



Struggling for Existence during and after COVID-19 in Rural India - A Micro Study

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Abstract

It is important to understand for a geographer in particular, the socio-economic condition of the villages and cities especially during some odd hours. The study includes the interrelationship between man and his environment that adapted to the utmost during the worst phase of Pandemic (2020-21). Such study was conducted in Goalpara village, located in the Ruppur Panchayet on the rolling western plateau region of West Bengal, India. The village near the river Kopai, still struggles for existence in the post-COVID period and deeply wishes to do it successfully. The villagers who were mostly in tourism activities are adapting slowly though for a resurgence after two years of COVID phase. Objective of this paper is to highlight such attempt of them at micro-level. Also, it highlights such issues (like unemployment and drop-outs) and government measures to cope with the situation through primary surveys at micro-level.

Keywords: *Pandemic, Settlement, Neighborhood, Unemployment, Drop-outs, Land Use, Livelihood.*

“COVID-19 disrupted supply chains around the world. It tested the resilience of global healthcare systems and exposed weaknesses in public procurement processes” (UN, 2022).

Introduction

Settlement Geography encompasses the entire hierarchy from the rural to urban settlements, from what may be termed nomadic to sedentary. So, it is not only concerned with the buildings grouped around the permanent farm dwellings but also temporary shelters where the hunters and gatherers usually stay. The rural settlements particularly are close to the nature as far as the livelihood, occupation and style of living is concerned. According to Jordan the main theme of studying rural settlements include the size, shape or form and most importantly the functions of the habitation while analysing the inter-regional variations (Jordan, 1966). The functions of rural settlements are in general natural resource oriented, namely farming, fishing, mining, and lumbering. These activities fetch the inhabitants the

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livelihood and for countries like India they rule the economy. West Bengal is considered to be the largest producer of rice in India as contributing about 15.1 percent of the total rice production from around 13 percent of the rice producing areal stretch in the country. Suitable conditions of the soil, climate and cheap labour supply make agricultural activities intensively feasible in this state. Major rice producing regions are spread across India and West Bengal and particularly Birbhum produces quite a prominent portion of rice that feeds the country and beyond as far as trade is concerned. So as the world struggles to overcome pandemic way in the smartest way, the remotest villages also have their own stories too.

Background

Underlain by the red lateritic soil the village Goalpara has flourished as a destination for tourists round the world owing to the heritage and cultural values added after Kabiguru Rabindra Nath Tagore made it a centre of knowledge, culture and rich domain of art. The village houses the tribal population who mostly are engaged with agriculture, fishing and trade activities. The team of surveyors deeply surveyed the place based on both physical and cultural parameters, in order to gauge the actual conditions of the respondents post Covid-19 phase. Here the major rural settlements due to fertile soil and suitable climate are compacted; the market place either occupies the central part of village or road-side (Jones E.). Rural settlements more appropriately ‘*gaon*’ here is defined as a living system, like living organism which has evidenced a close-knit human community living together in rain or shine. However, it is always necessary to maintain social relationships that give physical dimensions through family groups, movements and access patterns. They have sustained themselves since the beginning of civilization. Their ways of living, doing business, community engagement, public spaces, institutions and various other aspects of civilized human settlements have survived through the ages. The rural settlements of Asian countries, specifically India fought the pandemic in their own ways of adaptations. It has been argued that the World Health Organization (WHO) had so far worked closely and still working with global experts, governments, medical partners to rapidly expand scientific knowhows on this new virus, its outbreak and mitigation methods at the country, regional and micro-levels even at individual levels (UN, 2022).

Methodology

The methodology followed to write this article is categorized into two. The first one is the collection of data that comprised of the map of the village Goalpara and its exact location. The secondary information was obtained through Census Data and maps provided by National Atlas and Thematic Mapping Organizations; The literature review encompassed going through articles, news reports which unfortunately lacked micro-level study of the villages in rural India. The data were collected on field based on demographic parameters, land use components and struggles that the respondents faced and are facing to get into the neo-normal. The second part of the study included the interpretation of the information through statistical analysis. The state level data were also used to gauge the actual situation of the pandemic phase as far as distribution and management of provision of basic services are concerned through Public Distribution System.

Objectives

Bengal being the land of rivers and history often tells us that once the prosperity of it was intimately linked to river Bhagirathi and its systems. Most of the settlements in Bengal (and the study area) were associated to the activities of agriculture, cottage industries to name a very few. Since food crops have a steady demand but the phase of Covid-19 disrupted the Public Distribution System leading to the damage of many perishable commodities. Objective of this paper is to highlight many problems associated to the pandemic in a small micro-level study area at the granular form. This would help to add some light into the global study on varied experiences of people in the last two years.

Study Area

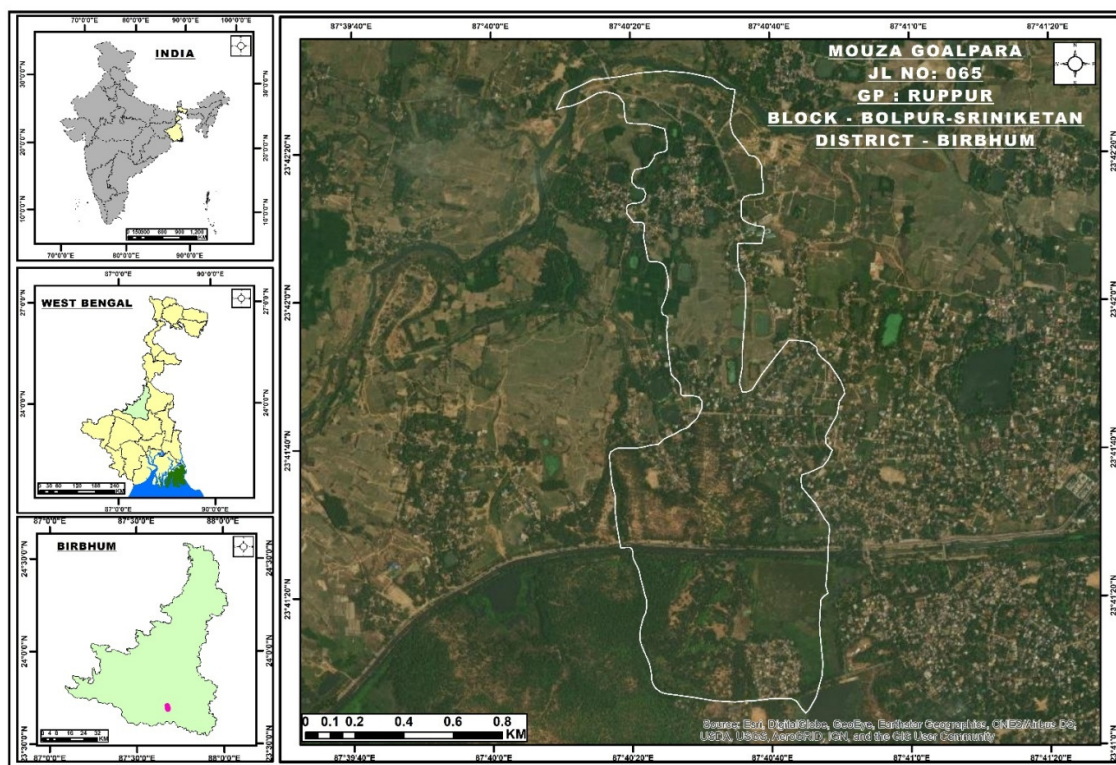


Figure 1: Map showing location of Goalpara village, West Bengal, India

The name Birbhum which includes Goalpara (where the case study is conducted) once sheltered quite a huge proportion of tribal population used to be densely forested years back. The study area encompasses the Goalpara village situated under the Ruppur Panchayet (rural administrative body) in Birbhum district of West Bengal (Figure 1). The region is predominantly agricultural and the land use reveal so. It has an altitude of around 40 meters above the sea-level and shows its plainland feature. It has dense vegetation in the adjacent areas, however near river Kopai the region shows agricultural land use components. Infact the region exhibits quite a dense settlement well connected by road networks. As discussed, earlier Goalpara village is situated in the western district of Birbhum of West Bengal and as far as relief is concerned the village has an elevation between 50-100 metres along the river Ajay. It depicts the *Alfisol* variety of older alluvial soils, quite fertile (not very though) for the

general crop cultivation. The region exhibits typical tropical monsoonal climate with more days of dry spells owing to its inward location. The region records average temperature (monthly) below 15 degrees that often nears 0 degree during winter. The relative humidity becomes low during pre-monsoon and gains back during the late months. The village near river Kopai has a descending terrain but the other side of the village has frequent undulations.

Demography

The rural settlement named Goalpara is taken into consideration to discuss its demographic conditions along with the problems faced by the inhabitants during the recent pandemic at micro-level. The surveyed families reflect more or less equal number of male and females of 382 size of total surveyed population. Here majorly the families belong to the general categories, followed by economically weaker sections of the communities while few belonged to the Other Backward Caste. All the surveyed families here are followers of Hindu religion and typically like most villages, male dominate women in working status (Figure.2b)

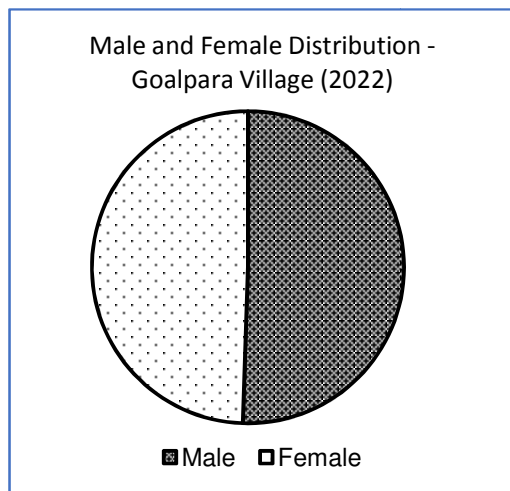


Figure 2a

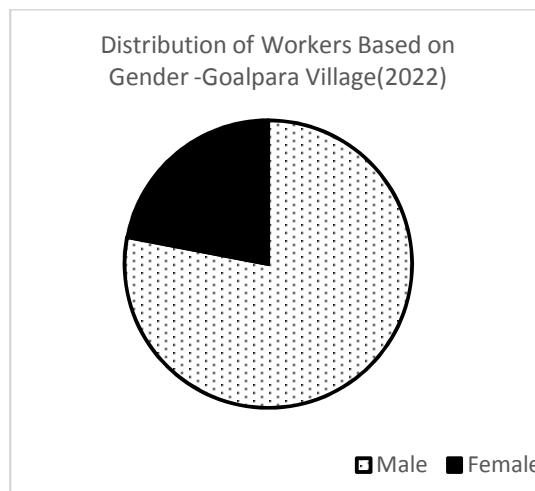


Figure 2b

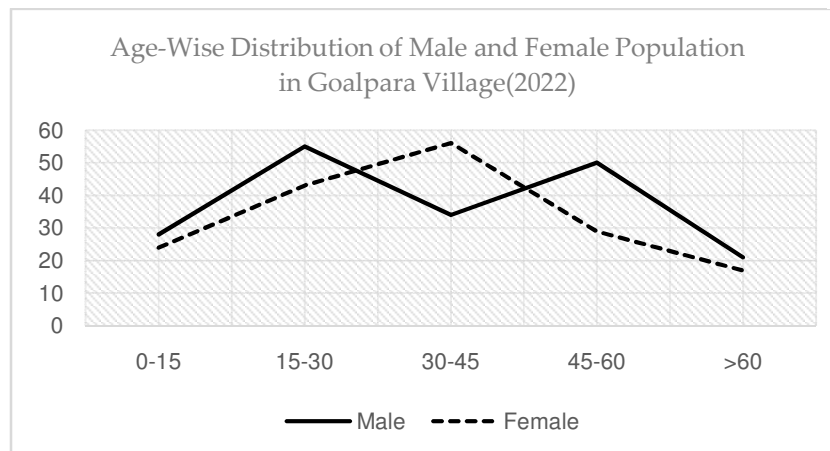


Figure 2c

(Source: Primary Survey, September 2022)

As far as age-sex profile of the study area is concerned, maximum number of male respondents belonged to 15-30 age group category where potentialities to already working male category are included. However, the females are more in middle aged category followed by 15-30 age group. The least are the number of both males and females in the greater than 60 years categories (Figure 2c).

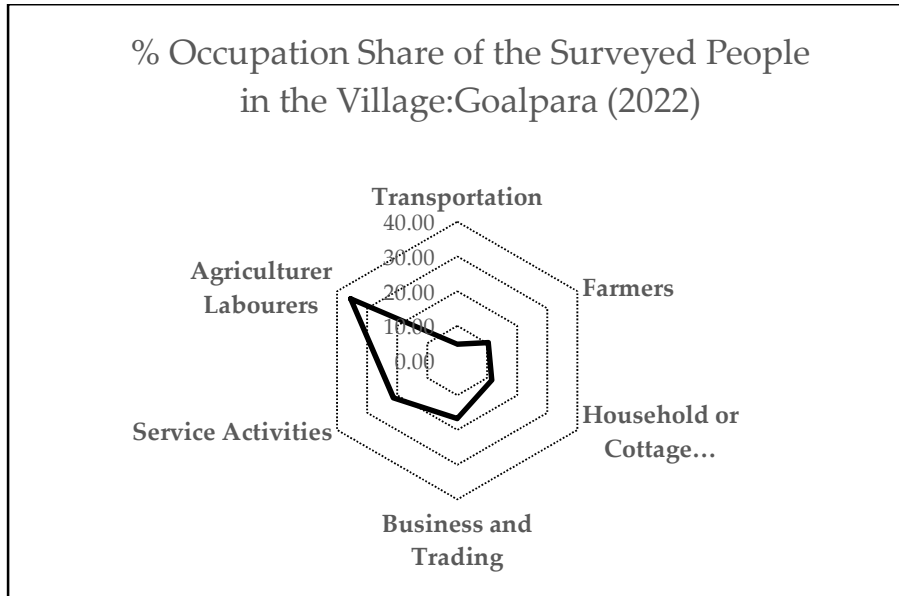


Figure 3 (Source: Primary Survey, September 2022)

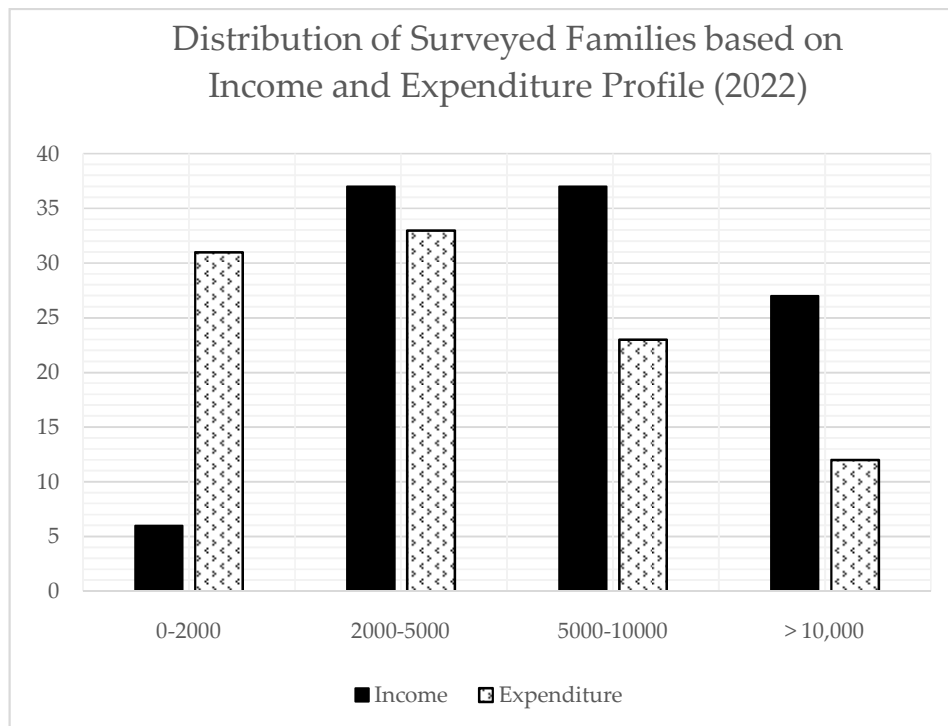


Figure 4a

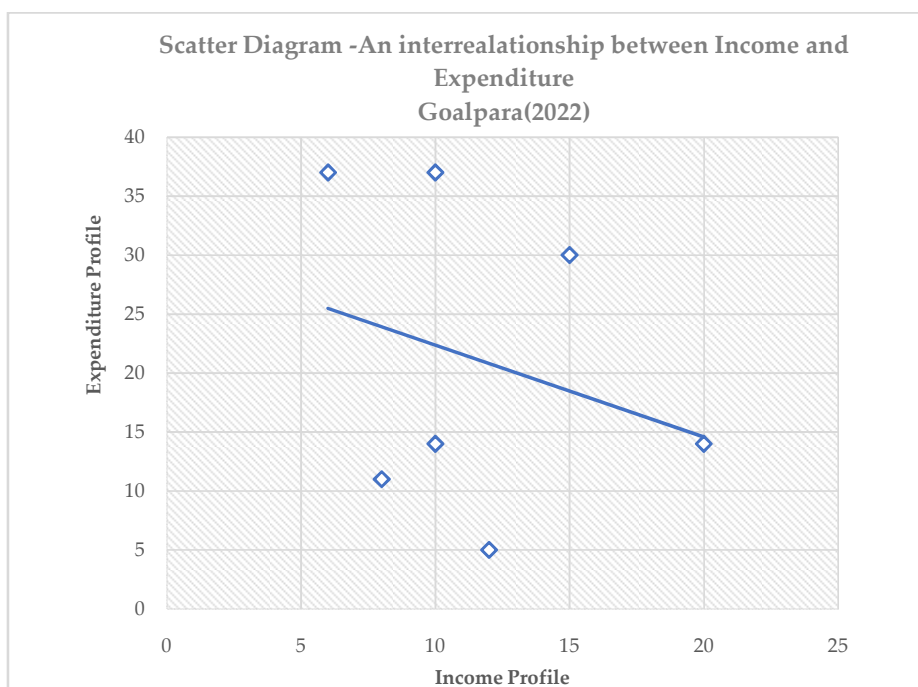


Figure 4b (Source: Primary Survey, September 2022)

The occupation of the respondents reveals maximum percentage as agricultural labourers, followed by service activities, businesses followed by household industrial workers and farmers, least engaged in transport activities. The agricultural labourers form the majority and they are the worst sufferers of the pandemic. The ownership of land is few, an area of concern economically (Figure 3). As far as education is concerned most of the respondents have studied uptill primary level, followed by secondary to higher secondary level, under graduate to others categories. Very few have done post-graduation. The responses of the households reveal more the income of the households, more will be the savings; and vice versa. Also, the major concentration of families belongs to monthly income of 5000-10000 INR and 2000-5000 INR categories. The expenditures are mostly recorded in 0-2000INR and 2000-5000INR categories (Figure 4). A market survey was conducted in the same year, in close vicinity of the Goalpara village where most shops are rented; while few are owned. Mostly shops are permanent while few are temporary. The shop keepers complained of running completely out of business in the last two years and that their economic conditions suffered the most. The majority of the shop owners admitted very low gap between income and expenditure with little or no savings to make. The shops were majorly male-owned. Shops of the nearby markets or 'Hats' open on daily basis, followed by weekly and few open monthly during the season of tourisms. The Covid-19 phase had a direct impact on the shop keepers and those working in the cottage industries centred around the tourism activities of Shantiniketan. What remains interesting is the analysis that reveals that the surveyed households in low-income group have expenditures more (especially in the basic households' articles); and the low to high income groups relatively manage to save a few after the expenditures are met (Figure 4b). Thus, a negative relation is portrayed in the relationship; it

is alarming as the low earners soon fell into the debt traps of financial crises during the pandemic.

Infact the very statements recorded through the interviews highlighted the awe of such trauma of being stagnant and thankfully the period we visited was seeing an overcoming of the pandemic through the release of lockdown impositions. The worst affected were the villagers or the respondents who had been categorised in the low to very low monthly income status where expenditures they incurred in general always outweighed the earned amount (Figure 4). Specifically, the agricultural labourers and those holding small business holders suffered the most. Majorly the houses were pacca or made with all-weather bricks, however a considerable number of houses are kutchra or made of mud and bamboo sticks; they remained ill maintained with growing poverty. The respondents use LPG as fuel for cooking purposes, however quite a high number of households still preferred wood, few coal and very few use kerosene. Such trend took a leap during the phase of Pandemic. They preferred cement and bricks as building materials for houses, but used mud, leaves and bamboos temporarily. In order to understand them further, it should be noted that the village respondents mostly rear domesticated animals for the supply of cow milk, hen and duck eggs and meat etc. However, they complained that such activities of them (that fetched them few earnings) suffered during the phase. This has recovered with government interventions but still suffers from limited demand with not so mentionable tourist flow in the resorts and hotels nearby.

COVID-19: Aftermaths, Vaccination and More

One of the most important components to protect the vulnerable in Covid-19 infection while supporting equitable access to tests, treatments, vaccinations and essential supplies like medical kits has been promoted by the Global Fund and UNICEF and WHO believes that effective allocation mechanisms are necessary to make them available to people (WHO, 2022). As far as the survey revealed the respondents satisfactorily took part in vaccination process and that too for the second and booster dose (Figure 5).

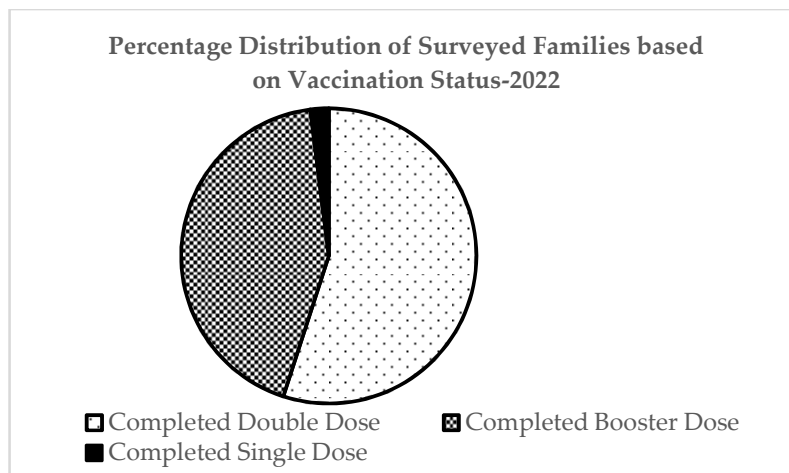


Figure 5 (Source: Primary Survey, September 2022)

However, the reasons which are alarming for their very existence is the issues of

unemployment and drop-out cases from the educational institutes both at the primary and secondary levels. The cases of migration were also significant during the Covid-19 phase in search of employment and other sources of income. Many moved outside the village, opted out from their regular jobs (either through lay-offs or non-profit generating businesses) and were forced to think of alternative sources of employment to name a few (Figure 6). The women respondents remarked that during the lock-down phase it was hard for them to have access to food grains and other samples as Public Distribution System were also suffering from low supply and growing demands.

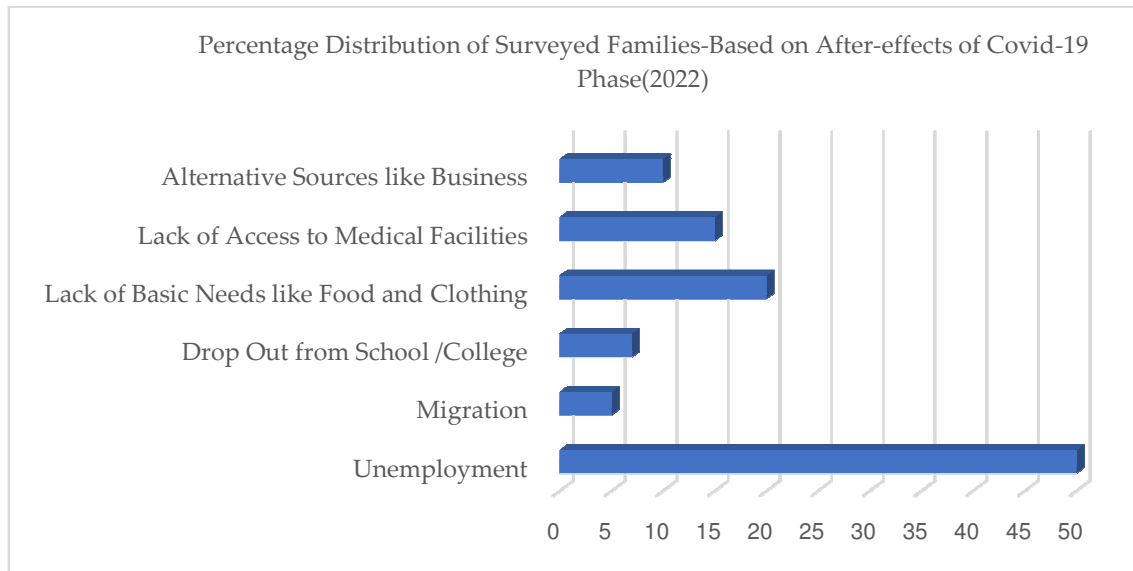


Figure 6 (Source: Primary Survey, September 2022)

State Interventions

As far as state or government interventions are concerned there had reportedly been seven vaccination centres in Bolpur centre which served the villages under its jurisdictions. The villages were served well with food and other staples along with pulses, mustard oil, detergent soaps free of cost or at nominal prices. The Tables (1, 2) below show such statistics. With over 2000 people living in Goalpara village where nearly 400 people were surveyed did not complain about such supports from the state. However, the villages in Birbhum district recorded few cases of deaths due to Covid-19, though affected were as many as 35,000 (Figure 7). As far as district population is concerned which is around 35,000,00, only 1% of the population has been infected officially which appeared satisfying. However, since the region caters to world tourism in the work place of the noble Laureate Rabindra Nath Tagore, the threat of increase in the cases of Covid-19 remained unaltered. Besides, as UN outlined that in any outbreak of epidemic or any kind of hazard, it is important to make ways for active and effective public distribution system. So, it is important to consider easy access to vaccines and staple food as the top most priority. Also, as far as the data portrayed in Table (2) is concerned there has been 10 % of the population brought under food coupon distribution categories under low or no cost Public Distribution System Programme. However, the data that dates back to the year 2008 suggested that 26 % of the population in

the Birbhum district belonged to those households which lied below poverty line. The result of PDS target however may not appear satisfactory but the villagers remarked that there were other initiatives to provide the food from the state and private organizations. It has to be understood that food supply for an agriculturally rich region of Goalpara may not impose restrictions on their overall living but they suffered in other occupation categories where tourism was involved.

Table 1: Vaccination Centres in Birbhum District

Blocks or Urban Local Bodies	Vaccination Centres
Bolpur	7
Bolpur Urban	2
Dubrajpur	5
Illambazar	2
Khyrasole	4
Labpur	2
Md. Bazaar	4
Nanoor	7
Rajnagar	5
Sainthia	5
Suri I	4
Suri II	5
Suri Urban	5

(Source: Govt. of West Bengal, Dept of Health, 2021)

Table 2: Distribution of Food Coupon during Pandemic of Covid-19 diseases at District Level

	Total	Programme	Product	Rate	Scale for Month
Food Coupons	286032	RKSJ-I	Rice	Free	2 kg / Beneficiary
			Wheat	Free	3 kg/Beneficiary
		RKSJ-II	Rice	INR 9.00/Kg	1kg/Beneficiary
			Wheat	INR13.00/Kg	1kg/Beneficiary
Special Coupon against Paper based Ration Card	8905		Rice	RKSJ-Rajya Khadya Suraksha Yojana or Food Security Scheme at State Level	
Temporary Coupon for food grains to Migrants, Stranded Migrants etc.	47619		Bengal Gram/ Chana Whole		
Khadyasathi Food	8	RKSJ-I	Rice		

	Total	Programme	Product	Rate	Scale for Month
Coupon to Transgender		RKSY-II	Wheat		
Khadyasathi Food Coupon to Deprived Women / Sex Worker	57	RKSY-I	Rice		
		RKSY-II	Wheat		
Khadyasathi Special Coupon to the Special Coupon holders whose Digital Ration Card application have been rejected	5438				

(Source: Govt of West Bengal, Dept of Health, Birbhum District, 2021)

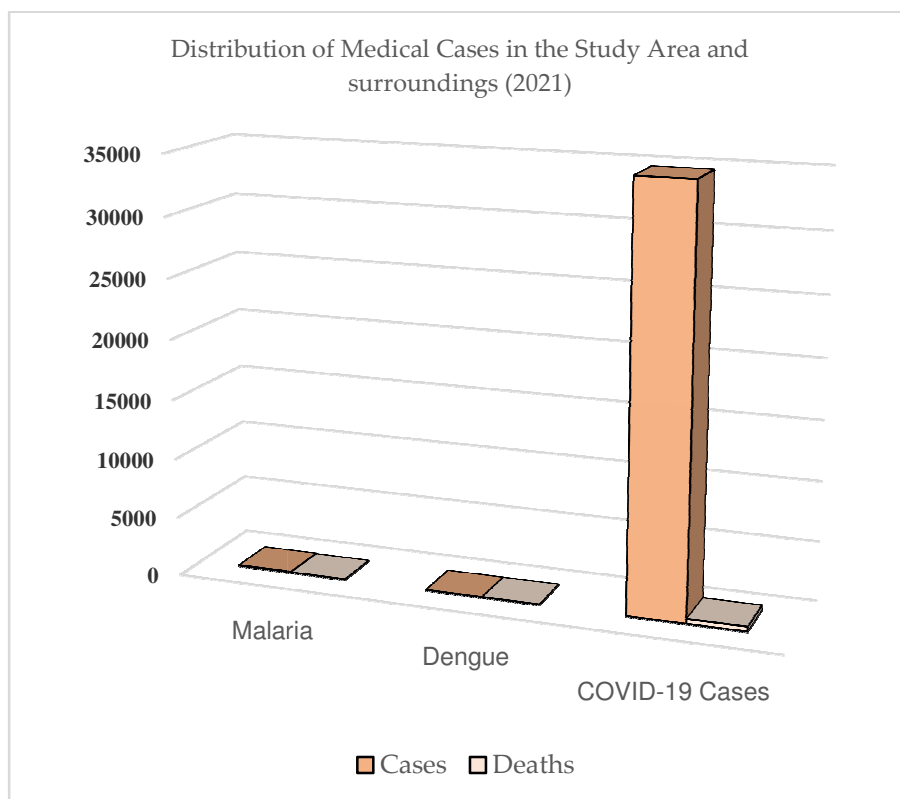


Figure 7 (Source: District Health Statistics, 2021-22)

After Views

The surveyors while studying rural households in Goalpara village had two things in mind; firstly, they gathered the demographic data like population, gender wise and age-wise,

educational status and occupational types to mention few. Secondly the data acquired were tallied with the struggle of the same in the recent phase of pandemic. As the surveyors did a literature study of such topic what was found was hardly any study conducted co-joining the two. Infact at micro-level such surveys followed by simpler analysis is important at micro-level in the rural India. Indeed, such granular studies are important worldwide where the researchers are devoted to finding every other perspective of studying Covid-19 and its impact. However, if we consider the District Census Handbook, 2011, the population of Birbhum district where the village Goalpara is located is nearly 35,00,000; and the vaccination centres are only numbered 57. So, it has been estimated that a single vaccination centre would support free vaccination drive for at least 60,000 population in the eligible categories roughly. This had been quite a burden for the local centres where vaccination has been facilitated (Table 1).

Conclusions

WHO mentions that any kind of data be it quantitative or qualitative to analyse case studies in varied geographical set up lessons learnt may not be generalizable at various settings and contexts. This is even more applicable for small villages or urban locations. Attempts to summarize observations may raise heterogeneity, particularly when there are vulnerable population overlaps. This highlights the significance of micro level study and putting Infront of global audience to seek exchange of ways and methods to fight the ordeal effectively. So, it is apt to mention quoting UN-DESA, ‘that no one is safe until everyone is...’; because every corner of the planet has witnessed the destructive effects of Covid-19. It is the responsibility of us again to contain such calamities and restore for better. With the changing pattern of climate and other physical parameters it has been predicted that infections, diseases, medical emergencies and disasters would be more frequent than what was in the previous years. Besides taking measures to conserve the environment it is the people who suffer the most need to be alert. The unfortunate phase of Covid-19 taught the marginal people to somehow manage their living through some not so satisfying measures of livelihood. However, there should be alternative provisions facilitated by the government or even by themselves to survive well.

Acknowledgements

I wish to take every opportunity to thank my beloved students who have worked (the Undergraduate stream with Geography Major) with me for days to conduct the household surveys, the physio-cultural studies and the land use pattern in the study area, Goalpara. Their support, our experience, the enthusiasm will be long cherished.

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