



SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF INFORMAL WORKERS IN KALIMPONG MUNICIPALITY AREA

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ABSTRACT

Migration has become a significant livelihood strategy for workers seeking better employment opportunities, particularly in the informal sector. The present study examines the migration patterns and characteristics as well as the socio-economic conditions of informal labour (primarily migrant informal workers) in Kalimpong Municipality Area, Kalimpong District, West Bengal. The study is based on primary data collected through a structured questionnaire from 70 migrant informal workers and is supplemented by secondary data obtained from various government reports, journal articles and census publications. The findings reveal that most respondents migrated from Bihar, Nepal and neighbouring districts of West Bengal, with migration primarily driven by the lack of employment opportunities and livelihood insecurity in their native places. Construction, self-employment, retail trade and domestic work constitute the major occupations of the respondents. Although migration has contributed to improved household incomes and regular remittance flows, most workers continue to experience low wages, long working hours, rented accommodation and limited employment security, reflecting the precarious nature of informal employment. At the same time, access to government healthcare, drinking water, and sanitation has contributed to improving their living conditions. The study also finds that while a considerable proportion of migrants intend to remain in Kalimpong, the majority prefer to return to their native places after achieving their economic objectives.

KEYWORDS: Informal labour, migration, Kalimpong.

INTRODUCTION

Kalimpong is a small hill town in the state of West Bengal in India having a rich and layered historical background shaped by different kingdoms, colonial powers and cultural influence. Almost lost in the cacophony of political turmoil and conflicts, this “sleepy town” as described by Kiran Desai in her Booker Prize winning novel ‘The Loss of Inheritance’ (Desai, 2006) was once a very important point for Nepali and Tibetan traders. Kalimpong became famous for its bustling trade fairs, especially wool and spices that were brought from Tibet. As a result, the town experienced the growth of a multicultural landscape that included Nepali, Tibetan, Marwari and European influences collectively contributing to the town’s diverse socio-cultural identity.

In this contextual background, the study of informal labour and migration assumes particular significance, as the town's historically diverse and dynamic socio-economic landscape has been shaped by successive waves of migrant populations and their incorporation into various forms of informal employment. Informal labour in Kalimpong is shaped by limited industrial development and fewer formal job opportunities. Many people rely on seasonal work, especially in tourism and agriculture leading to unstable income. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) notes that a major factor causing growing informality is the demographic dividend, this trend is especially reinforced by significant rural–urban migration (Sahu and Behera, 2025). Similar trend can be seen in the study area where population from nearby rural areas form a significant part of the informal workforce.

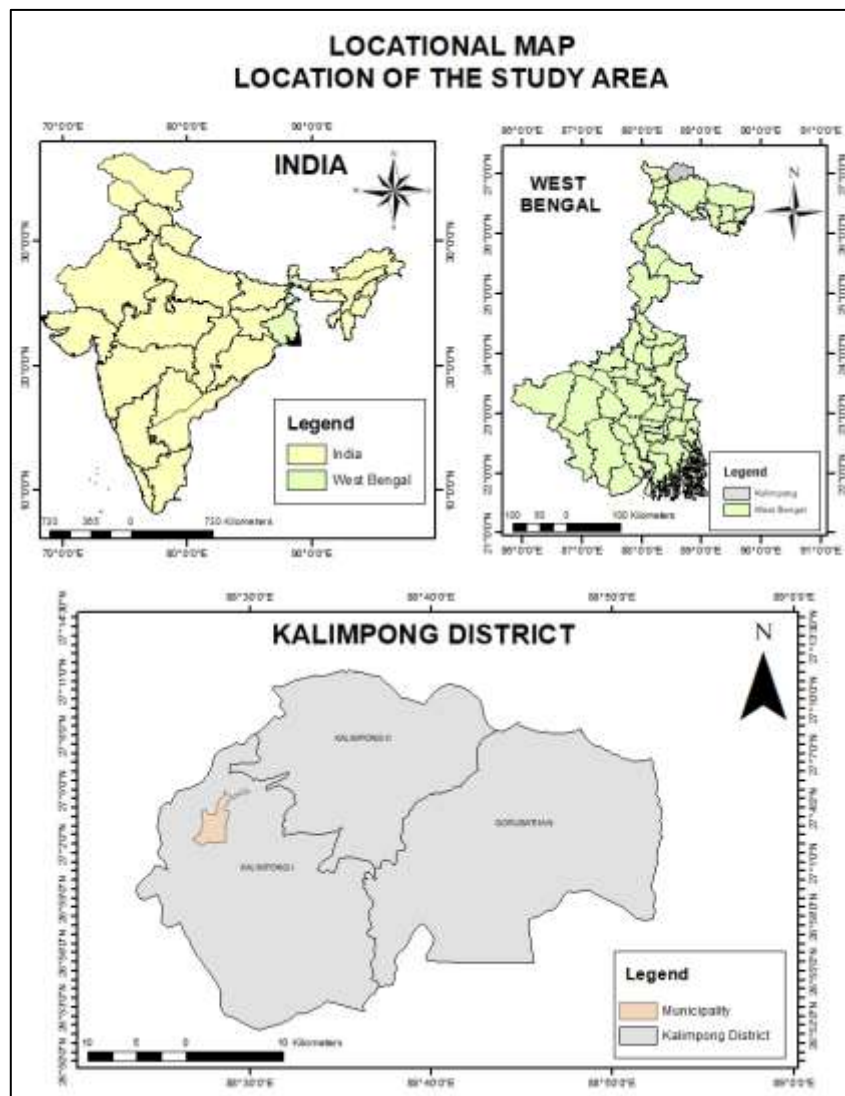


Fig.1: Location map of the study area

OBJECTIVES

The present study thus seeks to analyse the socio-economic characteristics of the informal labour sector and aims to identify the major factors responsible for migration of informal workforce into Kalimpong. The study also attempts to explore the relationship between migration and the growth of informal economic activities in the study area. And finally, it aims to identify the major problems and challenges faced by migrant labourers in the region.

DATABASE AND METHODOLOGY

The study on migration and the informal labour sector in Kalimpong Municipality area is based on both primary and

secondary sources of data. Primary data was collected through field survey using questionnaires. Information regarding their socio-economic condition, occupation, migration pattern, income and challenges faced was gathered during the survey.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The findings of this study are based on primary data collected through questionnaire of 70 respondents from the Kalimpong Municipality Area. The survey focused on migrant workers engaged in the informal labour sector to understand their socio-economic characteristics, migration patterns, employment status, income and the challenges they face.



Table. 1
Descriptive Statistics

VARIABLES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
GENDER		
MALE	50	71.43
FEMALE	20	28.57
AGE GROUP		
<18	1	1.43
18-25	13	18.57
26-35	28	40.00
36-45	12	17.14
46-55	10	14.29
>55	6	8.57
EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATION		
NO FORMAL EDUCATION	31	44.29
PRIMARY SCHOOL	12	17.14
SECONDARY SCHOOL	20	28.57
HIGHER SECONDARY SCHOOL	2	2.86
GRADUATE	5	7.14
MARITAL STATUS		
SINGLE	16	22.86
MARRIED	52	74.29
WIDOW	1	1.43
DIVORCED	1	1.43
RELIGIOUS COMPOSITION		
HINDU	46	65.71
MUSLIM	19	27.14
BUDDHIST	4	5.71
CHRISTIAN	1	1.43
HOUSEHOLD SIZE		
1-2	3	4.29%
3-4	26	37.14%
5-6	22	31.43%
>6	19	27.14%

The study considered the above-mentioned socio-demographic variables. The initial question included gender composition followed by age group. The age group was considered using six groups (<18, 18-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, >55). Education was measured in five levels: no formal education, primary school, secondary school, higher secondary school and graduate level. The respondents were also asked about their marital status. Information on the religious composition of respondents were also collected to understand the socio-cultural background. While the question on household size was made to identify the dependency burden and economic responsibilities of the respondents.

The demographic profile of the respondents reveals that out of the 70 individuals surveyed, 50 (71.43%) were male and 20 (28.57%) were female, indicating that males constitute the majority of workers in the informal labour sector within the study area.

The age distribution of the respondents shows that the largest proportion belonged to the 26–35 years age group, comprising 28 respondents (40.00%). This was followed by the 18–25 years age group with 13 respondents (18.57%) and the 36–45 years age group with 12 respondents (17.14%). The 46–55 years age group accounted for 10 respondents (14.29%), while 6 respondents (8.57%) were above 55 years of age. Only

1 respondent (1.43%) was below 18 years. The findings indicate that the majority of informal workers are concentrated in the economically productive age groups (18–45 years), suggesting that migration is primarily driven by employment and livelihood opportunities among the working-age population.

An overview of the educational background of the informal workers reveals that most of them have low level of educational attainment indicating that a significant portion of the workforce lacks basic schooling. The survey shows that 44% of the total respondents show no formal education, while 17% and 28% show primary and secondary schooling respectively. The predominance of workers with low educational attainment in informal employment has important implications for their livelihoods. Education thus is an important factor influencing employment outcomes with lower or no educational attainment strongly associated with a higher likelihood of association in the informal employment sector (Sheikh and Sarthak, 2020).

The marital status of the respondents indicate that more than 50% of them are married. The survey further revealed that migration is primarily undertaken to support family livelihoods and improve household income. The religious composition of the respondents reflects the socio-cultural diversity of the migrant population. Hindus constituted the largest group (46



respondents, 65.71%), followed by Muslims (19 respondents, 27.14%) while Buddhists and Christians together constituted around 7%. This distribution can be largely attributed to the population composition of the migrant-sending regions, which in this case is predominantly from Bihar and Nepal.

Household size analysis reveals that 37.14% of respondents belonged to households comprising 3–4 members, followed by 31.43% with 5–6 members and 27.14% with more than six members. Only 4.29% of respondents belonged to households with 1–2 members. Larger households often face greater financial demands, which encourage working-age members to migrate in search of better employment opportunities. This observation is consistent with migration studies that identify household size and family responsibilities as key factors influencing labour migration decisions (Stark and Bloom, 1985; Deshingkar and Akter, 2009).

The native place of the respondents indicates that migration to the study area is predominantly an inter-state phenomenon, with a smaller proportion of intra-state migrants. Among the 70 respondents, the highest number originated from Bihar (27 respondents, 38.57%), followed by Nepal (23 respondents, 32.86%). These findings suggest that the informal labour sector in Kalimpong Municipality Area largely depends on migrant workers from neighbouring states and the adjoining country of Nepal. “Labour migration has long been a defining feature of Nepal-India relations, particularly among the populations of Nepal’s western hill regions” (Bhatt, 2025). Employment among Nepali migrants is largely concentrated in the informal sector characterised by insecure working conditions due to the lack of formal contracts and exclusion from labour legislation and social security schemes (ibid.). Similarly, the predominance of migrants from Bihar in the present study reflects the state’s long-standing pattern of labour out-migration. “Due to persistent widespread poverty and under development, migration from this region continued even after Independence” (Kumar, 2020). More than half of Bihar’s households are affected by migration, with nearly 90% of migrants undertaking seasonal migration, largely driven by

employment-related factors (ibid.). Respondents from Siliguri and Malda accounted for 6 respondents (8.57%) each, while 4 respondents (5.71%) came from Islampur. A small number of respondents migrated from Assam (2 respondents, 2.86%), and only one respondent each belonged to Sikkim (1.43%) and Uttar Pradesh (1.43%). The presence of migrants from these different regions further indicates that both long-distance and short-distance migration contribute to the local informal economy of the study area.

This section presents an analysis of the migration details of the 70 respondents included in the study. It examines key aspects of migration, including the duration of migration, type and pattern of migration, reasons for migration and other socio-economic indicators that contribute to identifying the various levels of vulnerabilities associated with the informal labour sector.

Duration of migration: The duration of migration reveals that a substantial proportion of respondents have been residing and working in the study area for an extended period. Among the 70 respondents, 34 (48.57%) had migrated more than 10 years ago, indicating long-term settlement in the study area. This was followed by 14 respondents (20.00%) who had migrated to Kalimpong for 1–3 years. Respondents with less than one year of migration accounted for 6 (8.57%), while 8 respondents (11.43%) each had migration durations of 4–6 years and 7–10 years, respectively. The predominance of long-term migrant residents in Kalimpong reflects the development of social networks, familiarity with the local labour market and improved livelihood prospects, which may have reduced the likelihood of return migration. Migration is thus often driven by inadequate employment opportunities in the place of origin and the attraction of more favourable economic prospects in destination regions (Deshingkar et. al., 2006). The findings therefore indicate that, for many respondents, migration has evolved from a temporary livelihood strategy into a long-term means of economic survival.

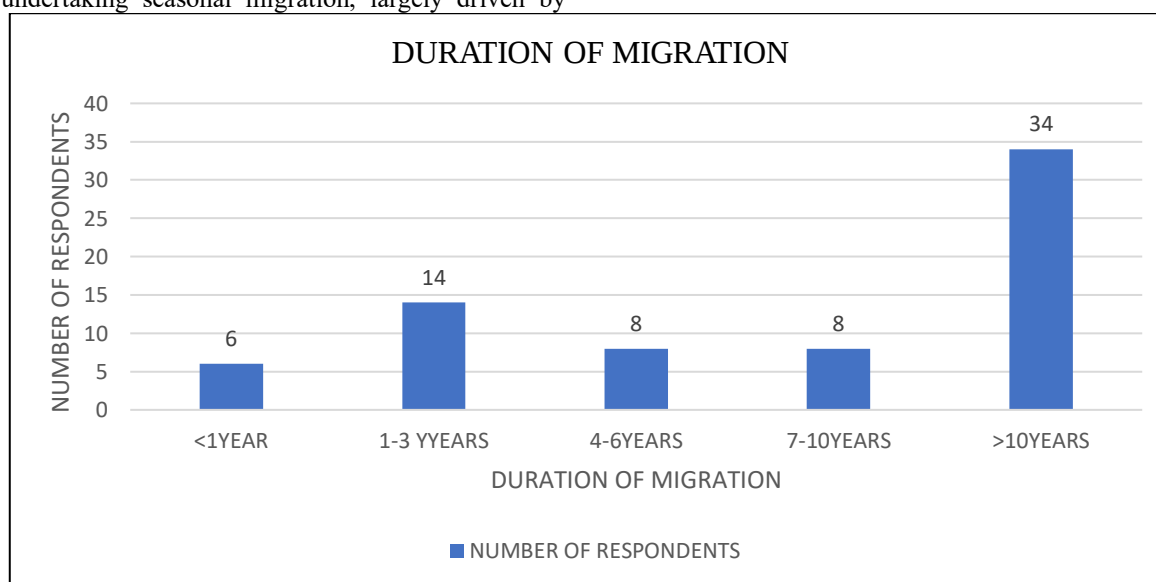


Fig. 2: Duration of Migration

Migration Pattern: The migration pattern of the respondents indicates that the majority migrated alone, accounting for 40 respondents (57.14%). This was followed by 25 respondents (35.71%) who migrated with their immediate families, while 5 respondents (7.14%) migrated with their extended or joint family members. The predominance of individual migration suggests that many respondents initially moved independently to secure employment and generate income for their households. Such migrants often act as target earners, migrating to accumulate savings for specific household objectives, such

as constructing a house, financing education, purchasing agricultural land, or acquiring durable consumer goods that improve the family's standard of living (Massey et al., 1993). Although the physical movement is often undertaken by an individual, migration decisions are frequently made at the household level to diversify income sources, reduce economic risks, and overcome financial constraints affecting family livelihoods, as explained by the New Economics of Labour Migration (Stark et al., 1985).

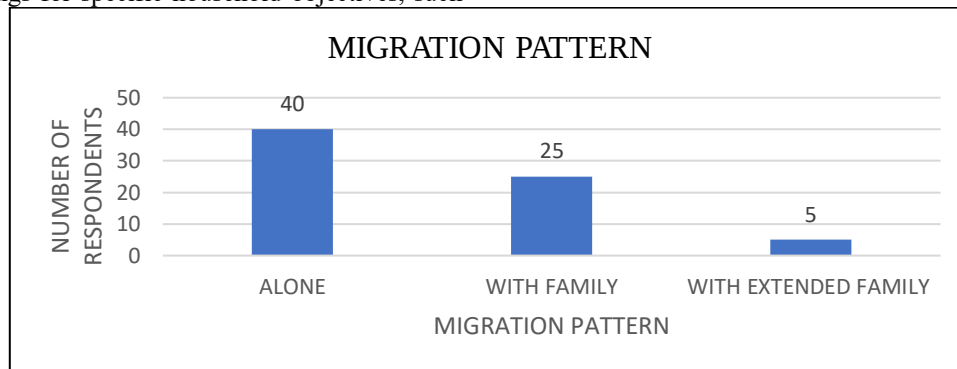


Fig. 3: Migration Pattern

Reasons for migration: The survey findings reveal that the lack of employment opportunities in the native place is the principal reason for migration, reported by 33 respondents (47.14%). This is followed by better employment opportunities at the destination, cited by 21 respondents (30.00%). Higher

wages motivated 7 respondents (10.00%), while family-related reasons accounted for 6 respondents (8.57%). Only 3 respondents (4.29%) migrated primarily for educational purposes.

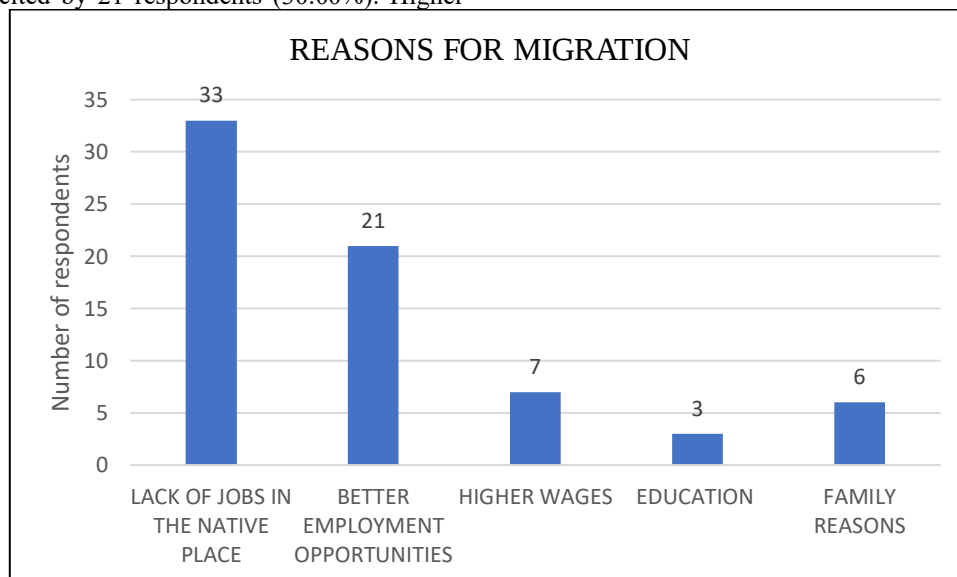


Fig. 4: Reasons for Migration

Considering the source regions of the respondents, particularly the rural areas of Nepal and Bihar, it is evident that push factors have played a more significant role in influencing migration than pull factors. A major factor driving the migration of workers from Nepal and other parts of India to Darjeeling and Kalimpong is the high level of unemployment, poverty and inadequate income opportunities in their native places, which compel economically disadvantaged households to migrate in search of better livelihoods (Bhutia et. al., 2014). “Most workers in the informal sector are migrants, driven by the motivation to earn enough income for survival” (Adihartono, 2023)

The present study has taken into consideration monthly income, working hours and place or nature of work as part of assessment of the working conditions of the informal labour migrants which aligns with the indicators recommended by ILO (ILO, 2023).



Monthly income: The monthly income distribution of the respondents reflects the economic condition of workers engaged in the informal labour sector. Respondents were classified into five income groups: below ₹5,000, ₹5,000–10,000, ₹10,000–15,000, ₹15,000–20,000, and above ₹20,000 per month. The monthly income distribution of the respondents indicates that a large proportion of informal workers earn relatively low wages. Out of the 70 respondents, the highest proportion (24 respondents, 34.29%) reported a monthly income between ₹5,000 and ₹10,000, followed by 18 respondents (25.71%) earning below ₹5,000. 15 respondents (21.43%) earned between ₹10,000 and ₹15,000 per month, while 10 respondents (14.29%) reported incomes between ₹15,000 and ₹20,000. Only 3 respondents (4.29%) earned more than ₹20,000 per month. The findings reveal that nearly 60% of the respondents earn less than ₹10,000 per month, indicating the prevalence of low-income employment in the informal labour sector. Wages in the informal sector are often significantly lower than those in the formal sector, even for similar work (Chakraborty, 2024).

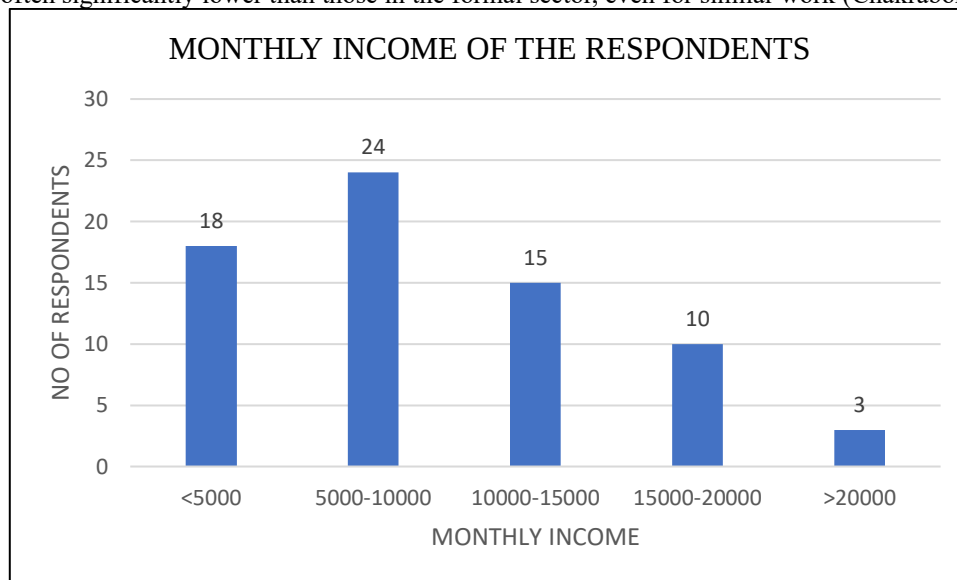


Fig. 5: Monthly income of respondents

Working hours: The analysis of working hours reveals that the majority of respondents work for long hours in the informal labour sector. Among the 70 respondents, 30 (42.86%) reported working between 6 and 8 hours per day, followed by 20 respondents (28.57%) who worked for 8–10 hours. Fourteen respondents (20.00%) reported working for more than 10 hours daily, while only 6 respondents (8.57%) worked for less than 6 hours. The issues of very short and long hours of work are both prominent in the informal economy that dominates much of the developing world (ILO, 2023). The International Labour Organization (ILO) also notes that informal workers often experience long and irregular working hours, inadequate labour protection, and limited access to occupational health and social security benefits (ibid.).

Nature of Work: The occupational distribution of the respondents indicates that the construction sector is the largest source of employment, engaging 21 respondents (30.00%). This is followed by self-employment, which accounts for 14 respondents (20.00%), and employment in shops as salesmen, involving 11 respondents (15.71%). Domestic work provides employment to 8 respondents (11.43%), while 9 respondents (12.86%) are engaged in other informal occupations. A relatively smaller proportion of respondents work as drivers (3

respondents, 4.29%) or in the hotel and tourism sector (4 respondents, 5.71%). The occupational structure indicates that migrant workers are largely engaged in low-skilled, insecure and unregulated forms of employment. The proportion of informal employment is the highest for elementary occupations, usually associated with low levels of skills (ILO, 2023). “Six sectors have informal employment rates that exceed the global average: agriculture (9 in 10 workers); domestic work (more than 8 in 10 workers); construction (close to 3 in 4 workers); and accommodation and food service activities, wholesale and retail trade and repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles, and other services activities” (ibid.).

Type of accommodation: The survey findings indicate that the majority of respondents reside in rented accommodation. Out of the 70 respondents, 50 (71.43%) lived in rented houses, while 12 respondents (17.14%) were provided accommodation by their employers. Only 7 respondents (10.00%) owned their houses, and 1 respondent (1.43%) lived in a temporary shelter. These findings are consistent with studies on migrant labour in India, which report that informal workers often face inadequate housing conditions, insecure tenure and limited access to affordable and adequate accommodation due to low incomes and the absence of social protection (ILO, 2023).

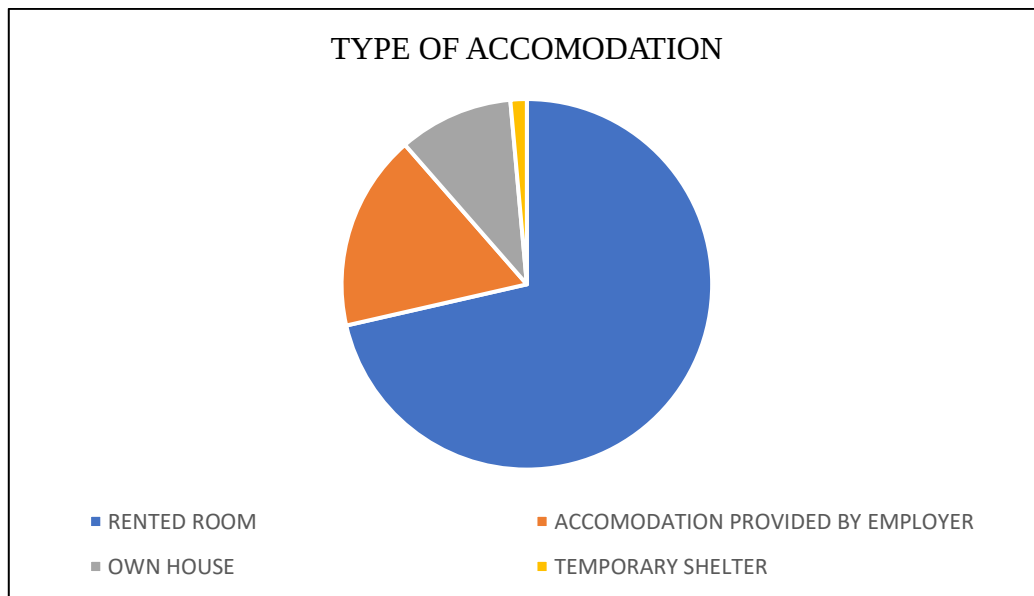


Fig. 6: Type of Accommodation

Access to Healthcare Facilities: The survey findings show that government hospitals are the primary source of healthcare for the respondents. Out of the 70 respondents, 59 (84.29%) reported seeking treatment at government hospitals, while 10 respondents (14.29%) preferred private clinics. Only 1

respondent (1.43%) reported having no regular access to healthcare services. The overwhelming dependence on government hospitals reflects the limited financial capacity of informal workers.

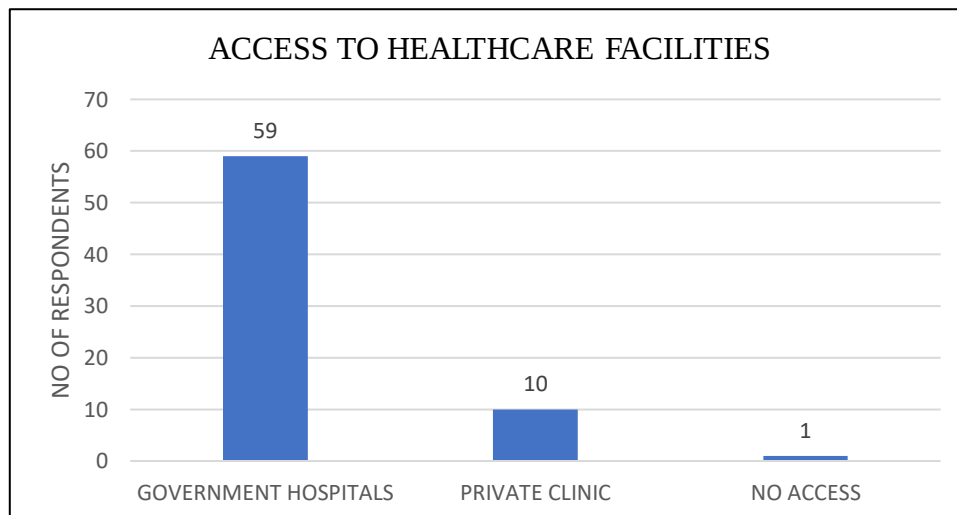


Fig. 7: Access to healthcare facilities

Access to Drinking Water: The survey findings indicate that more than half of the respondents have regular access to piped drinking water supplied by the Public Health Engineering (PHE) Department. Out of the 70 respondents, 36 (51.43%) reported receiving a regular piped water supply, while 24 respondents (34.29%) experienced an irregular piped water supply. The remaining 10 respondents (14.29%) depended on

shared community water sources, particularly springs. Overall, the findings suggest that although a majority of migrant informal workers have access to improved drinking water facilities, a considerable proportion continues to experience irregular water supply or dependence on shared community sources

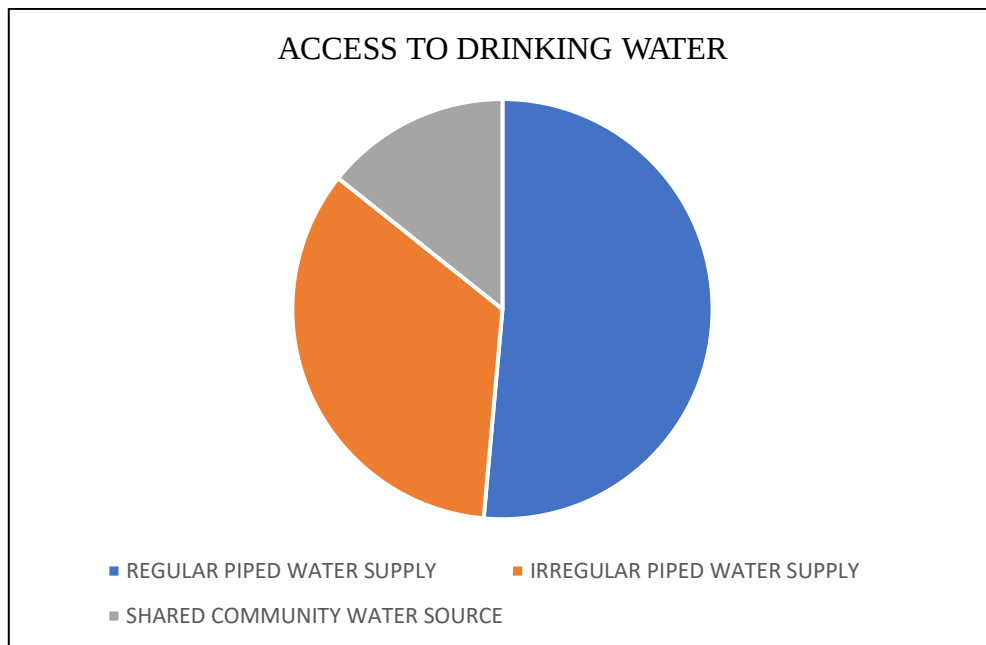


Fig. 8: Access to Drinking Water

Sanitation facilities: The survey findings reveal that the majority of respondents have access to private sanitation facilities. Out of the 70 respondents, 53 (75.71%) reported using private toilets, while 12 respondents (17.14%) depended on shared community toilets and 5 respondents (7.14%) used

public toilets. The predominance of private toilet facilities suggests comparatively better sanitation conditions among the surveyed migrant workers. However, improving access to private sanitation facilities remains important for enhancing the living conditions and well-being of migrant informal workers.

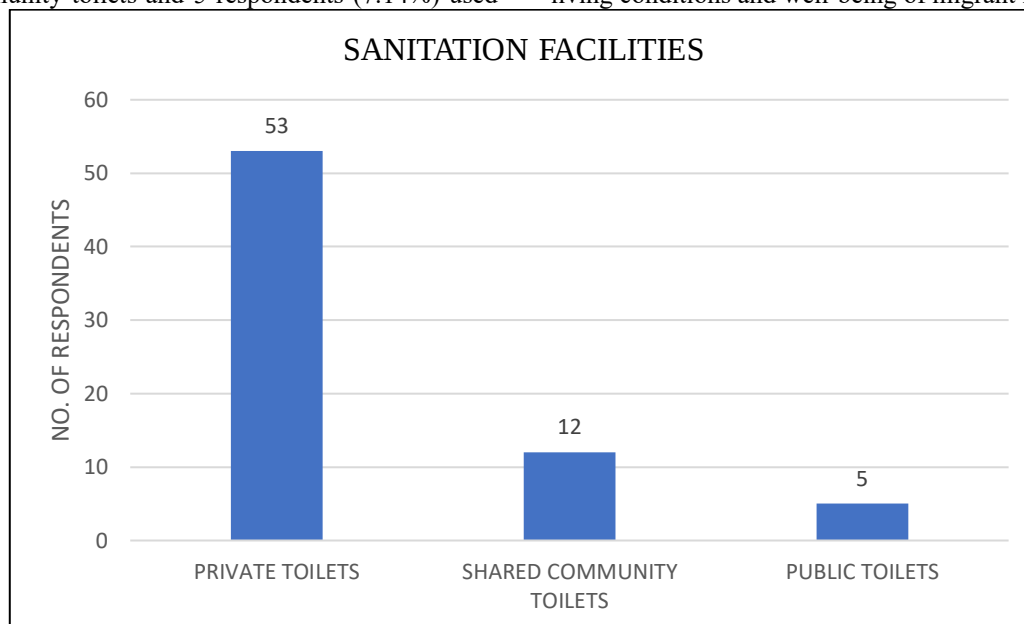


Fig. 9: Sanitation facilities

Remittances and frequency of money transfer: "Remittances are essentially a portion of migrant earnings sent back to their hometowns" (Adihartono, 2023). The survey findings reveal that out of the 70 respondents, 57 (81.43%) reported sending remittances to their families in their native places, while 13 respondents (18.57%) did not send any remittances. Similarly, with regard to the frequency of money transfers, 39 respondents (55.71%) remitted money on a monthly basis, 14 respondents (20.00%) did so occasionally and 4 respondents (5.71%) sent money only rarely. The high proportion of respondents sending

remittances indicates that migration extends beyond individual income generation and serves as an important household livelihood strategy (Adihartono, 2023). In addition to its economic importance, Adihartono emphasizes the moral dimension of remittance-sending representing a sense of moral obligation through which migrants continue to provide financial support and maintain their responsibilities towards family members left behind in their places of origin (ibid.). "Hard currency remittances carry considerable honour and prestige" (Massey et. al., 1993).

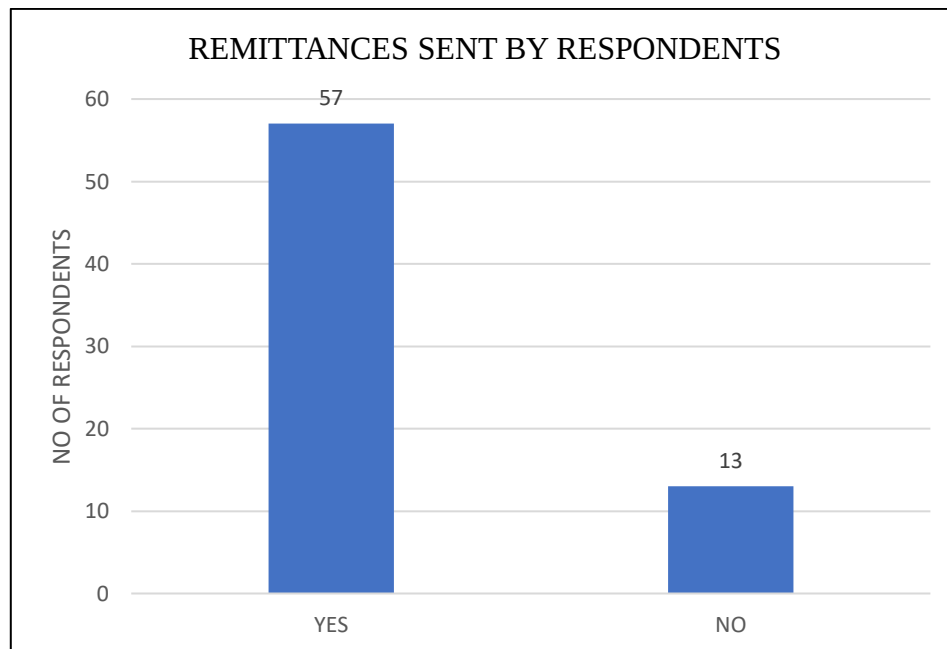


Fig. 10: Remittances sent by respondents

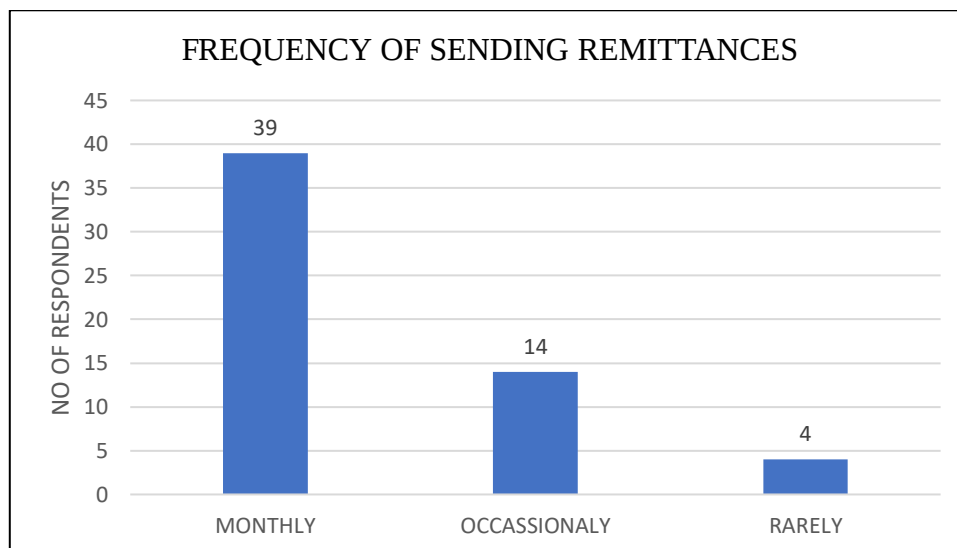


Fig. 11: Frequency of sending remittances

Respondents' future plan of stay in the study area: The survey findings indicate that respondents have mixed views regarding their long-term residence in Kalimpong. Out of the 70 respondents, 28 (40.00%) expressed their intention to continue living and working in Kalimpong, while 18 respondents (25.71%) stated that they did not plan to remain in the municipality. The remaining 24 respondents (34.29%) were uncertain about their future plans of stay in Kalimpong. The findings thus suggest uncertainty among many workers, possibly due to unstable jobs, income insecurity or changing family situations. The findings therefore strongly signify the flexible or impermanent nature of migrant informal labour.

Respondents' preference to return to their native place: The survey findings reveal that a majority of the respondents expressed a desire to return to their native place in the future. Out of the 70 respondents, 52 (74.29%) indicated that they would prefer to return to their place of origin, while 18

respondents (25.71%) stated that they did not intend to return. "Although most migrants and their families agree that migration has improved their economic condition, they feel that destination areas have become less welcoming and would like to secure a future for their children in their native place" (Deshingkar et.al., 2006).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be said that migration has played an important role in shaping the informal labour sector in Kalimpong, contributing to the local economy of the region by providing a steady supply of labour to sectors such as construction, domestic services, retail trade and other informal occupations. The study indicates that Kalimpong has been a destination choice for informal labourers migrating particularly from Bihar, other parts of West Bengal and the neighbouring country of Nepal. The proximity to these source regions have



further created a migration network and facilitated continuous labour mobility over time. The study also highlights that migration to the area is economic driven and is a part of the livelihood strategy that has enabled financial support to families. While the informal sector has significantly contributed to generation of employment and economic growth, at the same time it has also brought to light the challenges of economic vulnerability (Sahu and Behera, 2025).

Furthermore, it must be noted here that despite providing a large number of jobs by the informal sector, it is pertinent to address the challenges within by creating public awareness on various government schemes, providing skill development, training access and opportunities, vocational education and most importantly fair and free access to basic education.

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