

**LIVELIHOOD STATUS OF GOLD JEWELLERY MIGRANT WORKERS FROM
WEST BENGAL: THE BRUNT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

(Module E1: Pandemic, Migrants, Refugees and Public Health)

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Abstract

The sudden outbreak of the novel Covid-19 pandemic has drawn attention to the otherwise disdained vulnerable migrant workforce who live precariously moving from rural to urban areas not out of choice but for endurance. The study attempts to assess the after-effects of the pandemic on the employment and livelihood status of returnee migrants who engage as gold jewellery makers. The Wilcoxon signed rank test, Effect size test, etc. reveal that the pandemic significantly affected their income, employment and livelihood status during the pandemic. Although they resumed work after the pandemic, their income, employment and socio-economic status witnessed disruption. Measures like creating necessary awareness of their rights, strengthening the local governance and laws, provisions of social protection benefits, etc., can help them sustain during any crisis and build a resilient future.

Key Words: Migrant Worker; Covid-19; Pandemic; Livelihood Status

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1. INTRODUCTION

After the announcement of lockdown in India for 21 days from 25th March 2020 to combat the spread of COVID-19, the sudden shutdown of activities forced millions of migrant workers to walk to their homelands due to the absence of earning sources, unsuitable living conditions, food insecurity and fear of getting infected. Having no idea about their next meal, they settled as refugees in their hometown due to quarantine. The long journeys of these workers on foot portray a harsh reality of transition from crisis to tragedy and trauma.

The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) reports that of the total 2.25 crore jobs lost in April-May, 2020 out of which 1.72 crores were daily wage earners (Kaushal & Kumar, 2021). As per reports (Mohanty, 2020), 35 per cent of the returned migrant workers either had no work or were employed in casual labour, where 50 per cent of them received less than the minimum wage. There was a drop of about 85 per cent in their income on average after their return. These return migrant workers are either landless or own small land holdings that make building agricultural livelihoods in their native place small (Kukreti, 2020). Though the reopening of MGNREGA (a social security measure in India) made job opportunities temporarily available during the pandemic, it has not been enough to fulfil the requirement of the number of returnees, and earnings were low as compared to what they were receiving earlier. Further, the lack of social protection schemes made it even more difficult.

West Bengal that reports a high proportion of return of migrant workers (Out of 11.4 million migrant workers who returned to their home states, West Bengal alone accounted for 1.33 million returnees, GOI (2021)), also include artisans (karigars) from West Bengal who have

always traditionally been in demand because of their skills in making jewellery (Ghosal, 2015). To sustain themselves and their families, these 'karigars' leave their homelands at a young age with low educational qualifications, move to states like Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka, etc. and engage in jewellery making to earn 'sustainable' means of livelihood. However, their return in times of crisis raises queries regarding their livelihood source which was otherwise assumed as a stable source of income. The pandemic questions the sustainability of their income source, social security, survival and future of this emerging vulnerable segment of society. Therefore, the present study considers these 'karigars' from the Ghatal subdivision of West Bengal to understand the pandemic's impact on the livelihood of these workers.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Sudden lockdown in India has adversely affected the livelihoods of migrant workers in the informal sector (Bhagat et al. 2020). Post the spread of COVID-19, restrictions on travel, lockdowns and physical distancing measures have stranded migrant workers (Moroz et al. 2020). Major challenges faced by women migrant workers include 'loss of livelihood and resulting debt, compromises, captivity and burden of responsibility, disrupted access, emotional geographies of COVID-19 and insufficient support' (Abdul Azeez et al., 2021). Similar negative impact is indicated by Mookerjee et al. (2021) as 54 migrant workers from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal reflect from their experiences. With reference to inter-state migrant labourers from Assam, Guha et al. (2020) find that income of elderly labourers has been significantly hampered and caused failure in sending remittances to their families. Further, migrants from poor communities have been discriminated on grounds of social status (Sengupta and Jha 2020) which has exacerbated their suffering (Kumar and Choudhury, 2021).

Haan (2020) highlight the discrimination and inequality faced by migrant workers in India and neglect while framing of social protection schemes and thus, calls for framing of policies for the betterment of this marginalised group. Rajan et al. (2020) discuss that rise in health concerns of the migrants, inadequate social security provisions and increased concerns regarding women's safety and security have heightened the disruptions in the lives of the migrants and exposed them to vulnerability due to food insecurity and livelihood loss (Adhikari et al., 2020). Though the Government of India initiated the *Pradhan Mantri Gareeb Kalyan Yojana* to alleviate the poor in distress, however, the scheme poorly targeted the migrant population in the informal sector (Srivastava, 2020). Lokhande and Gundimeda (2021) find that the opening up of MGNREGA activities has been partly successful in creating work for the returning seasonal migrants. Taskin and Yadav (2020) report women taking debt to pay for the costs associated with the return of their migrant family members.

With reference to migrant workers, Guadagno (2020) estimates an increase in their probability of getting infected accompanied with inaccessibility of health care, livelihood and income insecurity which will negatively affect their psychological status. Further, they may become more prone to stigmatization and discrimination. Honorati et al. (2020) state limited job opportunities, accumulation of debts and little social protection as some of the challenges faced by Armenian migrants in Russia. Bhandari et al. (2021) identify financial shortfalls, negative impact on health, increased anxiety and fear, lack of social support, family obligations, language barriers as the prominent challenges faced by 14 Nepalese migrants in Japan. Studies based on Accra (Ghana) (Imoro and Dauda, 2021), China (Che et al., 2020) and Finland (Finell et al., 2021) indicate that the pandemic has worsened the existing conditions of the internal migrants. Ryazantsev et al. (2020) infer that lack of international coordination in tackling COVID-19 has complicated the situation of migrant workers who have suffered from closure of borders and absence of adequate social support.

2.2 Objectives of the Study

Two objectives have been set –

1. To measure the pandemic's impact on the employability of gold jewellery migrant workers from Paschim Midnapore in West Bengal.
2. To investigate the impact of the pandemic on the livelihood of the gold jewellery migrant workforce.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Sample Design

To carry out the interview smoothly, the information about the returned ‘karigars’ were collected through the heads of the Gram Panchayat (or Village Council) in different villages of Ghatal subdivision of Paschim Medinipur District (West Bengal). From thereon, snowball sampling technique was utilized to collect required data from at least 200 workers who work as jewellery workers in other Indian states. However, due to time constraints, data could be collected from only 150 workers from the underprivileged areas of Daspur – I, Daspur – II, Ghatal, Chandrakona – I, Chandrakona – II.

Using a structured and direct interview method, information was extracted from the jewellery workers regarding their lives before the pandemic, during the pandemic and post pandemic. The data has been collected from May to July, 2022. After removing the observations that have missing values on key variables, the final sample size for the empirical analysis was 126.

Here, the pre-pandemic phase is 12 months before the initiation of lockdown, i.e., before 24th March, 2020. The pandemic phase is 12 months from the initiation of 1st lockdown to May,

2021. During this period, cases of COVID-19 were high, however, the Government had relaxed certain restrictions in the latter months, and certain economic activities were allowed while following the precautionary measures and the first dose of vaccination was complete before the advent of second wave of COVID-19. The post-pandemic phase is from May, 2021 till the date of data collection, when both the first and second dose of vaccination was complete, and people were getting back to work as earlier times.

3.2 Variables of the Study

To assess the objectives, a total of 22 variables have been considered (Table 1). To judge the impact on the employability status of the individuals, the respondents have been enquired about the availability of jobs, receipt of wages and wage amount, workload level, etc. As pointed out by Chambers and Conway (1992) “*A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living: a livelihood is sustainable which can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation; and which contributes net benefits to other livelihoods at the local and global levels and in the short and long term.*” Here, the term ‘livelihood’ encompasses a means of living along with the requirement of capabilities, assets and is sustainable in the long run. Therefore, the study considers variables that act as proxies to the term ‘livelihood’. These include questions relating to the socio-economic status of the artisans during the three phases mentioned earlier. The economic indicators encompass the aspects of the livelihood resulting from the economic activity they are engaged in and may be quantified in monetary terms while the qualitative aspects which promotes and uplifts their social well-being have been assessed using social indicators. The economic indicators include the basic aspects of income/earnings. In other words, the selected variables assesses whether there has been a change in the amount of earnings, expenditure, savings, burden of debt and access to

financial help during the three phases. The social indicators include intangibles like access to health services, children’s education, living conditions, access to basic amenities, etc.

Table 1: Summary of the list of Variables

Employment	Economic	Social
Job not available 1 = Yes 0 = If otherwise	Decrease in Earnings 1 = Yes 0 = If otherwise	Unable to afford health treatment 1 = Yes 0 = If otherwise
Did not receive wages 1 = Yes 0 = If otherwise	Erosion of savings 1 = Yes 0 = If otherwise	Access to health services 2 = Government Hosp. / home remedies/Quack visit 1 = Government & Private 0 = Private
Wage amount reduced 1 = Yes 0 = If otherwise	Sale of assets to meet expenses 1 = Yes 0 = If otherwise	Child's access to Education 0 = Better 1 = If otherwise
Workload level (Working hours) reduced 1 = Yes 0 = If otherwise	Had to borrow from someone to meet expenses 1 = Yes 0 = If otherwise	Alcohol Consumption 1 = Yes / increased 0 = If otherwise
Relationship between employer and employee 1 = Bad 0 = If otherwise (Good)	Received no other monetary benefits from employer 1 = Yes 0 = If otherwise	Level of conflict in the household 2 = High 1 = Low 0 = No conflict
Not engaged in the same job 1 = Yes 0 = If otherwise	Accepting Government social security schemes 1 = Yes 0 = If otherwise	Living conditions at home 2 = unsatisfactory 1 = Neither nor 0 = satisfactory
Disparity in wage date 0 = No 1 = If otherwise	Household's financial situation 2 = unsatisfactory 1 = Neither nor 0 = satisfactory	No access to basic amenities (Electricity, Access to safe drinking water, Sanitation system etc.) 1 = Yes 0 = If otherwise
		No access to Smartphone with internet 1 = Yes 0 = If otherwise

3.3 Model Specification

First the income during the three phases has been compared – before the onset of lockdown, during lockdown and after the cessation of lockdown using t-test. Three tests are adhered to –

Kolmogorov-Smirnov; Friedman Test, Wilcoxon signed rank test - to understand the effect of lockdown on the employability and livelihood of the migrants during the abovementioned three phases. To measure the strength of the effect – Cohen’s d Effect size test has been utilized.

4. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1 Respondents’ Background

Table 2 highlights the strong presence of male workers engaged in jewellery making (96.8 per cent) as only 4 out of the 126 respondents are females. 81.8 per cent of the respondents are aged between 17 to 35 years. Most of these workers (92.9 per cent) have attained education up to the secondary level, i.e., passed matriculation examinations. Fair percentage of the respondents are married (54 per cent), belong to different social categories where General and SC communities occupy a major percentage (84.10 per cent), follow Hinduism (84.9 per cent) and have up to 6 dependent family members (82.5 per cent). Majority of the respondents fall in the category of Below Poverty Line (BPL) (74.6 per cent) and 47.6 per cent of the total respondents have been employed in other states for more than 10 years.

Table 2: Background of the Respondents

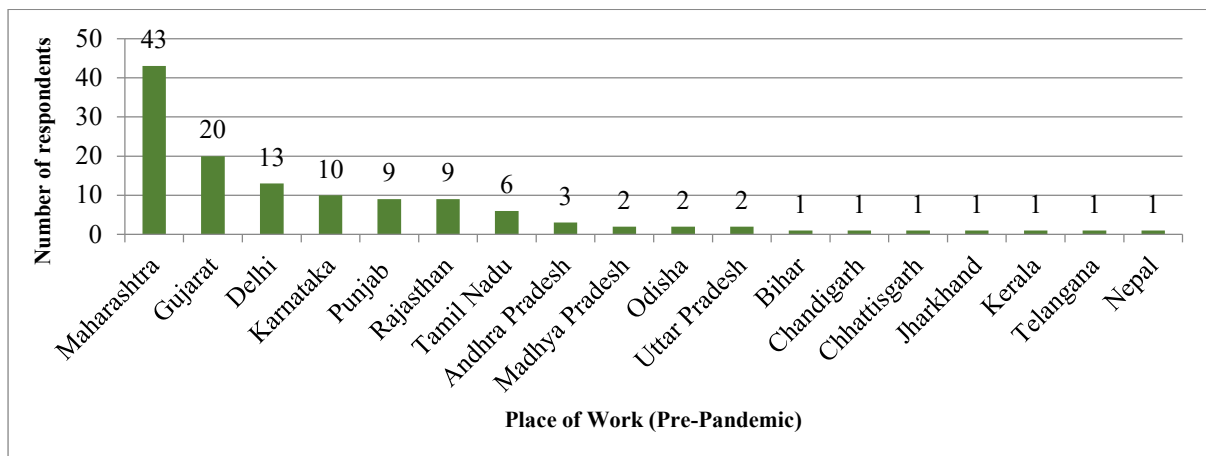
Background Characteristics	Count	Weighted percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	122	96.8
Female	4	3.2
Age group		
17 - 25	52	41.3
26 - 35	51	40.5
36 - 50	23	18.3
Level of Education		
No education	28	22.2
Primary	20	15.9
Secondary	69	54.8
Above secondary	9	7.1
Marital Status		
Single	58	46.0
Married	68	54.0

Social Category		
General	44	34.9
SC	62	49.2
ST	1	0.8
OBC	19	15.1
Religion		
Hindu	107	84.9
Other (including Muslim)	19	15.1
Poverty Line		
APL	32	25.4
BPL	94	74.6
No. of family members/dependent members		
< 4	26	20.6
4 - 6	78	61.9
> 6	22	17.5
Period of migration (Years)		
< 10	66	52.4
10 and above	60	47.6

Source: Prepared by Researcher [n=126]

Most of them were employed in Maharashtra (34.13 per cent) in the pre-pandemic phase where (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Place of Migrant (Pre- Pandemic)

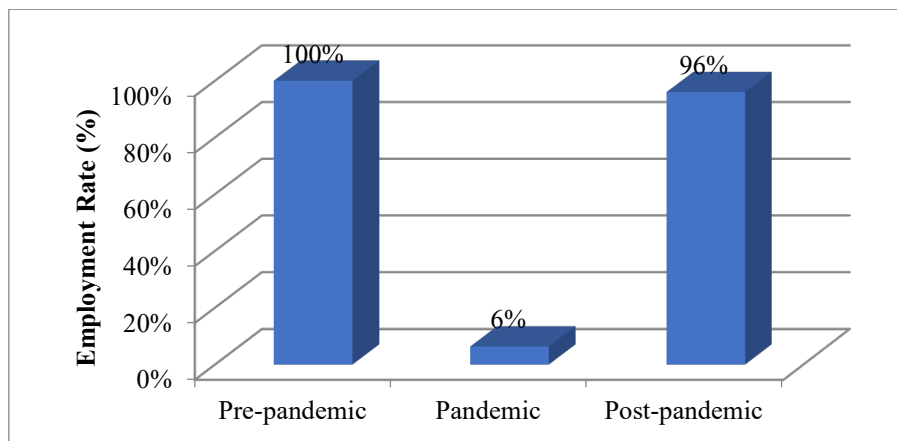


Source: Prepared by Researcher [n=126]

During the pandemic, most of the respondents had no work and had to return to their villages (Figure 4). Only 6 per cent of them were able to earn an income during the pandemic (Figure 2). However, 96 per cent of the respondents had resumed the status of employment.

During the pandemic the respondents could earn a paltry amount of ₹699 on average per month (Figure 3). Though the respondents had resumed working after the cessation of lockdown, the monthly average wages that they were earning before the pandemic, i.e., ₹14,194, had reduced to ₹13,583.

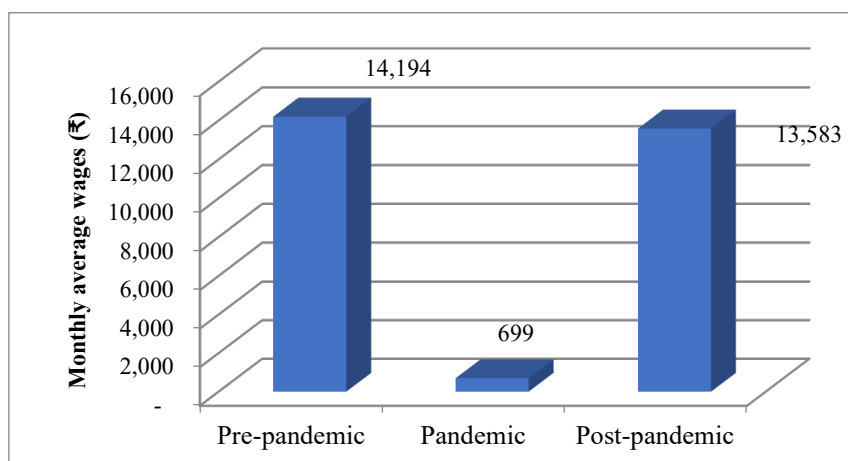
Figure 2: Employment Rate (%)



Source: Prepared by Researcher [n=126]

As per the responses, the workers receive payments either in the form of gold itself or the same can be converted into cash. For example, for each 100 gm of jewellery making these workers received either 1-1.2 gm of gold or market value of 1-1.2 gm of gold as payment. This system of payment, in general, is called as 'loss system'. Here, more the work they are able to produce, better are the chances of earning more.

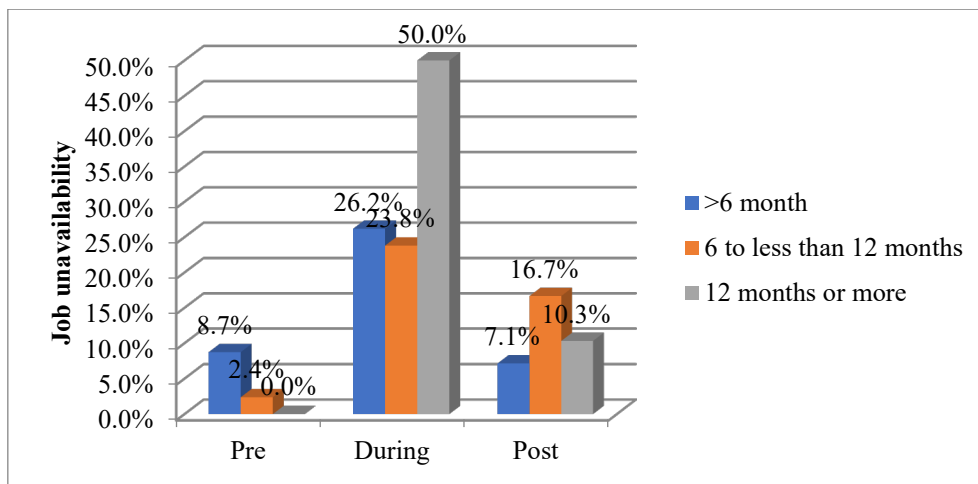
Figure 3: Monthly Average Wages (₹)



Source: Prepared by Researcher [n=126]

As per the responses of the workers, they did not have work throughout the year and there were months when they have to remain idle and wait for notifications of resuming work from the employers. While half of them respond that they did not have any work for up to one year, the other half had no work for more than twelve months during the pandemic period (from April, 2020 to several months in 2021).

Figure 4: Non-availability of Job



Source: Prepared by Researcher [n=126]

4.2 Impact on Income and Employment

First, the study documents the disparity in wages between (i) pre & during (ii) during & post (iii) pre & post. Table 3 reports the descriptive statistics of the monthly income earned by the migrant workers. The respondents account minimum earnings of ₹1500 before and after the pandemic. Table 3 also shows a huge reduction in the earnings on average during the pandemic as compared to the income before and after COVID-19. The study empirically assesses whether there is any difference in the mean income earned by comparing two phases at a time using the paired t-test.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics – Monthly Income of Migrant Workers

Monthly income	Number (N)	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	Variance	Kurtosis	Skewness
Pre	126	1,500	40,000	14,194	5437	29555889	5.46	1.65

Pandemic	126	-	20,000	699	2716	7376399	26.53	4.81
Post	126	1,500	55,000	13,583	6297	39651000	15.06	2.66
Overall	126	1,500	55,000	9,492	4062	16498409	11.09	2.42

Source: Calculated by Researcher

As per Table 4, significant reduction is evident when the income earned before the pandemic is compared with the income earned during the pandemic. On average, the monthly earnings of the respondents significantly declined from ₹14,194 to ₹699 during the pandemic and significantly increased to ₹13,583 in the post-pandemic phase, however, significantly reduced as compared to the pre-pandemic phase.

Table 4: Results of t-test

	Paired differences					t	df	Sig (2 tailed)
	Mean	Std Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Income during pre and pandemic phase	13495.2	5611.6	499.9	12505.8	14484.6	26.995	125	0.000
Income during pre- and post-pandemic phase	611.1	2920.9	260.2	96.1	1126.1	2.349	125	0.000
Income during pandemic and post-pandemic phase	12884.1	6422.0	572.1	14016.4	11751.8	22.520	125	0.000

Source: Calculated by Researcher

To understand the impact of the pandemic on the employment and livelihood status of the migrant workers, 22 variables (Table 1) depicting their employment and socio-economic status have been assigned scores. The variables have been allotted higher scores if the opinions of the respondents indicate negative effects on their employment status and livelihood, i.e., higher score indicates high negative impact of the pandemic. The total score of the social and economic variables gives the 'livelihood' score of a respondent. Before proceeding with the assessment, the reliability of the data has been tested using the Cronbach's coefficient Alpha (which in this case is 0.869) and Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test is employed to ascertain whether the dataset follows a normal distribution. As per the

Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test value, the data does not follow normal distribution ($p < 0.000$), therefore, Wilcoxon signed-rank Test, a non-parametric test is used to assess if the mean livelihood scores significantly vary between two phases under consideration.

As shown in Table 5, the Friedman test and Wilcoxon signed-rank test reveal a significant difference in the employment status between two different phases ($p < 0.01$).

**Table 5: Employment –
Kolmogorov-Smirnov & Wilcoxon Signed-rank Test**

Phase	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test			Friedman test	Wilcoxon signed-rank test	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	K-S Result		Pair	Result (2-tailed)
Employment	Pre	0.460	0.615	231.109 (0.000)	Pair 1	-9.810 (0.000)
	pandemic	5.984	1.088		Pair 2	-4.905 (0.000)
	Post	0.921	1.100		Pair 3	-9.767 (0.000)

() Indicate the probability values; Pair 1= Pre-pandemic & pandemic phase; Pair 2= Pre-pandemic & post-pandemic phase; Pair 3= Pandemic & post-pandemic phase.

Source: Calculated by researcher

To assess the viability of the difference in the employment scores, the effect size is computed under the Cohen’s d model (Cohen, 1988) and mean absolute deviation (Table 6). The effect on the employment scores of the pre- and post- pandemic phase is small (0.724) as compared to the before and during the pandemic phase (9.204) and pandemic and post-pandemic phase (7.441). The large values of Cohen’s d and mean absolute deviation indicate that the difference in the mean employment scores in the three phases is quite large.

**Table 6: Employment –
Effect Size Test under Cohen's d & Mean Absolute Deviation**

Phase	Mean Difference	Pooled Std. Deviation	Cohen's d	Mean absolute deviation
Employment Pair 1	5.524	0.884	6.250	9.204
Employment Pair 2	0.460	0.891	0.517	0.724
Employment Pair 3	5.063	1.094	4.629	7.441

Source: Calculated by researcher

Table 7 shows the results of Wilcoxon signed-rank test with respect to the socio-economic status, i.e., the livelihood status of the respondents. When comparing the mean difference of the scores of the two dimensions (Table 5) in three combinations of the three phases (denoted as Pair 1, Pair 2 and Pair 3), a statistically significant change was evident in the livelihood scores ($p < 0.000$). The Wilcoxon signed-rank test indicates that the livelihood of the workers during the pandemic was significantly different in the other two phases (z statistic associated p-values less than 0.01). Subsequently, we can confirm that the pandemic significantly affected the socio-economic condition of the workers.

**Table 7: Livelihood –
Kolmogorov-Smirnov & Wilcoxon Signed-rank Test**

Phase	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test			Friedman test	Wilcoxon signed-rank test		
	Mean	Std. Deviation	K-S Result		Pair	Result (2-tailed)	
Livelihood	Pre	5.056	1.449	1.966 (0.001)	220.414 (0.000)	Pair 1	-9.771 (0.000)
	pandemic	10.476	2.226	1.544 (0.017)		Pair 2	-6.655 (0.000)
	Post	5.984	2.036	1.685 (0.007)		Pair 3	-9.602 (0.000)
Economic	Pre	1.444	1.040	2.125 (0.000)	226.087 (0.000)	Pair 1	-9.794 (0.000)
	pandemic	5.524	1.079	3.162 (0.000)		Pair 2	-4.619 (0.000)
	Post	1.841	1.439	2.120 (0.000)		Pair 3	-9.655 (0.000)
Social	Pre	3.611	1.239	2.184 (0.000)	146.669 (0.000)	Pair 1	-8.772 (0.000)
	pandemic	4.952	1.644	1.563 (0.015)		Pair 2	-6.746 (0.000)
	Post	4.143	1.244	2.694 (0.000)		Pair 3	-7.071 (0.000)

() Indicate the probability values; Pair 1= Pre-pandemic & pandemic phase; Pair 2= Pre-pandemic & post-pandemic phase; Pair 3= Pandemic & post-pandemic phase.

Source: Calculated by researcher

**Table 8: Livelihood –
Effect Size Test under Cohen's d & Mean Absolute Deviation**

Phase	Mean Difference	Pooled Std. Deviation	Cohen's d	Mean absolute deviation	
Livelihood	Pair 1	5.421	1.878	2.886	3.840
	Pair 2	0.929	1.767	0.526	0.729
	Pair 3	4.492	2.133	2.106	2.806
Economic	Pair 1	4.079	1.059	3.851	4.673
	Pair 2	0.397	1.255	0.316	0.388
	Pair 3	3.683	1.272	2.896	3.674
Social	Pair 1	1.341	1.456	0.921	1.185
	Pair 2	0.532	1.242	0.428	0.564

Pair 3	0.810	1.458	0.555	0.753
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Source: Calculated by researcher

The effect on the livelihood scores of the pre- and post- pandemic phase is small (0.729) as compared to the before the pandemic and during the pandemic phase (3.840) and pandemic and post-pandemic phase (2.806).

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 outbreak has significantly affected the livelihood of the gold jewellery workers during the pandemic and lockdown period. Most of the workers could not resume the same work post-pandemic. Unable to access work due to lockdown reduced the earning capacity. As reported in some cases, the payment received through MGNREGA activities or small informal labour jobs was too low on comparing the payment they received before the pandemic. Even after the lockdown was lifted, the respondents could not engage in their previous jobs. The workers depended on past savings, borrowed to meet the expenses or sold the assets to meet the requirements. Unaware about the Government social protection schemes further lessened their scope of availing any financial aid. The negative effects on their employability and economic situation further influenced their social situation. Children's education was affected, there was increase in household conflicts, and the living conditions weakened. Although they resumed work after the pandemic, their income, employment and socio-economic status witnessed disruption. For example, the workers report a reduction in working hours, wage amount and change in occupation after the pandemic.

6. CONCLUSION

The present study examines the lives of gold jewellery workers who lead precarious lives doing informal jobs in distant places away from their families and lands. The livelihood of

these gold jewellery workers had been severely affected during the pandemic. Though some of them could earn through MGNREGA activities as seen in other studies (Lokhande and Gundimeda, 2021), the income generated was insufficient to meet the daily needs of the migrants and their families. The study highlights the insecurities of working as gold jewellery workers and questions the sustainability of these jobs. Where a section of the workforce could sustain themselves and their families by continuing work-from-home, it was difficult for the informal workers to earn a day's living costs.

As per the observations, these people move to other states in search of employment opportunities in their late teens due to their inability to pursue further education as the household cannot survive due to low agricultural output in the state. Further, the informal job as a gold jewellery worker seems more rewarding as the scope of gaining jobs with their qualification level is low. They work for more than 16 to 18 hours a day and earn according to the amount of work they can produce according to the 'loss system'. While some receive entitlements of lodging and food from their employers, others have to suffice with poor worksite housing and cramped living conditions. Illiteracy and lack of general awareness of the entitled benefits from the employers and government deprive these individuals and their respective families of their rights and facilities. As stated by most respondents, they remit money by incurring a charge of 10 per cent on every ₹1,000. The families back in the villages do not have bank accounts, lack access to digital facilities, or are unaware of the ease of digital transfers that make remittance costlier.

The above observations and analysis underline the necessity of involvement of governments, non-profit governmental organisations, and policymakers to protect them from discrimination. Measures like creating necessary awareness of their rights, strengthening the local governance and laws, provisions of social protection benefits, etc., can help them sustain during any crisis and build a resilient future.

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