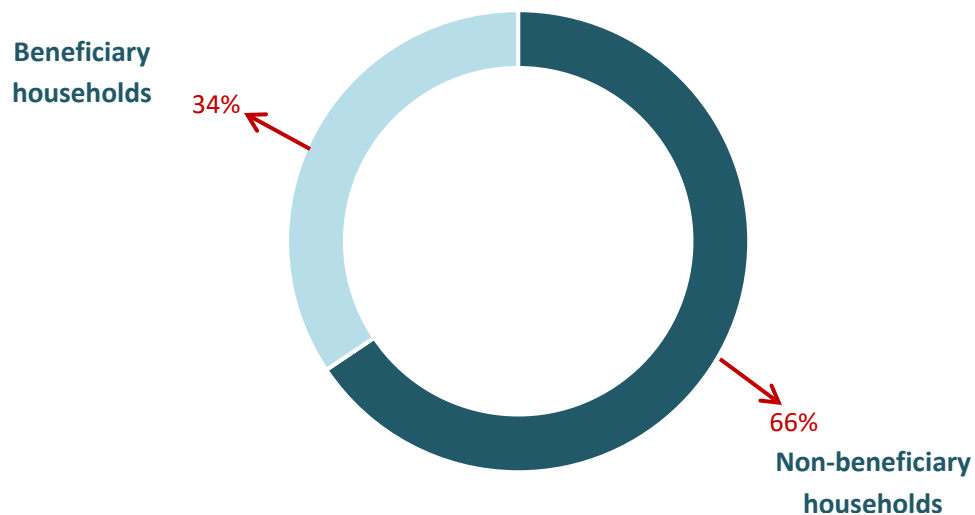


Fig 6: Households (if) beneficiaries of BAIF

Most of the distress induced out-migration is due to increasing inequality, agrarian instability and inadequate livelihood generation avenues. It is therefore essential to develop sustainable local employment opportunities to prevent seasonal migration.

BAIF has been working in rural areas facilitating livelihood generation opportunities and community empowerment through development models suited to geographic, economic and social needs. Transformational success has been recorded through initiatives with regeneration of natural resources, adoption of climate friendly practices, scaling off-farm economic activities, value chain development etc. in its program areas across India. Handholding and technical support is provided ensuring sustainable livelihoods.

Thirty four percent (graph above) of the households are beneficiaries of BAIF in the State; reaching out would be easier with the already present network. Understanding need, mapping skills and planning livelihood support activities could be taken up to reduce distress induced migration. BAIF's major program in the State is livestock development and above pattern also reveals the positive contribution of animal husbandry to livelihoods.

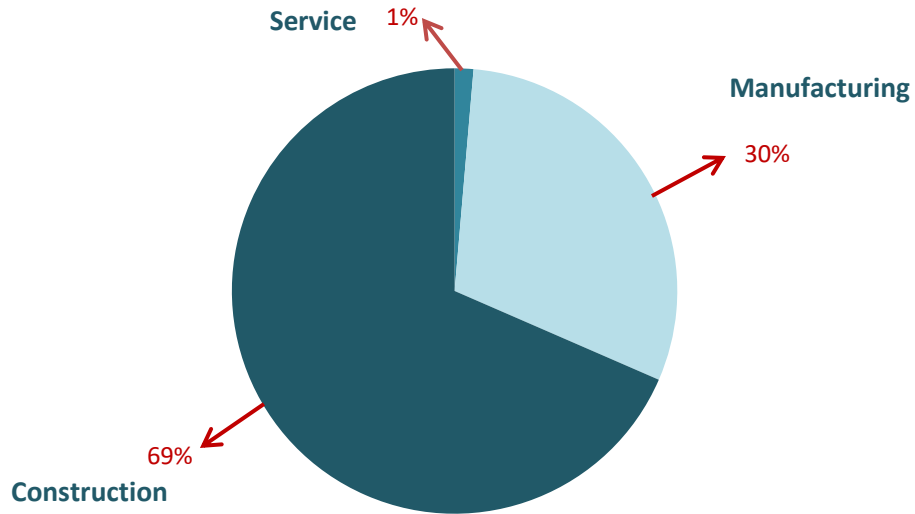


Fig 7: Sectorial spectrum of migration

Young and adolescent groups migrate to work in construction, manufacturing and other service sectors. 69% migration is into construction labor market, a sector that involves host of risks and uncertainties affecting migrants' access to fair and decent employment. It also impedes their ability to challenge exploitative and inhumane employment conditions. Migrants (manufacturing and construction) are mostly employed in the lower end of the industry and are unable to negotiate for better wages. Lack of proper documents showing identity proof deprives them from claiming socio-economic entitlements. This also points to the importance of skill building for availing better opportunities.

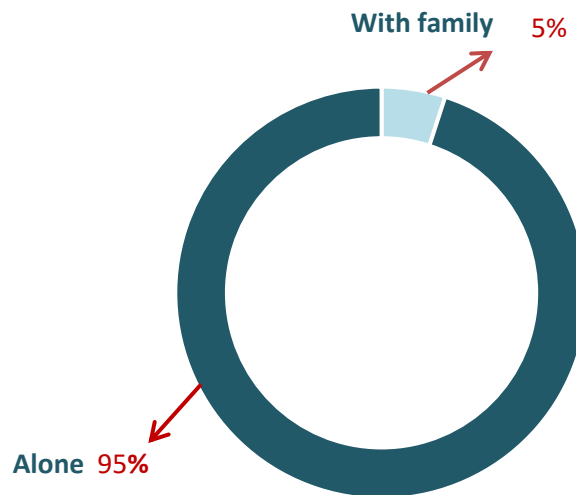


Fig 8: Migration (if) with family

From the chart above, it is seen that 5% of total migration is with family. Children who migrate with parents are critical to household livelihoods and often sent to work. Faced with challenge of language barrier and accessibility, children often miss school. The inability to provide education perpetuates poverty from the present to the next generation. Alternating between their source and destination location, migrants lose access to social benefits / entitlements linked to the place of residence.

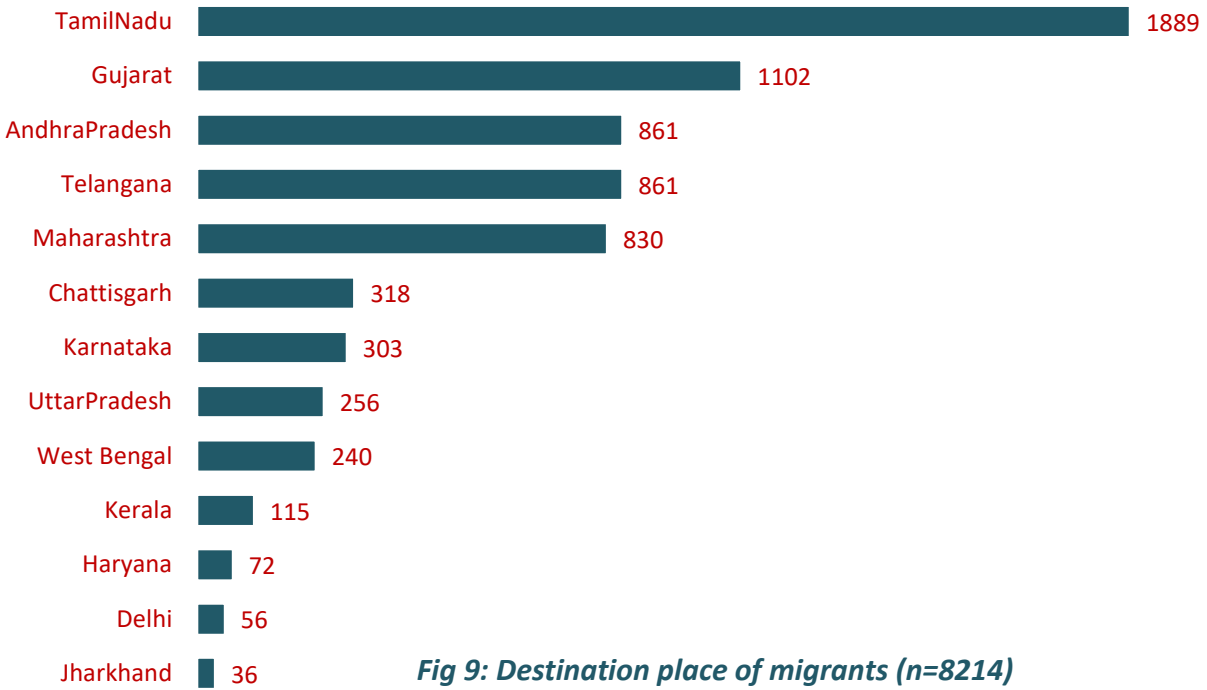


Fig 9: Destination place of migrants (n=8214)

**States with less numbers are not shown*

The graph above shows sizeable number of migrants in Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Maharashtra. This was well evident during the migrant crisis of lockdown. Preferred migrant destinations also point to the fact that these states are advanced in industrialization, urbanization, service etc. and hence provide ample opportunities for unskilled / semi-skilled labour. These states also have large influx of seasonal migrants from Odisha, who spend five or six months working in brick-kilns, construction sites, diamond cutting/polishing and other industries. Young girls work as domestic labor in Delhi and northern states.

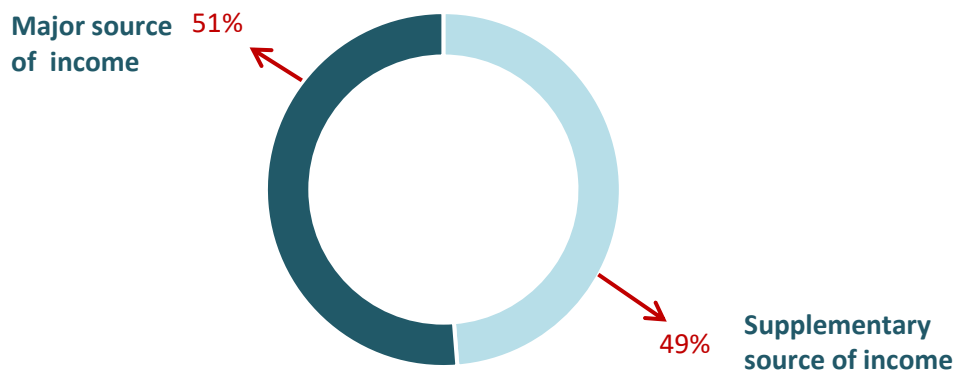


Fig 10: Migration (if) major source of income

For over 50% of the respondent households, migration is the major source of income and hence the disruption and uncertainties due to the pandemic have adversely impacted livelihoods. It is necessary to empower this section on high priority as these are the most vulnerable without any fall-back options. At the same time, it is not advisable to overlook the rest as income from migration contributes to enhanced living standards. Both the groups, as long as migration is distress induced, need to be provided with in-situ income generation opportunities.

5. Insights and Way Forward

The findings show the skewed spread of migration in the State with wide variations among districts. Unlike some states where migration is from rural areas to urban areas within the state, the migrants of Odisha search for opportunities outside the State. This is surprising considering prevalence of mining and related industries. Seasonal nature of migration indicates the lack of livelihood avenues during lean period. Most of the migrants work as un-skilled laborers in construction and manufacturing sectors which again emphasizes the role of skilling. A large proportion of migrants leaving their family at home is definitely a positive indication from the perspectives of health and education.

Most of the workers migrate at a young age, often unskilled and get employed in unorganized and informal labor markets, at exploitatively low wages. Access to basic civic amenities like health, sanitation, electricity and shelter is compromised resulting in adverse effects on well-being. Women from migrant households face vulnerabilities related to safety, health and nutrition. Life is not merely an existence but one that is lived with dignity. Creating jobs locally is crucial to prevent distress induced migration. By leveraging effectively the aspects of community empowerment, optimal local resource utilization and appropriate technology adoption, it is possible to provide decent livelihoods in the rural areas.

Odisha is still an agrarian state with about 60% engaged in agriculture. But the scale of migration is indicative of the insufficient opportunities in the sector. Issues like fragmented holding and extreme weather events pose problem to farming. It is here that allied off-farm and non-farm activities have a crucial role of supplementing agriculture income as well as engagement.

Our endeavor will be to enable migrant households to adopt sustainable livelihood avenues. Capacity building, hand holding and seed support can help overcome the initial barriers. A third of the respondents are BAIF's participant households which can be the starting point for integrating livelihood activities into the existing program and bridging the income gap. These initiatives can be commenced in the districts facing the migration issue to greater extents. Support will be mobilized from various available sources.

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