

# **CAPTIVE LABOUR IN A GROWING INDUSTRY**

**MIGRANT WORKERS ON SURAT'S SHRIMP FARMS**



**CENTRE FOR LABOUR RESEARCH AND ACTION**

**SUPPORTED BY ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG**

**DECEMBER 2025**

## Acknowledgements

This study was made possible through the time and trust bestowed upon us by the shrimp farming workers in Surat, Gujarat, who agreed to share their experiences and knowledge, despite difficult working conditions and fear of retaliation. We acknowledge their contribution and offer our gratitude with deep respect and solidarity.

We thank the members of Majur Adhikar Manch for their support in facilitating access to the shrimp farms, participating in the data collection and interviews, and providing critical insights. They will be playing a crucial role in the efforts to organise workers, henceforth. We would particularly like to thank Denis Macwan, Hiral Parmar, Jayesh Gamit, Megha Gamit, Raju Bhai, and Shanti Lal Meena. We would also like to appreciate the efforts of Kaumudi Raut, Rahul Patel, and Sujit Bhagat – interns from Azim Premji University who provided support with both primary and secondary research.

This report would not have been possible without the unwavering support of our partner Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung. We wish to particularly acknowledge the immense and continuous engagement by Britta Petersen and Rajiv Kumar of Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung South Asia for their inputs in bringing this research to fruition.

We are also grateful to colleagues and researchers who provided critical inputs, comments, and feedback during different stages of the study, especially our Secretary Sudhir Katiyar.

This study is the fruit of a collaborative effort and labour; however, any errors or omissions remain the sole responsibility of the author.

Anamika Singh  
December 2025

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**ANAMIKA SINGH**

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# Foreword

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The current study of workers at shrimp farms in South Gujarat is the latest in the series of studies sponsored by Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung on seasonal migration streams in India. These studies document one of the most vulnerable sections of the Indian working class – seasonal migrants. While seasonal migration is on the rise, there is very little information on the socio- economic profile of workers and their working and living conditions.

India has emerged as one of the world’s largest producers and exporters of farmed shrimp, supplying primarily to markets in the United States, Europe, and East Asia. While recent investigations and advocacy have focused on labour conditions in shrimp processing plants, the conditions of workers at the farm level, which is one of the initial tiers of the supply chain, remain largely invisible. This study seeks to fulfil this critical gap. Shrimp aquaculture in Gujarat, particularly in Surat district, has expanded rapidly over the last two decades, integrating coastal farms into global supply chains while relying heavily on seasonal migrant labour.

We hope that the study will be useful to multiple actors in the shrimp supply chain – workers themselves and their organisations, employers, state actors tasked with regulating the working and living conditions of workers, exporters and importers.

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*Sudhir Katiyar, Centre for Labour Research and Action (CLRA)*



# Executive Summary

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India has emerged as one of the world's largest producers and exporters of farmed shrimp, supplying primarily to markets in the United States, Europe, and East Asia. While recent investigations and advocacy have focused on labour conditions in shrimp processing plants, the conditions of workers at the farm level, which is one of the initial tiers of the supply chain, remain largely invisible. Shrimp aquaculture in Gujarat, particularly in Surat district, has expanded rapidly over the last two decades, integrating coastal farms into global supply chains while relying heavily on seasonal migrant labour.

This study was initiated by the Centre for Labour Research and Action (CLRA) following earlier interventions in Surat, where migrant workers were found to be confined to farms and denied wages during the COVID-19 lockdown. This report documents the working and living conditions of migrant workers engaged in shrimp farming in Surat, examines the nature of labour arrangements at the farm level, and assesses the extent to which these arrangements give rise to forced or captive labour-like conditions. By focusing on a relatively under-researched node of the shrimp supply chain, the study aims to provide evidence for worker-led advocacy and supply chain accountability.

The study adopts an action research framework using a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data were collected through structured surveys with 335 workers across two major shrimp-farming tehsils in Surat district — Olpad and Choryasi, where the concentration of farms is highest. Qualitative data were generated through 19 in-depth interviews with workers, interviews with four farm owners and three supervisors, informal conversations, and field observations. Desk-based research of policy documents, government data, and existing literature complemented the primary research.

These farms are typically spatially isolated, with workers residing on-site throughout the production cycle. The workforce is predominantly young, male, tribal migrants. Over 90% of surveyed workers identified as Scheduled Tribes, primarily from Sundargarh district in Odisha and Simdega and West Singhbhum districts in Jharkhand. Migration is seasonal, with workers staying at farms for six to ten months at a stretch. Most workers have low levels of formal education, small or marginal landholdings at the source, and a high number of dependents, making migration a distress-driven coping strategy rather than a pathway to upward mobility. Workers are employed without written contracts, appointment letters, or any form of documentation. Employment is arranged directly with farm owners through informal networks. This absence of contracts allows employers to exert unilateral control over wages, working hours, and employee mobility. Workers are effectively required to be available 24/7 due to the requirement of constant pond monitoring. There is no concept of weekly rest days. Living on-site blurs the boundary between work and rest.

Monthly wages generally range between Rs 8,000 and Rs 12,000, which are below the statutory minimum wages, accounting for no weekly off and overtime. In most cases, wages are paid only at the end of the season, often after workers return to their home villages. Food costs are deducted from wages without transparency. This system of deferred payment significantly increases workers' dependency on employers and restricts their ability to leave. Workers live in makeshift shelters near ponds with inadequate sanitation, electricity, and protection from extreme weather. Occupational safety risks are high, including exposure to electrocution, extreme heat, and slippery terrain, especially during rain.

Over 80% of workers reported not receiving any personal protective equipment, and regular health check-ups are absent. The spatial isolation of farms, coupled with continuous surveillance through cameras and supervision, restricts workers' freedom of movement. Workers rarely leave farms during the season, have limited access to markets or public services, and remain cut off from social support networks.

The aforesaid findings point to systemic labour rights violations, including employment without contracts or registration, payment of wages below statutory minimums, withholding and delayed payment of wages, excessive working hours without overtime compensation, unsafe and unhealthy working and living conditions, and absence of social security and labour welfare benefits. These conditions create strong indicators of captive labour, where workers' economic dependence, isolation, and lack of alternatives severely constrain their freedom to leave employment.

Addressing labour violations in shrimp aquaculture requires interventions at multiple levels. At the state level, labour departments must recognise shrimp farms as worksites subject to labour inspection and minimum wage enforcement. Registration of migrant workers, issuance of labour cards at destination, and extension of social security benefits are critical. At the supply-chain level, processing companies, exporters, and international buyers must extend due diligence beyond factories to farms, ensuring that labour standards are enforced at the point of production. Certification and audit mechanisms must meaningfully include worker voices rather than rely solely on employer-provided documentation, which tends to be deceptive and misleading and merely for marketing brands as sustainable. Finally, strengthening worker organisation and collective bargaining among migrant shrimp-farm workers is essential. Dissemination of findings in source and destination areas, legal support for wage claims, and alliances with unions and civil society organisations can help shift the current balance of power and make labour conditions in shrimp aquaculture visible, accountable, and just.



# Background and Introduction

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Commercial shrimp farming began in the 1960s–70s, driven by rising demand in the US, Western Europe, and Japan. Shrimp has emerged as a popular seafood among consumers in Western nations, especially in the US, where annual consumption averages around five pounds per person. Aquaculture or seafood farming has made shrimp more “affordable” and “accessible” (Kateman, 2023). Shrimp farming involves cultivating shrimp for human consumption in controlled environments such as ponds, tanks, and raceways. The preferred condition for such cultivation is brackish water, which has moderate salinity — between saltwater and freshwater. At what cost is this “affordability” ensured, and for whom? These are the questions increasingly raised by rights groups in various shrimp-producing nations. Around 90% of the shrimp consumed in the US is imported, largely from Asia (Kateman, 2023; The Associated Press, 2015). Ecuador, China, India, Vietnam, and Indonesia account for 74% of global production (Jory, 2023). This reflects a stark imbalance: production is concentrated in “Global South” nations, while consumption is predominantly in the “Global North.” Since certain species fetch a higher market value, production is almost entirely market-driven. What once operated as small-scale businesses has now expanded into a global industry, fully integrated into the international supply chain. Shrimp farms typically operate as monocultures, with two main varieties farmed in India: Pacific Whiteleg Shrimp (*Litopenaeus vannamei*) and Indian Black Tiger Shrimp (*Penaeus monodon*) (Suresh, AV, 2020).

In India, fishers began catching shrimp and prawns for the market in the 1970s because of increasing export values. However, brackish-water farming of seafood emerged only years later. Between 1991 and 1994, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu were the first states to adopt brackish-water farming systems. Today, Andhra Pradesh is the largest shrimp producer in India, contributing around 70% of the country’s output, followed by West Bengal and Gujarat (Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, 2025; Rajani and Balasubramanian, 2025).

CLRA first became aware of the presence of migrant workers at shrimp farms in 2020, when we received a case involving workers who were being restrained at a farm and not allowed to leave when the COVID-19 lockdown was announced. The union, Majur Adhikar Manch, facilitated the release of the workers and ensured that they received their pending wages of around 9 lakh rupees. At the time, about 800 farmers were engaged in shrimp farming on approximately 7,000 hectares of brackish-water land in Surat, Bharuch, Navsari, and Valsad. These farms directly employed more than 25,000 people, and around 30,000 others were indirectly dependent on the sector. These numbers have grown since then. India is now one of the world’s top shrimp exporters, with shrimp forming the bulk of its total seafood exports (Times of India, 2020). India’s share of total US seafood imports is around 35%, making it a significant player in the global seafood export market (Goreja, 2025).

Recent allegations by a US-based human rights group regarding abusive working conditions at shrimp processing companies in Andhra Pradesh have renewed attention on the exploitation that underpins the shrimp export industry. Similar allegations of slave labour and human trafficking have previously emerged in Thailand and Bangladesh. The issue is compounded by opaque commodity chains, which often make it difficult to trace links between consumers and farms (Kateman, 2023). Investigators have also pointed out flaws in the audit processes at shrimp processing plants in Andhra Pradesh, raising concerns about corporate-led accountability measures that have increasingly replaced worker-led movements (Galvin et al., 2024; Corporate Accountability Lab, 2024).

The introduction of capitalist aquaculture farming in regions such as the Sundarbans, where pre-capitalist social relations historically prevailed, has created new inequalities. Income from brackish-water prawn farming has benefited only certain sections of the population, allowing them to accumulate capital. Proponents of brackish-water farming argue that it enables efficient use of saline coastal land that is not viable for agriculture, and that it generates local employment to sustain the aquaculture process (Roy, 2012). However, as in most sectors, aquaculture has relied heavily on extracting the labour of migrant workers, given their specific vulnerabilities. The socio-economic impacts of commercial, corporate-led aquaculture, along with ecological impacts such as harm to mangrove ecosystems and biodiversity loss, have been well documented (Galappaththi & Berkes, 2015). The displacement of local populations from coastal saline lands, particularly caste-based small-scale fishers, has reportedly led to poverty and food insecurity (Nayak & Berkes, 2010, as cited in Galappaththi & Berkes, 2015). Existing studies have highlighted various hazards related to aquaculture work, especially tasks performed around water and during nighttime. Fatal risks include drowning, electrocution, hydrogen sulphide poisoning, head injuries, and crushing-related injuries. Non-fatal injuries from slips, trips, falls, machinery, strains and sprains, chemicals, and fires have also been documented (Rahman et al., 2025; Sharma et al., 2023; Myers, 2010).

While issues at processing factories have been documented through recent studies and investigations, the labour arrangements at farms — especially in the Surat region — and the associated migration patterns require further scrutiny. Interest from US-based stakeholders in the shrimp processing sector resulted in the announcement of a task force for increased oversight; however, other regions appear to be operating with little change (Sashikala, n.d.). This study sheds light on one such region. This study aims to investigate the working and living conditions of shrimp-farming workers in Gujarat, particularly in Surat, one of the state's main shrimp-producing regions. Despite their essential role in the global commodity chain, there is limited documentation of these workers' working and living conditions and the risks of rights violations.

The next chapter outlines the framework and methodology employed in the study. Chapter 3 sets the context by describing the shrimp supply chain and the work involved at shrimp farms. Chapter 4 presents the profile of the surveyed workers. Chapter 5 details the key findings — including migration patterns, employment terms, wages and social security, working conditions, occupational safety and health, living conditions, and freedom of association. Chapter 6 provides a discussion and analysis of these findings, including legal and regulatory violations. The report concludes with final reflections and recommendations.

## **A. DRIVERS OF MIGRATION**

**Push-pull factors, poverty, lack of jobs, tribal marginalisation, wage advances, networks**



## **B. RECRUITMENT & INTERMEDIARY STRUCTURES**

**Labour contractors, debt advances, kinship-based hiring, circular migration patterns**



## **C. ENTRY INTO INFORMAL AQUACULTURE**

**No written contracts, undocumented employment, flexible labour supply, employer-controlled arrangements**



## **D. LABOUR PROCESS & WORK ORGANISATION**

**Long hours, 24/7 availability, division of tasks, surveillance, employer control**



## **E. LIVING & WORKING CONDITIONS ON FARMS**

**On-site housing, food dependence, sanitation, health risks, isolation, no mobility**



## **F. CONTROL MECHANISMS / CAPTIVE LABOUR RISKS**

**Restriction of movement, delayed wages, debt bondage, isolation, lack of bargaining)**



## **G. OUTCOME: PRECARIOUS, RIGHTS-POOR LABOUR IN SHRIMP AQUACULTURE**

# Framework and Methodology

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The conceptual framework for the study centres on three domains:

- (i) migration patterns;
- (ii) employment conditions in unregulated worksites despite their integration into formal export-oriented sectors; and
- (iii) the emergence of shrimp aquaculture as an extractive capitalist process that creates unfavourable and exploitative working conditions.

The study examines the factors at the source that often lead to displacement and forced migration among tribal communities, as well as the social and kinship networks that facilitate such migration. Seasonal migration weakens access to entitlements at both the source and the destination, rendering workers invisible in the eyes of the administration. The study also explores the creation of informality within formal sectors that are linked to global supply chains, and analyses working conditions through the lens of forced and captive labour. Everyday work routines and power relations on the farms are examined in terms of the mechanisms of control and discipline that characterise informal work sites.

In addition, the study considers how capitalist shrimp production processes demand low-cost, flexible labour, thereby creating conditions of low bargaining power and high economic precarity for workers. The requirement for 24/7 monitoring, given the high-risk, high-profit nature of production, produces a preference for 'always available' labour among farm owners. Workers' dependence on owners is further intensified by the spatial isolation of the farms.

This framework is used to analyse wage payment arrangements, hours of work, living conditions, occupational health and safety risks, access to basic services, social protection, freedom of movement, and freedom of association.

## **Objectives of the study**

The research focuses on investigating the working and living conditions of workers at shrimp farms in Surat. The workers predominantly come from Jharkhand and Odisha and are involved in pond construction and preparation, as well as feeding and farm management. The study aims to:

- Understand the socio-economic profile of workers engaged in different stages of work at shrimp farms in Surat.
- Assess working and living conditions, including wages and social security, occupational health and safety, working hours, freedom of association, and quality of housing.
- Use the findings to advocate for workers' rights in cases of rights violations and to support worker mobilisation through meetings and dissemination of findings.

## Methodology

The study employs a mixed-methods approach comprising quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Since CLRA follows an action research approach, the findings will contribute to future worker mobilisation and advocacy efforts. A mixed-methods approach is particularly useful for action research as it offers quantitative data for evidence-based advocacy alongside qualitative insights that center workers' lived experiences.

- **Quantitative methods:** Structured surveys (n=335) were conducted to capture the socio-economic profile of workers and their working and living conditions. A copy of the survey form is provided in Appendix A.1.
- **Qualitative methods:** Semi-structured in-depth interviews with workers (n=19) were conducted to gather nuanced, context-specific insights into their experiences. Interviews with farm owners (n=4) and supervisors (n=3) were also conducted to understand the operational challenges they face due to downstream supply-chain actors and how these pressures affect workers. A copy of the interview schedules is attached in Appendix A.2.
- **Field observations and informal conversations:** These contributed additional insights into the day-to-day realities of workers and the functioning of farms.
- **Desk-based research:** Government data, policy documents, relevant literature, and existing studies were reviewed to contextualize the primary findings.

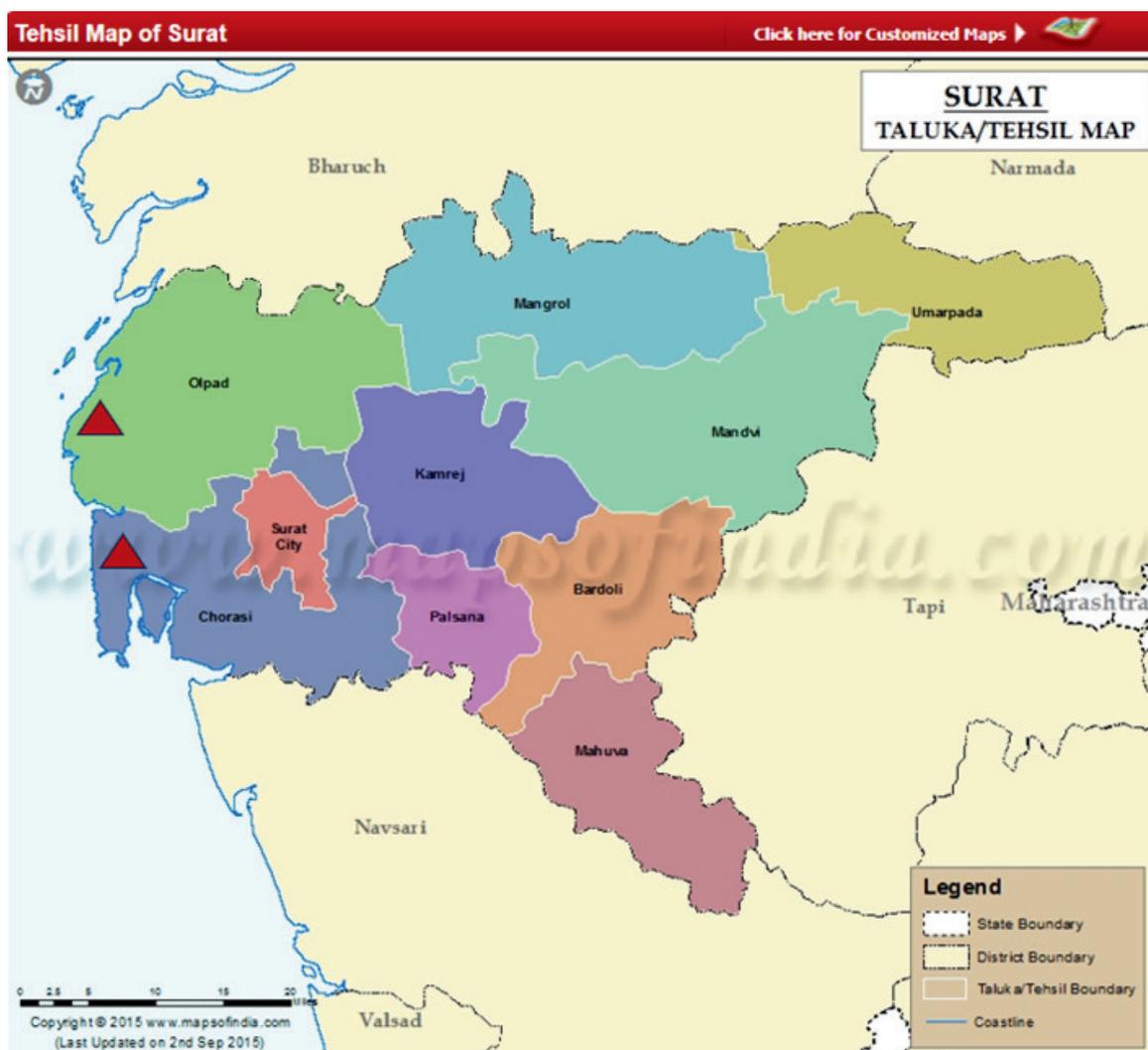
## Sampling

The study team selected two tehsils in Surat — Olpad and Choryasi, based on initial visits and the concentration of shrimp farms in these areas. The plan was to survey at least 150 workers in each tehsil using a structured questionnaire and convenience sampling. However, efforts were made to ensure representation in terms of migration source, religion, and caste. Since workers at the farms are predominantly men, gender was not considered during sample selection. The team planned to conduct at least 20 in-depth interviews (IDIs) with workers and five (5) interviews with farm owners, identified during the survey phase.

The team ultimately administered the structured questionnaire to 335 workers to understand their socio-economic conditions and migration patterns. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 workers, either individually or in groups depending on field conditions, to explore their experiences in greater depth. Interviews with four (4) farm owners and three (3) supervisors were held to understand their perspectives on labour-related concerns and broader challenges in the shrimp industry. Informal conversations and field observations also contributed to the analysis of labour rights violations and ground realities.

Secondary research was carried out to identify existing studies relating to the shrimp industry, particularly those addressing labour issues, along with government reports, and information on migration patterns from Jharkhand and Odisha, especially among tribal communities.

## Study locations



In Surat, Olpad Tehsil has 1,343.9 hectares of land dedicated to shrimp farming, while Chauriyasi Tehsil covers 4,039 hectares. Together, these two tehsils account for 5,641 ponds, which constitute 80% of all ponds in the Surat district. The total number of ponds in the district is nearly 7,000. Shrimp farming is concentrated in several villages across these tehsils, including Dandi, Lawacha, Saras, Tena, Kuvad, Dumas, Khajur, Bhimpor, Kapasi, Belasa, Bagava, Mor, Mandroi, and Karanaj, among others. Apart from Surat, shrimp farming also takes place in Bhavnagar, Navsari, Valsad, Bharuch, Khambhat, Gir Somnath, and Amreli in Gujarat.

## Challenges and Limitations

During the preliminary visit in February–March 2025, the team was informed that once the seeds are placed in the pond, no one is allowed to enter the area due to fears of water adulteration, white-spot disease, and shrimp theft. Although the team was able to visit the farms, we faced challenges in speaking to migrant workers on multiple occasions because workers live on-site. While some farm owners explicitly resisted the presence of the research team, others were more open to conversations and even allowed the team to speak with workers. However, in several cases, the presence of owners during the surveys made workers apprehensive about providing open responses.

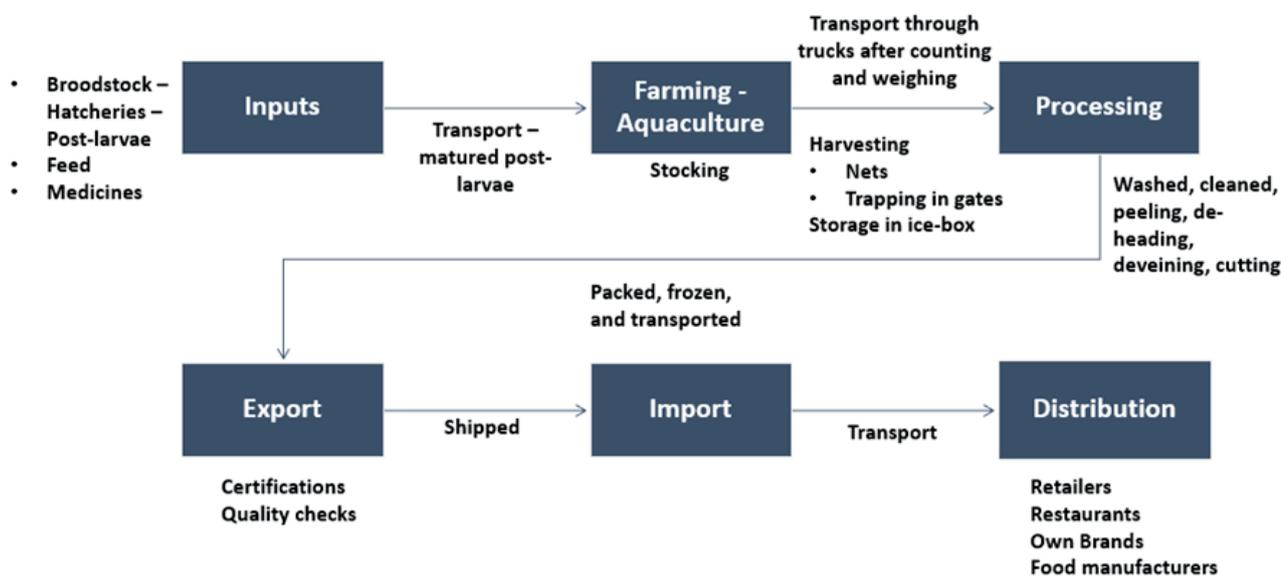
Overall, the team felt that workers were hesitant to share information freely due to a constant sense of surveillance. Because cameras are installed at the farms, owners were immediately alerted to any visits and would call workers on their mobile phones and instruct them not to speak — even if the workers had initially shown interest or expressed concerns about their working arrangement.

The team intended to visit the source areas in Jharkhand in October 2025, but time and resource constraints postponed this plan. Conversations at the source would likely have been more open and free-flowing, and since the workers would have returned home by then, it would have been possible to verify whether they had received their due wages for the season. The team plans to visit the source villages and connect with workers to hold meetings and disseminate the study's findings.

The team also planned to speak to processing and export companies in the region. However, despite an initial response from the owners of Mayank Aquaculture Private Limited, they did not reply to subsequent emails or calls. The owners of Zeal Aqua Limited were also contacted over email, but no response was received.



# Shrimp Supply Chain and Processes at the Farm Level



This report focuses on the working conditions at the aquaculture farm node of the supply chain. The farms generally have a cluster of ponds. The ponds we visited measured either 80 × 80 meters or 100 × 100 meters (around 1-2 acres), with around 2-2.5 lakh shrimp seeds stocked in each pond, and around 20% mortality is expected. A farm owner invests around 10-12 lakh rupees per pond, covering machinery, labour, feed, motors, electricity, rent, and other costs. During the initial stages, expenses are incurred in preparing the pond, amounting to approximately 50,000 to 70,000 rupees, depending on pond size. This is followed by the cost of filling the pond with water, which requires either electricity or a diesel generator (DG).

Once the seeds are stocked, ongoing expenses include the operation of machinery and the cost of feed. Shrimp are sold at prices ranging from 400 to 1,000 rupees per kilogram, depending on the “count per kilogram”; the lower the count, the higher the price. Each pond yields around 5,000–6,000 kilograms of shrimp. Based on this production, a farm owner can earn between 20 and 40 lakh rupees per pond. However, output may decline significantly due to disease outbreaks. Margins are around 30-40% at the farm level. The land used for shrimp farming may be government or cooperative (mandali) owned/leased and leased / sub-leased for 15–20 years. Some shrimp companies also own their own farms. There are mid-sized and small farmers, and large operators who may manage 100–200 ponds. The majority of the produce is exported.

Some of the feed and input companies mentioned include Avanti Feeds Limited, CP Aquaculture (India) Pvt. Ltd., Devi Fisheries Limited, Godrej Agrovvet Limited, Waterbase Ltd., among others. There are around ten key export/processing companies in the region, including Zeal Aqua Limited, Devi Fisheries Limited, CP Aquaculture (India) Pvt. Ltd., and Avanti Feeds Limited.

### **1. Pond Preparation Stage**

- Clearing and levelling
  - Lining the pond
- Installing motors & aerators
  - Biosecurity measures
- Testing set up for checking size and growth



### **2. Water Filling**

- Using motor
- Ensures brackish water conditions



### **3. Seed Stocking**

- Critical stage: high disease risk (e.g., white spot)



### **4. Rearing & Management**

- Feed inputs
- Machinery operation - Paddle wheel aerator for oxygen
  - 24/7 monitoring by workers



### **5. Harvesting**

- Through nets or trapping in gates
- Storage and lifting in ice-boxes
  - Counting and weighing



### **6. Transport to processing plants**

- Most production is destined for export markets

# Profile of Surveyed Workers

There are two main categories of workers involved in shrimp farming in Surat. The first group consists of interstate migrant workers who handle the pond-culture process, which takes around six months. These workers come from states like Odisha, Jharkhand, and West Bengal. They arrive sometime in February and stay for eight to nine months, until the shrimp are fully grown and ready for harvest. These workers are male migrants, mostly from Sundargarh district in Odisha and Simdega district in Jharkhand, which are bordering districts. The workers we met were tribals — identified as either Christians or Hindus.

The second category includes migrant workers from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, or local workers — including Halpatis who carry out the harvesting work, either using cast nets or trapping the shrimps at the pond outlet while emptying the water in the pond. They also help with lifting and storing the shrimps in ice boxes, after which they are weighed and counted. This study mainly focuses on the first category of migrant workers. The harvesting workers were not present at the farms at the time of the surveys, as they are only present for a day or two during the harvesting period.

Work at shrimp farm	N	%
Pond preparation and management	312	93.13%
Pond preparation and management + Harvesting/catching shrimp	14	4.18%
Pond preparation and management + Harvesting/catching shrimp + Post-harvest (weigh, clean, and pack etc)	1	0.30%
Cooking for male worker	3	0.90%
Supervisor	2	0.60%
Harvesting/catching shrimp + post-harvest (weigh, clean, and pack etc)	2	0.60%
Pond preparation and management + Electrician-technician	1	0.30%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Table 1: Nature of work at shrimp farms

Of the 335 workers surveyed in the Olpad and Choryasi tehsils, around 56% (n=186) were aged 25 or below. Further, 97.25% (n=326) were male, and 74.93% (n=266) were men below the age of 35 — indicating a predominantly young, male workforce. We met only nine women at the farms, most of whom were assisting with feeding but were primarily brought along to cook. At one of the farms, a woman, the wife of a shrimp-farming worker from Odisha, was cooking for 23 people. A worker in Olpad from Odisha explained: “Yeh humare liye accha hai, ladka log. Jo shaadishuda hain unke liye yeh kaam accha nahi hai” (“This is good for us, the young men. For those who are married, this work is not suitable”).

Overall, 92.24% of the surveyed workers (n=309) identified themselves as tribals. Among them, 53.43% (n = 179) identified as Christian tribals, 38.81% (n=130) as Hindu tribals, and 3.88% (n=13) and 3.58% (n=12) identified as Hindu Scheduled Caste and Other Backward Class, respectively. Only one person identified himself as belonging to the General category.



Gender	Men		Women		N	%
	n	%	n	%		
Age range						
18 and below	59	17.61%	1	0.29%	60	17.91%
19 to 25	122	36.42%	4	1.19%	126	37.61%
26 to 35	85	25.37%	3	0.89%	88	26.27%
35 to 50	42	12.54%	1	0.29%	43	12.83%
50 and above	18	5.37%		0.00%	18	5.37%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>326</b>	<b>97.31%</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>2.69%</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Table 2: Age and gender distribution of surveyed workers

Religion and caste	N	%
<b>Christian</b>	<b>179</b>	<b>53.43%</b>
ST	179	53.43%
<b>Hindu</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>46.57%</b>
ST	130	38.81%
SC	13	3.88%
OBC	12	3.58%
General	1	0.30%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Table 3: Religion and caste composition

The survey indicated a lack of adequate formal schooling among the workers. Those who reported having received no formal education, or having studied only up to the 8th grade, made up around 63.29% (n=212) of the surveyed workers. Secondary schooling was completed by 34.33% (n=115), and only 2.39% (n=8) reported having studied beyond school. This reflects the general patterns of educational attainment among tribal migrants observed in other unorganised-sector work as well.

Education level	N	%
No formal schooling	55	16.42%
Upper Primary schooling (Till 8th grade)	157	46.87%
Secondary schooling (9 to 12)	115	34.33%
Skill-based or vocational training	2	0.60%
University education	6	1.79%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Table 4: Education levels

Workers also reported having a high number of dependents back home. 53.04% (n=133) said that 6–10 people were financially dependent on them, while 43.38% (n=197) reported having 1–5 dependents. When asked about their spouses' occupations, 79.12% (n=125) said their spouses were engaged in agricultural labour on their own farms in their village. Additionally, 52.84% (n=195) of the workers identified as unmarried. Most workers, 56.41% (n=189), whether single or married, were migrating alone — 62.05% of unmarried workers and 48.92% of married workers migrate alone.

Number of family members	N	%
1-5	197	43.38%
6-10	133	53.04%
More than 10	5	3.59%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Table 5: Number of dependents

Marital status and migrating family members	N	%
Unmarried	195	58.21%
Migrating alone	121	36.12%
1-4 members	69	20.60%
5 and more members	5	1.49%
Married	139	41.49%
Migrating alone	68	20.30%
1-4 members	66	19.70%
5 and more members	5	1.49%
Widowed	1	0.30%
Migrating alone	1	0.30%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Table 6: Marital status and migrating family members

Occupation of spouse	N	%
Agriculture - Own cultivator	122	77.22%
Shrimp Farm worker	14	8.86%
Housework	7	4.43%
Agricultural labourer	4	2.53%
Agriculture - Own cultivator, Labourer	3	1.90%
Construction worker	3	1.90%
Domestic worker	3	1.90%
Anganwadi worker	1	0.63%
Computer Operator	1	0.63%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Table 7: Occupation of spouse

It is also pertinent to note that the majority of the workforce is relatively new to this work, with 82.69% (n = 277) reporting that they have been involved in it for five years or less.

Years' of experience	N	%
5 or less	277	82.69%
6-10	42	12.54%
11-15	13	3.88%
More than 15	3	0.90%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Table 8: Years' of experience



# Key Insights

## A. Migration Patterns and Key Source Areas

All the workers are seasonal migrants, given the nature of the shrimp production cycle. A majority, 66.57% (n=223) stayed at the farms for 7–10 months, which covers the entire cycle of pond preparation, management, and harvesting. Another 30.75% (n=103) reported staying for only 4–6 months. There is regular attrition of workers at the farms, and they get replaced by new workers so that the shrimp culture process does not get disrupted. Farm owners and workers noted that migrants are hired because the local population is ‘unwilling’ to work day and night or stay on the farms. However, migrants, as a group, are more vulnerable, which is a key reason they are preferred over local workers. Lacking social networks and support at the destination, they can be made to stay on the farms 24/7 and work without any documentation or contract.

Duration of migration in the past 12 months	N	%
4-6 months	103	30.75%
7-10 months	223	66.57%
More than 10 months	9	2.69%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

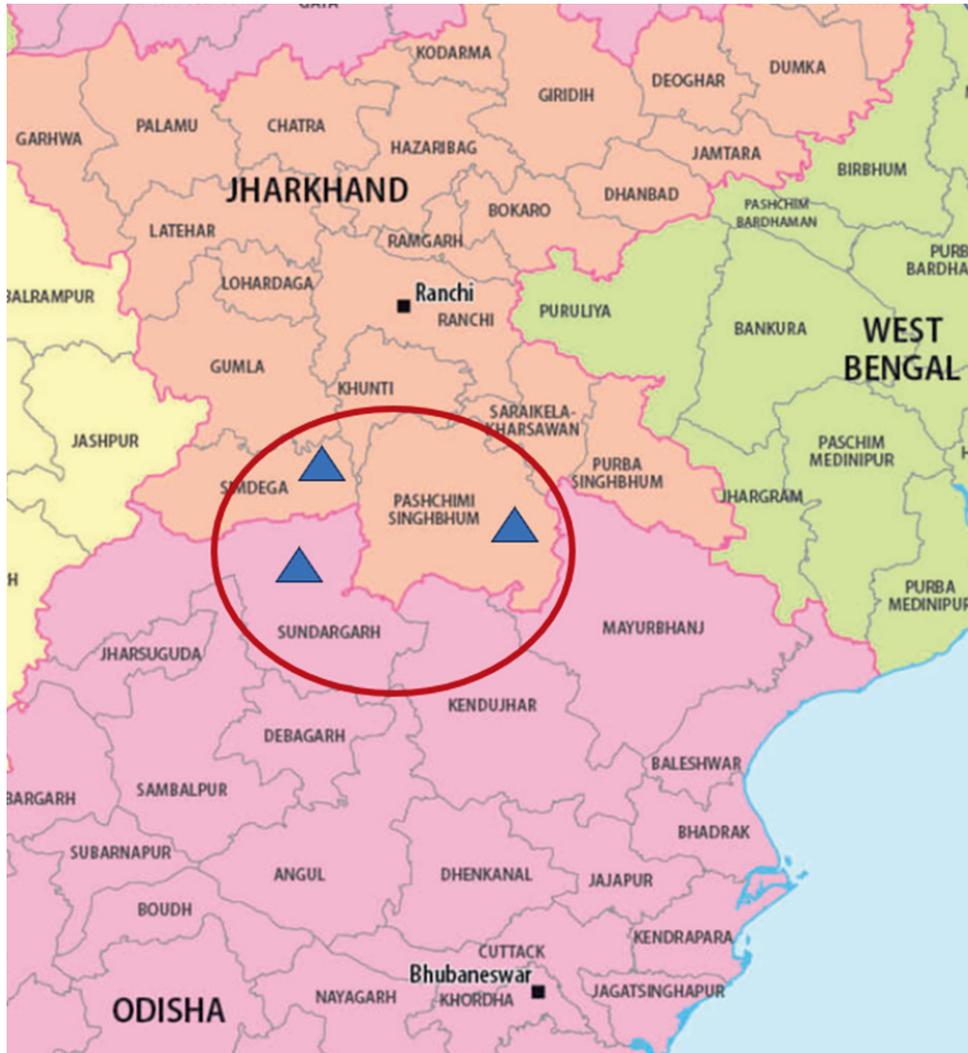
Table 9: Average duration of migration per year

Destination Source	Bhimpor		Dandi		Kudiyana		Saras		N	%
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
<b>Odisha</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>23.58%</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>9.85%</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>11.34%</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>5.37%</b>	<b>168</b>	<b>50.15%</b>
Sundargarh	68	20.30%	31	9.25%	33	9.85%	12	3.58%	144	42.99%
Kuarmunda	27	8.06%	10	2.99%	9	2.69%		0.00%	46	13.73%
Sambalpur	9	2.69%		0.00%	1	0.30%	5	1.49%	15	4.48%
Others*	2	0.60%	2	0.60%	4	1.20%	1	0.30%	9	2.69%
<b>Jharkhand</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>28.06%</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>3.28%</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>3.28%</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>5.67%</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>40.30%</b>
Simdega	72	21.49%	7	2.09%		0.00%	18	5.37%	97	28.96%
Thethaitangar	35	10.45%		0.00%		0.00%	8	2.39%	43	12.84%
West Singhbhum	17	5.07%	4	1.19%	10	2.99%	1	0.30%	32	9.55%
Others**	5	1.49%		0.00%	1	0.30%		0.00%	6	1.79%
<b>Gujarat</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>5.67%</b>	<b>0.00%</b>	<b>0.00%</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0.30%</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>3.58%</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>9.55%</b>
Ahmedabad	15	4.48%		0.00%		0.00%		0.00%	15	4.48%
Others	4	1.19%		0.00%	1	0.30%	12	3.58%	17	5.07%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>192</b>	<b>57.31%</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>13.13%</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>14.93%</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>14.63%</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Table 10: Mapping key source areas

\*Bhadrak, Jharsduguda, Nayagarh, Rourkela

\*\*East Singhbhum, Khunti



Map 1: Contiguous source area in Odisha and Jharkhand

As per a study by Srivastava (2020), around 60–65 million workers in India are temporary and circular migrants, predominantly engaged in the informal sector. They are mostly absorbed in the lowest-paid and what is considered unskilled labour. Often, they are accompanied by family members, who also engage in work at the destination. Most of these workers remain undocumented, making it challenging to assess their numbers and migration patterns. Informal sector work occurs without any formal contract, paid leave, or social security, and labour laws are nearly absent. Studies indicate that the majority of temporary or seasonal migrants belong to ST and SC communities and undertake migration as a “risk-coping strategy” (Deshingkar & Farrington, 2009; Breman, 1994).

The contiguous regions of Simdega and West Singhbhum in Jharkhand and Sundargarh in Odisha are tribal-dominated regions witnessing high out-migration. These three districts, among others in Odisha, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh, form a cluster considered rich in mineral resources (Mistri and Sardar, 2023). Development-induced displacement is a hallmark of tribal migration from “resource-rich” areas such as Jharkhand, which are acquired for mining and other extraction processes. Depleting agricultural value and forest produce, ineffective implementation of schemes such as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 and National Rural Livelihood Mission, poor skill-development efforts, and low wages at the source were cited as some of the push and pull factors contributing to high out-migration. This displacement uproots tribal populations from their livelihoods, and the lack of local employment forces them to migrate. The lack of education and skills pushes workers into what is considered unskilled or semi-skilled work at the destination (Disha Foundation, 2018).

As per the 2011 Census, out of the 41 million population of Odisha, 22% were ST and 16% were SC. While official figures state that 47% of Odisha's population lives below the poverty line, the Tendulkar Committee places this at 57.2%, and the NC Saxena Committee puts it as high as 84.5%. According to a 2017 report, 1,446 villages in Odisha were displaced between 1950 and 1993 due to development projects (Tharu, 2018). Informal estimates suggest that 2.5 million people migrate out of Odisha every year, and specifically to Surat, where 900,000 migrants from Odisha were present as per a UNDP–HDR report. This migration has predominantly been to textile factories since the 1970s, mostly by workers from the Ganjam district. The Kalahandi, Bolangir and Koraput (KBK) regions have witnessed migration to brick kilns in South India. Odisha has 62 tribal communities, contributing around 9% of the total tribal population in India. The predominantly tribal districts are Kandhamal, Koraput, Malkangiri, Mayurbhanj, Nabarangpur, Rayagada, and Sundargarh, which have been declared as Fifth Scheduled Areas by the Government of India. The main livelihood opportunities in these tribal districts are linked to foraging and forest produce.

Studies have indicated that migration from tribal-populated areas in Jharkhand has increased in the last decade. While tribes have historically been involved in the forest-based economy and agriculture, migration has pushed them into precarious jobs, mostly in urban India (Mistri and Sardar, 2023). In the districts of Simdega, Gumla, and Lohardaga in Jharkhand, an average of 2.3 members per household migrate for work (Deogharia, 2012). According to the “Indigenous Navigator Community Survey Report – 2023,” conducted in Gumla, Simdega, Saraikela-Kharsawan, West Singhbhum, and Khunti districts in Jharkhand with the Santhal, Ho, Munda, Oraon, and Kharia communities, over 46% of the surveyed households were living below the poverty line. Only half of the surveyed families indicated access to any social protection schemes such as pensions, maternity benefits, and rations. Incidence of migration was reportedly high, with 42.3% of men and 50% of women aged 15–24 leaving home for work in other states. The root cause was reported to be a lack of access to legal land rights (only 8%), and 81% reported being embroiled in land conflicts. Local activists demanded secure land tenure, implementation of the PESA Act, vocational training, and community-led development models, while emphasising Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) to uphold indigenous rights (ToI, 2025).

While tribal migration has also been a consequence of colonial-era displacement and labour recruitment (Singh & Jha, 2004, as cited in Kumari and Subratha, 2025), in contemporary times, notwithstanding the root causes, migration is often undertaken in the quest for a “better life,” and to escape the deplorable conditions at the source, primarily due to agrarian distress. Tribal landholdings are small and largely unproductive, suitable mainly for subsistence farming. Neoclassical approaches link migration to economic push and pull factors such as poverty, unemployment, and opportunities, but socio-cultural aspects related to tribal identity receive less attention (Mistri & Sardar, 2023). States like Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Odisha and Chhattisgarh mainly witness interstate tribal migration, while Maharashtra, Telangana and Gujarat mostly have intrastate migrants (Disha Foundation, 2018).

A study conducted with tribal migrants from Sundargarh, Odisha indicated that migration was a compulsion rather than a choice, given the socio-economic conditions at the source. Surat, along with Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Kerala, Goa and Bhopal, were mentioned as some of the key destination areas. Around 39% of the sampled population in this study was reported to have migrated to work in fish farming and allied sectors.



Land-displacement-induced poverty, lack of local work, low wages, indebtedness and food insecurity are contributing factors. However, migration only helps them cope with distress rather than accumulate capital for upward mobility. Poverty levels among tribals in rural Odisha are high, at 67%, and more than 50% of tribal land has been transferred to non-tribals through illegal means over the last three decades (Kujur and Minz, 2021). In 2011, more than 50% of the population of Sundargarh belonged to indigenous groups (Tharu, 2018).

In Sundargarh, local agents lure workers with promises of decent pay. The district administration and labour department have carried out awareness drives in migration-prone blocks on safe migration and workers' rights under the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act, 1979. According to existing records, there is a high concentration of out-migration of men from Sundargarh to fishing jobs in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa and Tamil Nadu. However, migration data is not maintained efficiently, and the district labour office had no official records on migrant workers (The New Indian Express, 2022). In 2014, activists stated that, apart from declining income from forest produce and agriculture, the closure of mines and private sector units was also driving migration, sometimes leading to human trafficking. There were also cases of workers migrating to places like Goa for better prospects rather than distress (The Pioneer, 2014). Indigenous groups in Sundargarh have resisted land grabs by industrial corporations, but the corporation-state nexus has continued (Tharu, 2018).

When asked about the reason for migrating, a worker from Sundargarh working in Kudiyana said that there is work in their home state, but the wages are insufficient, and there are no savings because everything gets spent. Speaking about the manager at the farm, who is also from Odisha and had called them, he said: “Talaab jabse hai tabse woh aaya hua hai. Uska bhi agar pait na bhare toh humko kya bharayega woh. Lekin agar jheenga accha nikla aur company ko fayda hua toh usko dega, hum logon ko nahi. Kaam karne wala hum log hai aur fayda uthane wala woh. Woh makaan mein rehta hai kahin.” “He has been coming here since the pond was set up. If even he cannot fill his stomach, how will he fill ours? If the shrimp turn out well and the company makes a profit, he will get something, not us. We are the ones who work, and he is the one who takes the benefit. He stays somewhere in a proper house.”

The workers were not aware whether he received any commission from the owner for bringing them. Before joining this work, they had been engaged in casual labour at the source and in other migration destinations. They all have small land parcels in their villages, but these do not sustain their families. Another worker from Sundargarh at a farm in Olpad shared that wages get exhausted at the source because of expenses. Workers from West Singhbhum shared that there is no work in Jharkhand that can sustain them, which is why they migrate. There are no companies or factories where they can work.

An owner at a farm in Bhimpur, Dumas, shared that workers have been coming from the same areas in Jharkhand and Odisha for the last 20 years. Now the owners simply have to call them and send travel tickets, and they arrive. He said that a worker will most likely not return to the same farm and owner the next time; they might go to Olpad or even Goa. However, the old network of workers arranges for the new lot to come the next season. Another owner from Bhimpur said that because experienced workers demand higher salaries, he prefers to keep a mix of experienced and new workers. He added that farmers with more ponds find it difficult to recruit the required number of labourers, while for those with fewer than 10 ponds, it is not as challenging.

None of the workers or supervisors indicated the involvement of contractors in hiring workers. The owners directly contact workers who have been migrating for some time. Often, 4–5 workers themselves reach out together, asking for work. They negotiate living arrangements and salaries. A worker from Sundargarh shared that owners call old contacts directly and state the labour requirement, for example: “Mujhey 15 ladke chahiye, ladka lekar aa. Woh log aane ka paisa bhej dete hein.” “I need 15 boys, bring the workers. They send the money for us to travel.”

If there is difficulty finding workers, owners propose an incentive per recruited worker to the main worker, who then convinces others. Workers from Simdega, Jharkhand at a farm in Bhimpur said that someone from their village used to come for this work and told them about it. This way, every year, new workers are recruited by those who have already migrated. Owners generally ask one experienced worker to assemble the required number of workers. Some provide advance payments, while others do not. This depends on the owner. Most of the workers also engage in some farming activity in Jharkhand. However, most of this land, as reported by 61.19% (n = 205) of workers, is less than two acres, making them marginal farmers. A total of 84.48% (n = 283) of workers reported engaging in cultivation on their own farms at the source.

Caste category Land at source	ST		SC		OBC		General		N	Total %
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
2 acres and less	188	56.12%	11	3.28%	6	1.79%		0.00%	205	61.19%
2.5 to 5 acres	88	26.27%		0.00%	3	0.90%		0.00%	91	27.16%
6 to 10 acres	27	8.06%	1	0.30%	2	0.60%		0.00%	30	8.96%
11 to 16 acres	4	1.19%		0.00%		0.00%		0.00%	4	1.19%
30 acres or more	2	0.60%	1	0.30%	1	0.30%	1	0.30%	5	1.49%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>309</b>	<b>92.24%</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>3.88%</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>3.58%</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0.30%</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Table 11: Land holding

Caste category Work at source	ST		SC		OBC		General		N	Total %
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
Agriculture - Own cultivator	265	79.10%	10	2.99%	7	2.09%	1	0.30%	283	84.48%
Casual Daily-wage work	40	11.94%	3	0.90%	1	0.30%		0.00%	44	13.13%
Clerical, Technician		0.00%		0.00%	2	0.60%		0.00%	2	0.60%
Factory worker	2	0.60%		0.00%		0.00%		0.00%	2	0.60%
Driver		0.00%		0.00%	1	0.30%		0.00%	1	0.30%
Driver, Fisherman	1	0.30%		0.00%		0.00%		0.00%	1	0.30%
Shrimp Farmer		0.00%		0.00%	1	0.30%		0.00%	1	0.30%
Studying	1	0.30%		0.00%		0.00%		0.00%	1	0.30%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>309</b>	<b>92.24%</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>3.88%</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>3.58%</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0.30%</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Table 12: Work at source

## B. Employment Terms

All the workers involved in shrimp farming, including both migrant and local workers, are employed informally. They lack job security and formal contracts, which makes them highly vulnerable to exploitation. Once the migrant workers begin their work, they rarely get to leave. They arrive in January–February and start going back between October and December, during which time the local workers take over the harvesting work.

It takes around two months to prepare the ponds — first by digging using a tractor and filling them with water (a mix of saline and freshwater), maintaining salinity, bleaching, and adding medicines. Thereafter, once the water is sampled in the lab for pH levels, hardness, salinity, etc., and biosecurity measures are set up, the seeds are put in. The saline water is channelled from the sea using drains and motors. Workers also create a testing setup with bamboo to regularly monitor the size and growth of the shrimp.

The preparation stage is the busiest, according to the workers, and work during this phase is round-the-clock. Once the seed is put in, feed and medicines have to be given regularly, and oxygen supply and water quality need to be maintained. Workers are required to feed the shrimp four to six times a day, clean around the pond so that dirt and garbage do not fall into the water, run the aerator, which helps dissolve oxygen in the pond, and monitor the oxygen levels. Occasionally, they also have to change the water in the pond, depending on the requirement. Each pond generally has one worker assigned to care for it, and at night, one worker is assigned to oversee a cluster of ponds on a farm. So, if an owner has five ponds, they would typically hire six workers. The local workers are responsible for harvesting, loading, and unloading. They are required to harvest one pond in a day using nets. After a pond is harvested, it is dried again, and then cleaned and repaired for the next season.

The fact that the workers are made to stay on the farm ensures that they are available round the clock. Although 69.85% (n=234) of workers indicated their shift to be 12–14 hours, given the lack of regulation or formal contracts, they can be made to work overtime without additional pay. While there are night workers on most of the farms we visited, around 12 workers told us that they have to be available to work both day and night. Of the surveyed workers, 98.81% (n=331) were working without any contract, and 98.21% (n=329) were hired directly by the owner.

Further, living on site means there is no concept of a weekly off, a basic labour right that should be available to all workers. The reason for housing the workers on site, and not hiring local workers, is to ensure this round-the-clock availability, as is the case in other work where predominantly seasonal migrants are engaged, such as agricultural labour (including sugarcane harvesting) and brick kilns, as seen by CLRA in its areas of work.

When asked, some of the workers agreed that it was not a 12-hour shift, but a 24-hour one. A worker from Simdega, Jharkhand, said, “Free raho lekin duty par hi raho.” “Be free but stay on duty.” The union activists urged the workers to compare their work to that of a security guard, who has to keep a watch and has an eight-hour duty, but after that, they can leave. These workers cannot, nor do they have the opportunity to take up additional work in the remaining hours of the day to supplement their low wages.

Hours of work	N	%
12-14 hours	234	69.85%
9-11 hours	45	13.43%
8 hours and less	56	16.72%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

*Table 13: Hours of work per day*

Duty	N	%
Day	292	87.16%
Night	31	9.25%
Day and Night	12	3.58%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Table 14: Duty time

Employment arrangement	No contract		Written contract		Total	
	n	%	n	%	N	%
Directly by employer/owner	325	97.01%	4	1.19%	329	98.21%
Contractual	6	1.79%		0.00%	6	1.79%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>331</b>	<b>98.81%</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1.19%</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Table 15: Nature of contract / presence of written agreements

## C. Wages and Social Security

Workers are generally paid around 8,000 to 12,000 rupees per month. Of the surveyed workers, 98.50% (n=330) reported receiving less than Rs 15,000 per month. The owner provides them with groceries, which they cook on their own, and this expense is deducted from the amount they are paid at the end. The majority of the workers, 93.73% (n=314), shared that they get paid at the end of the season or that the settlement is done at the end of the season. A total of 84.48% (n=283) shared that they receive payment in their bank accounts after they reach the source. They prefer not to travel with the money, as they travel in the general compartment and fear being robbed on the train or at the station. This was reiterated by owners as well, who said that this is one of the reasons why workers are paid into their bank accounts after they reach home. Some workers said that they take cash in case of urgent requirements, and the settlement is then done by transferring the pending amounts to their bank accounts.

A group of workers at Kudiyaana from Sundargarh, who had come for the first time, shared: “Talaab kaam mein ek rate hai. Hum log jo bahar sunte hain. Khaana khaake agar 10,000 humko dega toh usmein se 2,000 kaat lega khaane ka. Khaane ka bhi koi valuation nahi hota hai. Kya layega woh bhi nahi pata. Yahan rate bhav kaisa hai hum logon ko nahi pata. Market toh hai nahi, toh kaise maalum chalega. Toh hum logon ka bachta 8,000 — jismein tel, sabun, khaini, gutka. Aakhri mein sab hisaab ke baad hum logon ko bachega kya? Kuch nahi bachta. Biwi bacha log wale aadmi hain, hum jab jayenge 6-7 mahine baad toh kya niklega, kuch nahi.” “There is one standard rate for pond work, the rate we hear from outside. If they give us 10,000 rupees, they will deduct 2,000 rupees for food. There is no proper valuation of the food, and we don’t even know what they will bring. We have no idea about the rates here. There is no market nearby, so how will we know? So, we are left with 8,000 rupees — from which we must buy oil, soap, tobacco, and gutka. After all the calculations, what will be left for us? Nothing. We are men with wives and children. When we return after 6–7 months, what will we take home? Nothing.”



They speculated that at the end, they would not get more than 250 rupees per day for duty from 6 am to 8 pm, while staying on the farm full-time. At another farm, workers from Sundargarh said that they should get at least 15,000 to 18,000 rupees because they have to stay on the farms and ensure 24/7 monitoring. One worker who has been coming to the same farm for the past 6–7 years said that his pay has increased to 14,000 rupees, and food expenses are deducted from it. When asked whether they knew how much the shrimp sells for, they said they are not told directly but tend to overhear during harvest. They added that the labour cost for one pond would be around 1,80,000 rupees, including the night worker, which is only a small proportion of the total cost, which could be around 30 lakhs for each pond.

One supervisor from West Bengal said that even though it is not “hard work,” 12,000 rupees is still too little. But they cannot do anything because “that is the rule.” Everyone feels it should be increased. He added that this amount is very low, and the work should be considered skilled labour because of the technical aspects. While technicians visit from time to time, they cannot be relied upon as they do not come regularly. One worker from Simdega, Jharkhand, when asked whether 11,000 rupees is sufficient, said: “Kahan kaafi hai, par utna hi de raha hai toh kya karein. 15 se zyada hona chahiye.” “It is not enough, but if that is all they are giving, what can we do? It should be more than 15,000 rupees.” A group of workers from Simdega, Jharkhand, said that their agreed salary is 11,000 rupees, and whether the owner will deduct expenses for ration, and how much, will be known only at the time of settlement. They do not get paid every month, but if they want some money sent home, the owner sends it. The owner sometimes gives one month's salary as a bonus, depending on his discretion.

The disparity in payments to supervisors and workers was also evident during a discussion with two supervisors at a farm in Mandroi. They are paid 20,000 rupees for 12 hours of work (day and night shifts), and they receive payment monthly. Workers, on the other hand, are paid 10,000 rupees per month along with food expenses, but they are not paid monthly.

Various rationales are offered for paying at the end of the season: that they will spend it on alcohol, so it is better to transfer it to their accounts; that they may get looted on the way back home, so it is safer if they do not carry anything with them and the money is deposited after they reach home. One of the workers complained that he had not seen any money since he arrived. “Humein pata bhi nahi hai yahan ka paisa kaisa dikhta hai.” “We do not even know what the money here looks like”. The physicality of money is completely absent in their lives at the farm. There is a possibility that they might receive nothing in the end, in the absence of written contracts. They do not even receive kharchi in hand, as the ration is simply bought and handed to them. Even during illness, they do not receive anything in hand — the owner directly pays. So, they have nothing that functions as a record of payment. They do not know what will be deducted before they receive the final amount, which happens only after they return to their villages.

It must be noted that, in 2020, the union Majur Adhikar Manch facilitated the release of a group of workers from Jharkhand from a farm in Olpad. They were being restricted from leaving the farm during the COVID-19 lockdown. During the course of the research, two workers came forward — one in Bhimpur and one in Kudiyan, wanting to pursue cases related to non-payment of wages. However, later they decided not to pursue the cases.

The daily minimum wage for workers in the fishing sector in Gujarat is Rs 489.50 to 500.50 for unskilled workers, Rs 500.50 to 510.50 for semi-skilled workers, and Rs 510.50 to 522.50 for skilled workers for an eight-hour workday. Monthly wages are calculated based on 26 days, considering a weekly off. In contrast, shrimp-farm workers are paid between Rs 266 and Rs 400 for 30 days of work and 12-hour shifts, with 24/7 on-site stay requirements.

Skill Level	Zone	Total Per Day (₹)	Total Per Month (₹)
Unskilled	Zone I	500.50	13,013
	Zone II	489.50	12,727
Semi-skilled	Zone I	510.50	13,273
	Zone II	500.50	13,013
Skilled	Zone I	522.50	13,585
	Zone II	510.50	13,273

**Skilled:** Supervisor, Processing Supervisor, Processing Assistant, Store Boy, Grader, Clerk, Typist, Clerk cum typist

**Semi-skilled:** Washer, Peelers, Packers

**Unskilled:** Peon, Watchman, Mazdoor, Helper

Zone I are the corporation areas. Dumas and Bhimpur fall under Surat Municipal Corporation jurisdiction, while Olpad falls outside it – thus considered Zone II.

None of the workers indicated having access to any form of social security benefits, such as Provident Fund, Employee State Insurance, pensions, or health benefits, such as the Ayushman Card. One worker from Odisha said that they should get a local labour card at the destination. When they go to Himachal Pradesh for construction work, they get a labour card from the government office at the destination, which contains all employment details. Here, they did not register anywhere, and therefore, there is no record of their employment. Another worker shared that he is registered on e-Shram but has not received any benefits from it yet. A worker from Bhavnagar, Gujarat, said that no government officials visit the farms. They have ration cards and Ayushman cards but do not avail anything at the destination. He said: “Koi card ka koi fayda nahi hai. Bas kamaya hua khaane ka hai. Aur kuch nahi hai.” “There is no benefit from any card. Whatever we earn is just for our food. There is nothing else.”

Monthly wages	Number of workers	%
Less than 10,000	117	34.93%
10,000-14,000	213	63.58%
15,000-20,000	3	0.90%
More than 20,000	2	0.60%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Table 16: Monthly wages

Food expenses	Number of workers	%
Less than 1,500	27	8.06%
1,500-2,000	262	78.21%
More than 2,000	46	13.73%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Table 17: Food expenses

Expenses	N	%
Given in kind as ration (As Required)	303	90.45%
Monthly	30	8.96%
Twice every month	2	0.60%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Table 18: Mode of payment for expenses

## D. Work Conditions and OSH

Around 80% (n=269) of the workers indicated that they do not receive any personal protective equipment (PPE) for work on the farms. The remaining 20% (n=66) stated that they mainly receive either boots, raincoats, or gloves. Most of the PPE provided was linked to the monsoon season — meant to shield them from the rain while giving feed and to make it easier to walk in the muck, and not for any other aspect of the work during the remaining months. It is pertinent to note that the workers regularly handle bleach, medicines, and feed, yet are not provided with any safety equipment while handling these.

PPE Provision	N	%
No	269	80.30%
Yes	66	19.70%
Boots	49	14.62%
Raincoat	14	4.18%
Gloves	32	9.55%
Masks	6	1.79%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Table 19: PPE Provision

When asked about occupational health-related challenges, 41.9% (n=139) of workers reported experiencing some form of health and safety issue related to their work. While workers were initially somewhat hesitant to articulate these challenges — often beginning by saying there were no issues, especially during surveys, many eventually opened up during the interviews about the common occupational hazards and routine difficulties they face on the farms. During discussions, a large number of workers shared that working conditions become extremely challenging when it rains. Workers from Sundargarh at a farm in Kudiya explained that during the rains, they have to walk through the sludge carrying feed. “Ghusega pair andar fir bhi aapko jaana hi padega.” “Even if your feet sink into the sludge, you still have to go,” one worker said.

When asked about safety gear such as boots, one worker said, “kuch nahi diya, aur kya pehnega keechad mein? Woh boot dene se toh girega, kaun uthayega usko. Haathi ka pair hai, waisey hi pakadta hai mitti, toh kaun uthayega”. “They haven’t given us anything. What are we supposed to wear in this mud? If they give us boots, we’ll slip. Who will pick us up then? Our feet grip the mud like an elephant’s.” Another worker added that there may be boots suitable for such terrain, but they are not provided. A worker from Jharsuguda mentioned that the pathway cannot be levelled, nor can anything be laid on it to make walking easier, because in January, a tractor needs to pass through for pond repairs.



Health and safety challenges	N	%
No	196	58.51%
Yes	139	41.49%
Grand Total	335	100.00%

Table 20: Health and safety challenges

The most pressing issue was the threat of electrocution, especially during the rains. Because there is no power supply, the generator set is run constantly, and the wires are exposed in most cases. The workers also have to operate the motor at regular intervals, which is another time when there is a fear of electric shock.

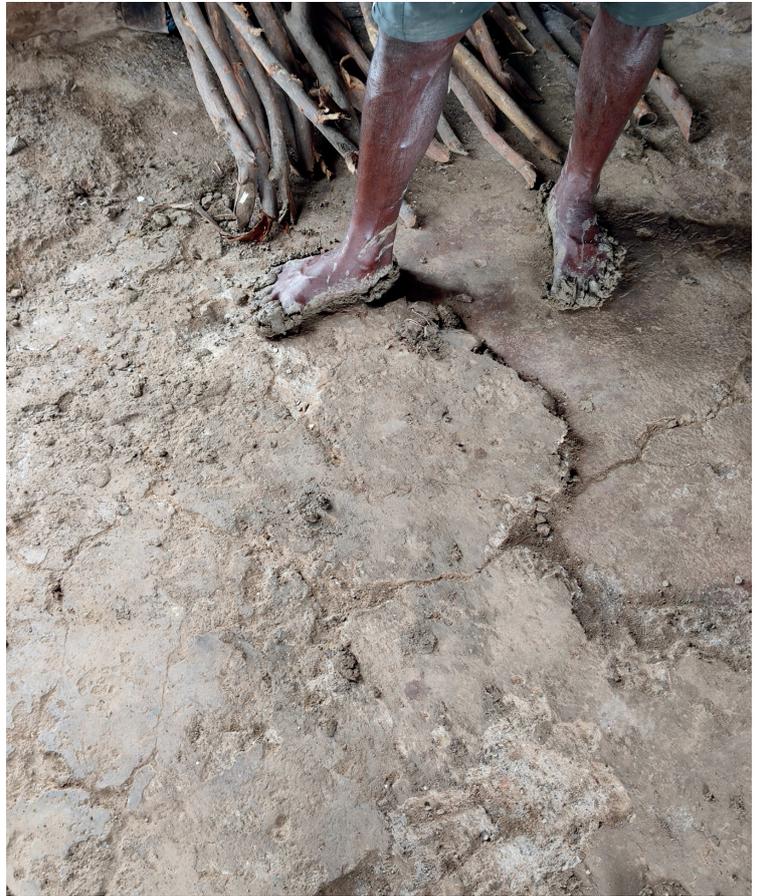
During discussions with workers, they spoke about cases they had heard of where a worker received an electric shock and even died, which had instilled a sense of fear. A worker from Sundargarh said that someone got stuck to the DG set in Dumas and died — “Baarish ke time agar pakad liya toh fir chhuta nahi” (“If it catches you during the rains, it won’t let go”). However, such an incident has not happened in his immediate vicinity. Another worker from Bhavnagar, Gujarat, said that he has heard that there have been cases of death due to electrocution at farms for which the owners gave compensation. A worker from Jharsuguda, on another farm in Olpad, told us that recently a worker died on the farm next to his. They were told that he died because of a heart attack, and that it was linked to alcohol. The owner sent the body back to the village, and the worker was not taken to the hospital.

The workers said they were taking all the precautions on their own wherever possible, as ultimately one is responsible for one's own health. This individualisation of risks at worksites is a common practice, which leads to blaming the workers for “carelessness” in case of any incidents, rather than interrogating the systemic issues at the worksites that lead to them. Such accident-related cases are difficult to track because there is no reporting or recording of such incidents, and the workers often end up leaving the farms. Further, health risks are also not tracked in the absence of any regular health check-ups.

A few health risks identified by the team and discussed with the workers were: risks of slips and falls, especially during rains when the soil turns to sludge; regular colds and fevers from working in the rain; and fear of contracting malaria. Workers also spoke about the impact of extreme heat during peak summer, when they have to step out of the tents to give feed and sleep without fans, leading to ill health.

Common health issues / risks	Number of workers
Regular Fever / Cough	216
Body Pain	181
Frequent headache	98
Skin issues	71
Light electric current	40
Physical injuries (Cuts/falls)	24
Sunburn	17
Breathing issues	6

However, assessment of health conditions and establishing any link with work would require regular medical check-ups and monitoring, which was not done as part of this study.



Health checkup	N	%
Never	210	62.69%
When required	125	37.31%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

*Table 21: Health checkup*

Healthcare expenses	N	%
Yes, support during checkups/emergency	242	72.24%
No	93	27.76%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

*Table 22: Health expenses*

Discussions with workers indicated that their average monthly health-related expenses were around Rs 250 to 300. However, workers added that they do not have to spend this amount out of their own pocket. Around 72% of the surveyed workers (n=242) shared that the owner provides support during medical emergencies and whenever any medicine is required, while 27% (n=93) said they do not receive any support. It is imperative to highlight that the workers are completely dependent on the owner for any health-related emergency.

Keeping control over when and where workers are taken, even for fever and cold, allows owners to exercise a form of patriarchal authority over them. The denial of agency to decide their own health needs is also linked to the absence of any government schemes and the lack of information on the nearest hospitals, which ultimately increases their reliance on the owners. Even the payments for doctor consultations and medicines are made directly by the owners. This also normalises and reinforces the fact that workers do not have any cash on them during their time working at the farms.

It is also to be noted that for more serious health issues, there is no local support, and workers usually go back home to seek treatment. We met a worker from Sundargarh, Odisha, who had developed prostate-related issues. He said that the local doctors were not able to identify the problem, so he was planning to return home. Owners may also view extremely sick workers as unproductive and of no utility to the work on the farms. Thus, their intervention is limited to taking workers to the hospital for minor issues and giving them over-the-counter medicines for cold, fever, and pain. There is no concept of regular health check-ups, making it impossible to ascertain any link between occupation and health. An owner in Olpad shared that while they do not hire anyone below 18, they also do not prefer older workers or those with any disease or illness, such as mirgi (seizures), as the work takes place around water and there is a risk of workers falling into the pond.

Training	N	%
Never	327	97.61%
Only once	6	1.79%
Yes regularly	2	0.60%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

*Table 23: Health expenses*



It must be highlighted that workers do not receive any training for this work. A total of 97.61% (n=327) of workers indicated that they have never received any training. They mostly learn by observing older workers on the farm. This puts them at further risk, as the lack of training means they do not receive the necessary instructions on how to navigate the occupational hazards linked to shrimp farming. Whether the farm owners are aware of the health and injury risks related to this work, and whether they are interested in ensuring that workers are protected against these risks, needs to be assessed.

During conversations, none of the farm owners highlighted any risks associated with this work, instead describing it as “aaram wala kaam” (easy or relaxing work), thereby either ignoring or neglecting the threats to workers’ health and safety.

The farmers receive some support from Godrej Agrovet and other such companies regarding technical aspects, including feed and medicines, through visits by their agents. These agents help monitor the health of the shrimps and provide any technical advice the farmer may require; however, workers are not provided with any specific technical training.

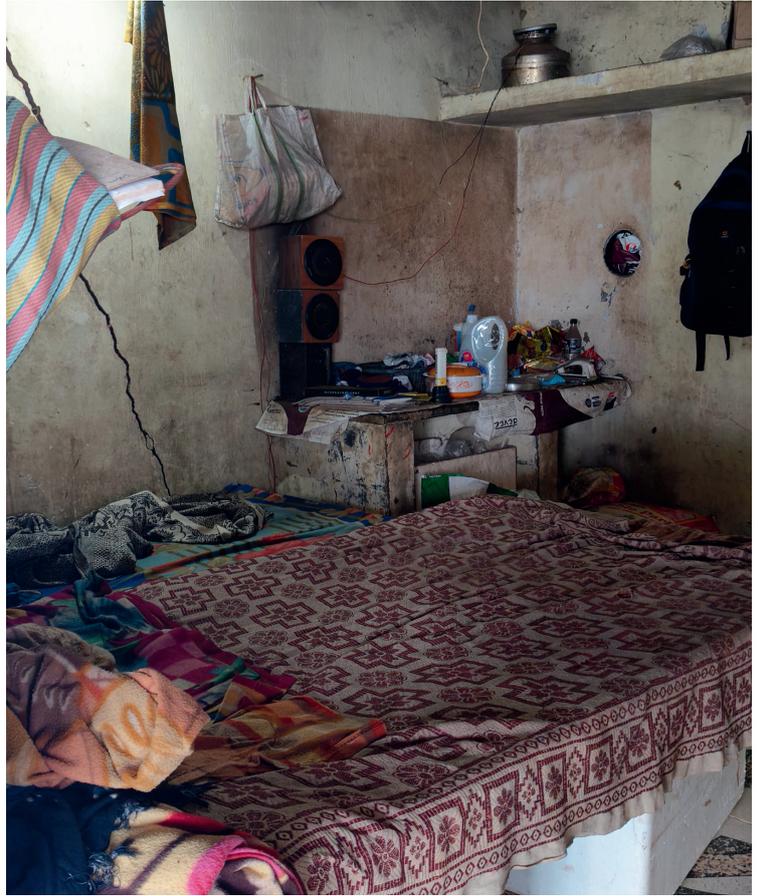
## **E. Living conditions**

Since migrant workers live on-site, they are prone to greater exploitation and vulnerabilities. The living conditions at the farms are dismal, lacking access to basic facilities like toilets and bathrooms. While workers commonly mentioned that the farms are open and not claustrophobic like factories, the living facilities provided by the owners are highly questionable.

The housing can be categorised into three broad types: kutchha, meaning bamboo and tarpaulin structures; pucca, which refers to proper cemented rooms; and semi-pucca, which are sturdier than tarpaulin tents but not entirely permanent structures. Of the surveyed workers, 61.49% (n=206) were living in kutchha set-ups; 28.06% (n=94) in semi-pucca structures; and only 10.15% (n=34) had a proper room.

In most cases, workers were not provided with fans. Only a few farms we visited during the peak summers in May and June had fans inside the tent or room. The main reason for this was the lack of electricity connections provided to workers. Some farms had solar panels, which workers used to charge their phones. However, fans were provided only in a few farms. Workers broadly compared their situation to cramped factories, and in that sense, the farms appeared to be an upgrade. We often found night-duty workers sleeping on charpais provided by the owner, under mosquito nets, in cramped rooms where day-duty workers were also cooking.

By providing accommodation on-site, the owner ensures complete control over the workers, making them work around the clock while also saving on costs. This arrangement becomes a justification for paying them meagre wages and not paying them regularly, since workers supposedly do not need higher monthly wages to cover accommodation costs. Such an arrangement also works well for young single male migrants — hence the preference for hiring only them.



The absence of toilets is glaring but normalised. Except for a couple of farms where women had accompanied the men, there was no provision for a toilet or bathing area. A total of 94.63% (n=317) of surveyed workers did not have access to toilets. At a farm in Kudiyana with around 23 workers from Odisha and Jharkhand, including one woman, there is a washroom, but it is clogged. This is particularly challenging for the woman, and there has been no discussion about getting it repaired. The woman, whose primary job is to cook, said that the challenges are more severe during her menstrual period. The owner has told her that the toilet will be fixed, but it has been a while.

At another farm in Dumas, which had two families from Bhavnagar, Gujarat, a small area was cordoned off as a bathing space for the women. One of the women said she is facing issues because of the lack of a bathroom, but her husband interrupted to say that the owner is getting a washroom and rooms constructed, along with solar power for the next season if the harvest is good. Currently, they only get electricity when they switch on the diesel motor in the morning. That is when they charge their phones. Till now, the owners have not built permanent infrastructure because they fear that authorities will come and demolish it.

Workers from Simdega, Jharkhand, at a farm in Bhimpur, Dumas, said that they would definitely demand better living facilities if possible. Currently, they do not have electricity in their rooms, so there is no fan even during extreme heat. There is no toilet — “hona chahiye, lekin dega tabhi na” “There should be one, but only if the owner actually provides it”.

Further, there was no regular supply of water. In 99.10% of cases (n=332), the water source was tankers that were used to fill plastic containers on the farms for all the needs of the workers. One worker from Sundargarh, Odisha, at a farm in Kudiyana shared that since there are no schools or Anganwadis in the vicinity, the work is feasible for single male migrants, but they cannot bring their families. He said that if they worked with a company, maybe they could have received some of these facilities, but here, they do not expect anything.

Housing type	Kutcha		Pucca		Semi-pucca		N	Total %
	n	%	n	%	n	%		
On-site	206	61.49%	34	10.15%	94	28.06%	334	99.70%
Owned		0.00%	1	0.30%		0.00%	1	0.30%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>206</b>	<b>61.49%</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>10.45%</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>28.06%</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Table 24: Housing type and structure

Water source	N	%
Tank	332	99.10%
Well	2	0.60%
Handpump	1	0.30%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Table 25: Source of drinking water

Toilets	N	%
No	317	94.63%
Yes	18	5.37%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Table 26: Toilet access



## F. Freedom of association

Traditional trade unions are not the only form in which mobilisation can take place, especially when it comes to tribal migrants. Often part of cultural or religious associations in their source villages, these same networks can be mobilised to speak about their rights after migrating to destination locations. Tribal migrant workers face heightened vulnerabilities at the destination because of inadequate support networks there. This makes it easier for owners to keep them on the farms until the end of the season, deny them dignified wages for the hours and months they put in, and provide inadequate shelter and basic facilities without any accountability. The social networks at the source tend to remain there, but the strong cultural connections and solidarities often do not travel to the destination because of the scattered nature of the worksites and the fear of retaliation, given the unprotected and insecure working arrangements.

At the shrimp farms located in the villages of Olpad and Dumas taluka in Surat, 98.21% (n=312) denied being part of any collective, be it a union or a cultural group at the destination. Even if they did become part of unions, the lack of spaces to congregate and discuss matters, to later raise collective demands, is absent. In situations where workers do not have permission to leave the farms and visit other farms, and where they are not allowed to visit sites of worship, it is evident that the owner exercises control over workers' movement to prevent any possibility of them uniting. A worker from Simdega, Jharkhand, said that there is a church nearby, but when asked if they visit, he said: "Idhar se chutti kahan milta hai. Khatam hoga tabhi jaana hai?" "When do we get leave from here? We can go only once the work ends." At one of the farms with predominantly Christian tribal migrants, we saw a cross painted on the wall of the hut. There is a complete denial of any space for workers to gather and pray or engage in their cultural practices — let alone a space where they can come together to discuss their collective hardships, should they wish to do so.

Unlike at brick kilns, where the kilns are situated at a distance from each other, farms that are clustered together are close to each other. The workers also know that most workers in the region predominantly come from selected areas in the Simdega–West Singhbhum–Sundargarh belt. It should not be too challenging to organise at the destination, given these realities, but through mechanisms such as withholding pay and other paternalistic forms of control, the possibility of organising is removed from the minds of workers due to the threat of losing work. While the fact that the owners take the workers to the doctor's clinic for check-ups and pay for it can be acknowledged, it also ties the workers to the owners. The same applies to the act of bringing them groceries. In this way, they become dependent on the owner for all their survival needs despite living in deplorable conditions. This means they cannot leave, nor can they raise their voice against ill-treatment. When asked whether they can raise concerns with the owner, a worker at Kudiyana from Sundargarh, who was migrating for this work for the first time, shared: "Par woh (owner) idhar aate hi nahi hein, to kisko bolenge. Isko (manager) bolenge toh woh bas haan karega. Talaab kaisa hai, kya labour hai, kaisa chal raha hai, usko koi farak nahi hai, yahan nazar bhi nahi lagata. Ek baar aaya tha apni biwi aur behen ke saath. Bas. Aane se bhi baat karne ke liye koi mauka hi nahi deta." "But the owner never comes here, so who should we tell? If we tell the manager, he only says 'yes, yes.' He doesn't care about the condition of the pond, the workers, or how the work is going. He doesn't even look around here. He came once with his wife and sister, that's all. Even when he comes, he doesn't give us any chance to talk." A supervisor from West Bengal said that if they wanted to hold meetings, they would have to speak to the owner and take permission. Without that, it would not be possible.



One of the workers, who feared receiving less than the agreed wages at the end of the season, asked whether they would be able to get any support in case of non-payment of wages. Workers from both Odisha and Jharkhand agreed that meetings should be held at the source to discuss how to raise collective demands for wage hikes and better working conditions. How do they even begin to band together and organise at the destination in a scenario where they work on isolated patches with their movements watched and controlled?

Collective at destination	N	%
No	329	98.21%
Yes, cultural group	4	1.19%
Yes, other collective	1	0.30%
Yes, union	1	0.30%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Table 27: Membership in unions/collectives/cultural groups at destination

Collective at source	N	%
No	312	93.13%
Yes (either union or cultural group)	23	6.87%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Table 28: Membership in unions/collectives/cultural groups at source



# Discussion and Analysis

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## A. Withholding pay and other tactics to trap workers on the farms

While intermediary-based migration was not found to be a reality in the case of shrimp-farming workers in Surat, and most did not report receiving an advance before migrating, the way in which their employment terms were structured led to a situation of entrapment. Since their wages are withheld until the end of the season, the workers are unable to leave the farm for fear that they would not receive any payment for the time they have already put in. There is no concept of a contract, and all arrangements are verbal, leaving workers without any legal recourse if the owners go back on their words or promises. While this might not legally qualify as bonded labour, it does satisfy several conditions associated with it — such as restrictions on movement, long working hours, denial of minimum wages, and non-payment of regular wages, all of which bind the worker to the workplace, even if they may not have taken an advance. This is reflected by the workers in their own words.

A worker from Jharsuguda, Odisha, at Olpad said: “Ghar jaane ke liye time nahi milta hai. Company mein jaisa chutti milta hai, waisa nahi rehta idhar.” “We don’t get time to go home. Here we don’t get leave the way people get in a company.” Workers from Simdega, Jharkhand, at a farm in Bhimpor, Dumas said, can only go home once the owner permits it, even if the harvesting work is complete. “Ab malum nahi humare aage koi aayega ya nahi. Jisko kaam accha lagega woh ayega, jisko nahi lagega woh nahi ayega.” “We don’t know whether someone will replace us after we leave or not. Whoever likes this work will come; whoever doesn’t like it will not come.” When asked whether they would return next season, one of the workers said they would only know after going back. They have already sown rice at their farms in the village, so depending on how things go at home, they will decide whether they need to return in the coming season, since there is no other work available at the source. When asked who decided that they should be paid only at the end of the season, the workers said: “Yeh toh pehle se hi chala aa raha hai.” “This has been happening from the beginning.” There was no discussion or negotiation with the workers about when the payment would be made, as it is already understood that they will receive it only at the end of the season. This practice has been set entirely by the owners.

A group of workers at Kudiyaana from Sundargarh, who came to the farms for the first time, said that the owner has still not told them the final wage, even though they are close to the harvest. “Issey toh hum logon ka Odisha mein hi theek hai. 500–600 mein 8 ghanta kaam karo aur bhaago. “It’s better for us in Odisha. Work 8 hours for 500–600 rupees and leave”. “Yahan raat bhar tumko jagna hi padega. Chalo bolne se jaana hi padedga. Sona ho, keechad ho, kuch bhi ho, jaana hi padedga.” “Here, you have to stay awake at night. If they tell you to go, you must go, whether it’s sand, mud, anything, you must go”. “Apna duty karo bas seedhe, niklo chalo makaan, aaram se nahao, khao.” “Back home, you do your duty straight, go home, bathe peacefully, eat”. “Yahan bazaar hai, na haat hai, na city hai, na kahin ghumne ko hai” “Here, there is no market, no weekly bazaar, no city, nowhere to go”. “Kuch time nahi milta. Abhi 2 ghanta time milega thoda sa.” “We get no free time. Maybe now we’ll get two hours”. “Bahar jaana bilkul manaa hai, phir bhi chip chaap ke jaate hi hein.” “Going outside is strictly forbidden, but we still sneak out quietly”. Those who brought them for this work ran away because of drinking issues. They were the ones who told them about the work and recruited them. “Itna rate dega, utna rate dega, aisey baat karke laaya hai.” “They brought us here by saying we would get this rate, that rate”.

“Laaya toh theek hai, lekin hum logon ke pocket mein jo tha, 2–4 rupaiya, woh bhi 2 mahina ke baad khatam ho gaya.” “Bringing us here was fine, but the little money we had, 2–4 rupees, got over after two months”. After they arrived, the wage rate was renegotiated: “Aane ke baad rate vichaar hua, paisa ka. Pehle jo baat ki thi, woh kata gaya aur bola woh wala rate nahi dega.” “After coming, the payment rate was reconsidered. What was promised earlier was reduced, and they said they won’t give that rate”. “Itna dur aa karke fayda hum logon ko kya hai?” “After coming so far, what benefit do we get?” Another worker said: “Yahan khao, peeyo, aur subah shaam keval talaab ko dekho.” “Here you eat, drink, and watch the pond from morning till night”. “Kya time paas hoga, aisey hi ghumte rehte hein.” “How will we pass time? We just wander around”. “Jiske paas mobile hai woh waisey time pass kar raha hai” “Whoever has a phone passes time on it”.

Another worker from Sundargarh at another farm shared: “Hum kahin jaate hi nahi hein. Jo chahiye usko bolne se woh lekar aa jata hai. Lekin idhar udhar nahi jaane ka, yeh pehle se hi bola hai. Isliye hum nahi jaate. Jayenge bhi toh kaisa, paisa nahi dega. Kamaya hai woh paisa bhi gaya aur wapas jayega bhi kaise.” “We don’t go anywhere. Whatever we need, we tell him, and he brings it. But we were told from the beginning not to go anywhere. So, we don’t go. Even if we try, how can we? He won’t give us our money. If the money we earned is gone, how will we go back?” They will be able to leave only after the shrimp harvest. Before that, they cannot even think of leaving, because that would mean letting go of the entire season’s earnings. “Baandh ke rakh diya hai, yeh line hi galat hai. Aisa lagta hai ki jab jayenge toh bhul jao paise ko, woh sab gaya, dimaag mein mat rakho. Deta hai ki nahi deta hai, kuch pata nahi. Kaisey pata chalega. Itna dur se aayein hein. Wapas kaisey aayenge return paisa lene. Kitna aadmi chod ke bhaag bhi gaya hai. Kis jagah mein kaisa hai, kaise malum chalega hum logon ko. Hum log toh andhera mein abhi hein. Ghar jaane se bhi andhera, idhar rehne se bhi andhera. Phasne ke baad ab kuch upaye nahi dikha raha hai.” “They have tied us down; this system is wrong. It feels like when we leave, we should forget our money, it’s gone, don’t think about it. We don’t know whether he will pay or not. How will we know? We have come from so far away. How will we come back to collect the money? Many people have left their work and run away. How will we know what things are like at different farms? We are in darkness now. Going home is darkness, staying here is darkness. After getting trapped, we see no way out”. Another worker said: “Phasane waala kuch bhi bola kar phasayega.” “The one who traps you will say anything to trap you”. The workers confirmed that they did not receive any advance except the amount for the train tickets.

They do not know how much profit the farmers earn: “kuch fayda hoga toh hum log ko kya dega, chocolate khaane ko bhi nahi milega” “Even if they make some profit, what will they give us; we won’t even get a chocolate to eat”. They said they should be getting paid every month rather than at the end of the season. “Agar mere bacche ko kuch ho gaya, toh kahan dhundega paisa? Agar ghar pe biwi bacchon ko kuch hua toh yahan par paisa maange se mushkil hai. Ghar pe har cheez ka takleef hai, lekin yahan bhul jao woh cheez.” “If something happens to my child, where will I find money? If something happens to my wife or children at home, it is very difficult to ask for money here. There are difficulties at home, but here you have to forget all that”. A worker from Odisha who had migrated for the first time expressed that they should get paid every month as there are needs at home: “Idhar toh hum log khaa pee rahe hein lekin ghar walon ko bhi zarurat hai.” “Here we are eating and surviving, but our families at home also have needs”.



At another farm in Olpad, another worker said: “Mahine milna chahiye lekin nahi dete hein. Paisa de denge toh chala jayega beech mein.” “We should get paid monthly, but they don’t pay. If they give money, workers might leave mid-season”. In case someone wishes to leave in the middle, the worker said: “Kam paisa rehta hai toh jab jayega tab dedega. Koi emergency mein bhi de dega. Par zyada rahega toh aakhir mein dega.” “If only a small amount is due, they will pay when the worker leaves. In emergencies, they may give it too. But if a large amount is due, they will only give it at the end”. According to the workers, this arrangement was a “rule” set by the owners, and workers had no say in it. Workers from Valsad and Navsari in Gujarat working at a farm in Saras also said that: “Agar payment account mein daal diya toh koi ladka bhaag jayega. Isiliye nahi deta hai .” “If they deposit wages in the bank account, some boys might run away. That’s why they don’t pay monthly”. If required, the owner gives them some money in between. Some owners allow workers to go home in case of urgent work, but others refuse and tell them they will not be paid if they leave.

When asked if they would come again for this work, one worker from Sundargarh said: “mereko mera udhar hi theek hai.” “For me, my home is better”. Another worker said: “Aur jagah facility hein lekin talab line mein nahi hai.” “Other places have better facilities, but not in the shrimp-pond line”. They said that some farms have harvested early, restocked the ponds, and will harvest again in three months, in December: “Double fayda uthana chahte honge. Labour hai abhi toh chhalao.” “They want to make double the profit. Since labour is available now, they will run the cycle again”. They have been told they will have to work with the local workers to harvest the shrimp as well. At another farm, a worker from Sundargarh said: “Ab aa hi gaye hein toh ek saal toh rukna hi padega. Accha nahi lagega tab bhi.” “Now that we have come, we must stay for at least a year, even if we don’t like it”.

Some workers also said that owners keep their Aadhar cards when they arrive: “Koi haraami wala seth hota hai toh Aadhar rakh leta hai” “Some wicked owners keep the workers’ Aadhaar cards”. A worker from Jharsuguda confirmed that their Aadhaar card is kept with the owner. An owner at a farm in Bhimpor, Dumas, and another in Olpad confirmed that they keep the workers’ Aadhaar cards. The Olpad owner said: “Agar koi baahar sey crime karke aaya ho toh unka Aadhar card humare paas jaruri hai lena.” “If someone has come from outside after committing a crime, then it is necessary for us to keep their Aadhaar card”. During the conversation, the owner repeatedly referred to the workers as bacche (children).

A group of workers from Odisha shared that there were only four workers at their farm this season, although six were required. But because of the owner, some left for other farms, and the owners did not replace them. Such a shortage of workers existed across various farms, which burdened the remaining workers. The workers said that slowly, people have stopped coming because there is no life here. “Koi problem hota hai toh jaa hi nahi sakte. Koi mar gaya ya kuch ho gaya.” “If any problem happens, we cannot go. Even if someone dies or something happens”. Further, some fear that losses might lead to the denial of wages. In the adjacent farm, there was a loss, so they did not pay the workers the agreed amount. It has been 3–4 years, and the farm is non-operational now. At another farm, a worker from Odisha said that some owners refuse payment to workers if they face losses. They just give enough money for the workers to travel back home and tell them to leave, or they claim they will send the money later, but ultimately do not. “Hum Odisha se toh aa nahi sakte hein. Aaj daalenge kal daalenge bolta rahega. Late kardega aur koyi nahi bhi daalta hai.” “We cannot keep coming from Odisha. They keep saying they’ll deposit it today or tomorrow. They delay it, and some don’t deposit it at all”.

Workers from West Singhbhum confirmed that despite the large influx of migrants, labour shortages happen when workers do not want to return to farms where the owners have not paid them the agreed amount. Then, owners must quote higher rates to get workers. When asked, workers from Simdega, Jharkhand, said that there has never been a situation where they were not paid because the owner suffered losses due to the virus. However, they have heard it has happened to some workers. They were not aware of how much was harvested, the rates, or the profits earned by the owners: “Hum nahi jaanna chahte. Jaan ke bhi kya karenge?” “We do not want to know. Even if we know, what will we do with that?” Though they recognise they are the ones doing the work, and without them there would be no harvest. “Lekin kya bolenge. Woh dega to dega, nahi toh nahi.” “But what can we say — if he gives, he gives; if he doesn’t, he doesn’t”.

Workers from West Singhbhum, Jharkhand, at a farm in Olpad shared that they first migrated to work on the farms of the shrimp processing company Zeal Aqua, but due to some issue, they moved to an individual owner’s farm. The person who brought them, the thekedar (labour contractor), brought around 13–14 workers and then ran away. The only difference is that the individual owner puts money into their bank accounts, while Zeal Aqua would give them cash through the thekedar. Both pay at the end of the season. “Khaa peekar 9,000 bola hai, par deta hai ki nahi woh dekhna padega. Last mein hi pata chalega.” “They have said we will get 9,000 after food and expenses, but whether they actually give it, we have to see. We will only know at the end.” Depending on how they are paid, they will decide whether to return or go to the company farms. The workers are not aware of how much the owners earn as profits. At the company farms, they do not even know the shrimp sale price; at individual farms, they at least get some idea. When asked whether he would prefer monthly payments, a worker from Sundargarh said: “ab jaisa rule bana hai wohi karna hoga.” “We must follow whatever rule has been made”. The rules are made by the owners. When he came for the first time, he learned that this system was already in place and there was no scope for questioning.

One of the farm owners in Olpad, however, placed the responsibility on the workers: “Workers har mahine lete hi nahi hein. Aur lenge toh saara khaa peeke uda denge.” “Workers don’t take monthly payments. And if they take it, they will spend it all on food and daily expenses”. Another farm owner in Olpad shared that at times, some owners initially mention a higher amount to the workers, and then once the workers arrive, they reduce the rates since there is no written contract. He said that is why he clarifies the payment terms from the beginning; otherwise, workers do not trust. He also tells them that, unless there is an emergency, in which case he keeps two months’ wages aside as a reserve that can be given to the workers, payments are only made at the end of the season. “Inko zyada paisay bhi do toh koi matlab nahi hai, yeh log bachate nahi hein. Naam ka bolte hein ki gaon bhejna hai paisa par gaon nahi bhejte.” “Even if you give them more money, it does not matter, they don’t save. They say they want to send money home, but they don’t actually send it”.

A supervisor from West Bengal, who has been migrating to the region since 2004, earlier for factory work and since 2006 for shrimp farming, shared that this practice of paying at the end of the season has been followed since the beginning of the business in the region. Earlier, the owners would hand over cash when workers were leaving, but some workers were robbed at the Surat station, so they shifted to bank transfers. He said that they do not go to the market because the owner can arrange everything for them. They only go to the dawakhaana (clinic) in Saras village if required. The owner’s wife is a doctor, so in case of an emergency, she helps. They are not allowed to go to other farms due to the fear of disease. They can only speak from afar.

They can only speak from afar. Even the owners do not enter the farm — they leave materials and groceries outside. He said that the workers pass their time on their mobile phones. “Akelapan toh lagta hi hai, kya karega majboori hai na.” “Of course, we feel lonely, but what can we do? It’s our compulsion”. The supervisor said that he does not have a fixed salary. At the end of the season, he sits with the owner, and based on the earnings, the owner gives him a share. He added that some of his dues from two seasons ago are still pending. The owner told him, “Jab kaam chodega tera hisaab ho jayega. Jab maangta hai toh de deta hai. Mujhey 1 lakh chahiye tha ghar banane ka toh de diya.” “Your dues will be cleared when you leave the job. When I ask, he gives. I needed 1 lakh rupees to build my house, so he gave it”.

A worker from Jharsuguda expressed that he does not see a good future in this work. He took an advance of Rs 50,000 from the owner for his sister’s marriage, which is why he had to return this year; he would not have otherwise. While giving the money, the owner told him that it would be good if he came back this year. The advance will be deducted from this season’s salary.

When asked how she feels living there, a woman from Sundargarh at a farm in Kudiyana said, “kaisa hi lagega idhar. Kaam kar rahein hein toh accha lagega hi. Ganv mein accha lagta hai. Akela lagta hai toh bhi kya karenge.” “How do you think it feels here? If we are working, it will feel okay. I like it in the village. Even if I feel lonely, what can I do?” She receives the same amount as the men, around Rs 8,000, and she will also receive it at the end of the season. She mentioned that she has heard that in Dandi farm, workers are paid every month, but not here.

Another reason workers may prefer migrating for this work compared to brick kilns or factories is the direct contact with owners instead of a chain of subcontractors, and the absence of a mandatory advance amount, which still gives them some possibility of escaping tough working conditions. However, given the lack of connection with the outside world once they reach the farms, especially due to physical isolation and intense surveillance by owners through both physical monitoring and cameras, the workers have lost any imagination of engaging in union activity. This ensures that they must keep their heads down and continue for the entire season or risk losing their wages if they leave before the harvest. While this might not formally be termed “bonded labour” since workers do not take debt from the owners, the conditions created remove the agency and choice that workers might otherwise have had if they were paid fair wages every month. If forced labour means restriction of movement and non-payment of minimum wages, then the conditions at Surat’s shrimp farms reflect this reality.

## **B. The idea of ‘work’ and the surveillance and control over workers’ bodies**

At the outset, it may seem like shrimp farming work is not “labour-intensive” — something that the supervisors often repeat. They point to workers doing aaram (rest), describing how there are only three to four times during the day when they are required to perform specific tasks, such as giving feed to the shrimp or adding medicines and chemicals to the pond. Otherwise, according to the owners, the workers are on the charpai, “leisurely hanging out.” The perception of “idleness” is also present among the workers because of their previous experiences of labour-intensive work, as well as the perceptions instilled in them by the supervisors and owners.

Cameras — installed to check movement in and out of the farm — are primarily used to control the workers, as they point not towards the ponds but at the workers' huts and rooms. These cameras also captured the movement of the research team. While none of the workers shared any issues regarding verbal or physical abuse by the owners, the team noted that when they attempted to interview workers at some farms, the workers would receive calls from the owners, who would shout at them for taking too long to answer the phone or for entertaining visitors. They would stop them from talking to the research team, or come to the farms themselves and ask us to leave. The stance was intimidating, and the tone towards the workers often indicated a paternalistic attitude, suggesting that the workers were “theirs,” so no one else had the right to speak to them. “Yeh mere mazdoor hain” (“These are my labourers”), “Maine inhe paise diye hain” (“I have paid them”), “Main inka seth hoon” (“I am their employer/owner”), and “Main inko yahan laya hoon” (“I brought them here”) were some of the lines repeatedly said to us. To avoid compromising the safety of the workers, the team did not administer surveys or interviews at these sites.

One of the owners in Olpad said that there are cameras on most farms, and owners use them to monitor the workers. During feeding time, they definitely check the cameras to see if the workers are active. “Medicine lagaya ki nahi, woh check karenge aur time pe gaye ki nahi. Bahar se zyada idhar mein focus karte hein.” “They check whether medicine was applied and whether the workers went on time. They focus more on what happens inside than outside.” On another farm in Olpad, a worker from Jharsuguda said that there are cameras — “Jhagda hoga isliye dekhte hai raat mein” “They watch at night because fights may happen”.

Most workers compared their conditions with even worse conditions in cramped factories where they had to work continuously on poorly ventilated shop floors. To escape that, they preferred this work, as at least the worksite was open, and except for the two months of preparatory work, feeding work was not as labour-intensive as factory work — even though factories paid at least minimum wages. Some workers were even okay with being paid at the end of the season because it allowed them to save. A worker from Navsari working in Saras said that in companies, the work is for 12 hours and extremely laborious. Earlier, some of them used to work in temple construction in Daman and Silvassa, which was also back-breaking, and they earned 400 rupees daily. Workers from West Singhbhum said they find this work better than factory work, where the labour is gruelling. Here, they can do aaram (rest) apart from the four hours of feeding work. “Lekin idhar bhi kaam toh 24 ghanta hai. Raat mein bhi hum log duty par rehte hein.” “But here too the work is 24 hours. We stay on duty at night as well”.

Many workers shared that the initial two months are tough, as they have to repair the pond, set up biosecurity measures, fill the water, add bleach, and then release the feed. During harvest as well, heavy labour is required, as workers must lift the full-grown shrimp for weighing and loading onto trucks. Some also support local workers during the harvest. Further, they dismantle the entire setup before leaving. One of the farm owners in Olpad shared that one worker can handle two to three ponds in the initial days if there aren't enough workers. But as the size of the shrimp increases, the feeding frequency increases, and around 100 kg of feed goes into a pond per day. Managing this becomes difficult with fewer workers, so one person is required per pond. If there are 10 ponds, 12 workers are hired so that two can do night duty. Initially, fewer workers are acceptable, but later more are required. The owner admitted that they do not want to spend more on labour, so they keep fewer workers at first and increase the number later as needed.

A worker from Odisha, who came to the farm for the first time, said that he used to earn more by migrating to Tamil Nadu as a welder, but the work there was extremely strenuous. Here, the work is comparatively “less,” and there are more workers from his area, giving a sense of familiarity. A supervisor from West Bengal shared: “Family ke liye yeh kaam karna padhta hai. Accha toh nahi lagta.” “I have to do this work for my family. It does not feel good”. He said that if he gets decent work at home, he can eat home-cooked food and take care of his children’s education. Regarding whether he sees a future in this work, he said: “Jo aage nikal gaya woh nikal gaya. Baaki toh koi bhavishya hai nahi. Feed maro, khaana khao aur so jao. Humara toh umar ho gaya. Zyada se zyada 2–4 saal kheechna hai aur fir ghar jaake baith jaana hai. “Those who have moved ahead have moved ahead; there is no future for the rest. Give feed, eat food, and sleep. I have grown old. I will stretch it for at most 2–4 years more, then go home and sit”.

Workers from Bhavnagar, Gujarat, seemed sympathetic to the owner and said they would return for the next season as well. Maalik accha hai toh koi takleef nahi hai (if the owner is good, then there is no problem), implying that their welfare depends heavily on the benevolence of the owners.

Regarding how workers and owners perceive the intensity of the work, a narrative has been shaped that justifies low pay. This narrative is now repeated by the workers as well. However, contradictory viewpoints emerge when asked why local labour is not hired for this work. At that point, the work becomes “tough,” involving heavy lifting, which owners claim local workers cannot do as they are not “productive enough.” An owner in Olpad stated that local workers are not hired because they cannot perform the heavy labour required. A farm owner in Bhimpur, Dumas, also cited “hard work” as the reason for preferring migrant workers. Another owner from Bhimpur repeated this, saying that workers have to lift 100 kg of shrimps from the tank to the pond, and perform other strenuous tasks — thus contradicting their own narrative of “aaram wala kaam” (easy work).

### **C. Alcohol as a way of social control**

Alcohol abuse needs to be interrogated as a way of exerting control over the bodies of tribal communities. This becomes particularly important in the context of migrant workers from tribal communities, wherein alcohol becomes a hegemonic tool of control. At the shrimp farms, during conversations with workers and owners, the narrative of alcohol abuse emerged in multiple ways. First, workers were denied monthly wages because the money would be spent on alcohol. Second, at a few farms, workers said that owners sometimes give them alcohol over the weekend, so they are willing to accept not receiving a monthly salary. Lastly, owners refuse to hire local workers, citing alcohol abuse as a reason for their lack of productivity.

At one of the bigger farms, which had around 23 workers, of whom we spoke to four, some of the workers who arrived at the beginning of the season left within 3–4 months, and new workers replaced them. The earlier group was drinking a lot. “Yeh log nahi manta. Peeyo lekin kaam bhi dekho.” “They do not listen. Drink if you want, but also do the work”. They would keep drinking till 12–1 am, and this was not acceptable to the owners. Nine people left. The woman at the farm said about the men: “Pee kar fit ho jaate hein. Jhagda bohot kiya hai.” “After drinking, they become aggressive. They have fought a lot”. She said that they do not speak to her properly after drinking: “Bohot kharab bolte hein.” “They speak very badly”. The manager hit them and asked three of the men to leave.

A worker from Simdega, Jharkhand, said: “Idhar peeta haina bohot iske liye mahine deta nahi hai. Dega toh kaam karega bhi nahi. Bhaag bhi jayega, jhagda bhi karega.” “People drink a lot here, which is why they are not given monthly wages. If they are paid, they won’t work. They will run away and also create fights.” A worker from Sundargarh said: “Jharkhand mein agar hum jayenge cycling karke Olpad jitna dur, raasta mein handiya, daru sab laga rehta hai. Aur raaste mein koi saathi mil gaya toh kharcha badh hi jaata hai. Khaate peete nikal jaata hai paisa. Idhar ka paisa rehta hai, kyunki yahan ghumna wumna kuch nahi hai.” “If we travel in Jharkhand by bicycle for a distance like Olpad, we find handiya and liquor all along the way. And if you meet a companion on the way, expenses increase. Money gets spent on food and drink. Here, we can save money because there is nothing to roam around for or spend on.” According to a supervisor from West Bengal, the owner tells them to stay away from alcohol. He said he can save money because of the lack of a monthly payment, as he would otherwise end up spending on alcohol, and it is not difficult to get alcohol near the farms. While interacting with a farm owner in Olpad, he instructed a worker to come and stand in front of us, and he began narrating instances of the worker drinking on the farm. He said that he made him sit down and explained, “Beta aisa nahi hota. Tum humari zimmedari mein idhar aaye ho toh humaare hisaab se chalna padega. Tum apne hisaab se chaloge toh nahi jamega.” “Son, this is not acceptable. You have come here under our responsibility, so you must follow our rules. If you act according to your own will, it will not work”. He said that while explaining this, the worker fell and hurt himself.

It is important to understand the reality of alcohol consumption in the context of the relationship that tribal communities have historically had with alcohol. Traditionally, local alcohol has been an important part of tribal cultures, with locally brewed liquor like mahua and tadi consumed communally as part of cultural practices. Commercial alcohol was introduced into tribal communities as a tool of social control, which disrupted local drinking traditions and led to addiction and overconsumption, mostly by young men. This has, in turn, contributed to indebtedness. The impact on women is manifold, as they often bear the brunt of the adverse effects of alcohol abuse.

An owner from Bhimpor, Dumas, stated that local villagers would not be able to perform the heavy labour required for this work, and that local workers drink and sleep at night, so they would not be able to maintain a 24-hour watch. They will switch on the motors and then fall asleep. He said that the migrant workers on his farm do not drink alcohol — they only use tobacco. The narrative of local workers not being productive was, however, countered by the supervisor from West Bengal. He said that the real reason local workers are not hired is: “Permanent mein 24 ghanta rehna padega. Local toh ghar chala jayega. Toh Seth ko rehna padega.” “In permanent work, one must stay 24 hours; local workers will go home, so the owner would have to stay”. There are 20–25 people in the local villages who carry out the harvesting work. They get 600 rupees per day for harvesting, weighing, and storing the shrimp in containers with ice. They must enter the canal during harvesting. It is hard work. The shrimp is heavy, and lifting it is tedious. Then they have to carry it to the tanker with ice water, where it is weighed and sold.

Thus, the alcohol-abuse narrative, however concerning, becomes a way to exercise social control over the bodies of the workers through the denial of monthly wages and the workers’ acceptance of it, the occasional provision of alcohol and control over its supply, and the refusal to hire local workers by citing alcohol consumption as a reason for non-productivity. This allows owners to easily evade their responsibility to provide fair wages and dignified working conditions. They can dehumanise the workers and simultaneously infantilise them to control the terms of employment.



## D. Legal and Regulatory Violations

The labour practices observed across shrimp farms in Olpad and Kudiyana indicate a wide spectrum of violations of Indian labour laws, international standards, and global aquaculture certification norms. Workers do not receive some of the mandated protections — no registration and no mechanisms to address grievances. Their dependency on owners for mobility, access to markets, and even necessities reflects a structurally coercive labour arrangement. Although these workers are hired informally, the farms are required to be registered, and the scale of operations (often 20–25 workers with continuous use of electricity/motor) places them within the scope of several statutory labour protections that are either ignored or actively circumvented.

One of the most significant violations relates to the denial of timely wages and non-payment of minimum wages. Workers are paid only at the end of the season, which may run for six to eight months, directly contravening the Payment of Wages Act, 1936. The withholding of wages functions as a mechanism of control, as workers who attempt to leave before the harvest may forfeit their earnings entirely. Owners openly justify this practice by claiming workers would “waste” their income on alcohol, shifting responsibility away from their own legal obligations. This wage retention, combined with advance deductions in some cases (although not common) and the threat of non-payment, aligns with multiple indicators under the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976 and the ILO’s Forced Labour Indicators. Further, the non-payment of statutory minimum wages, which seems to be the norm at the farms, violates the Minimum Wages Act, 1948. If no-weekly off is considered, then workers are not getting paid the statutory daily minimum wage. Of the surveyed workers, 98.50% (n=330) reported receiving less than Rs 15,000 per month, thus below the statutory minimum wage, accounting for the overtime.

Workers often engage in extended and uninterrupted shifts, especially night-time monitoring of motors and ponds, with some describing their responsibilities as continuous or “24-hour watch”. Such working hours violate the Factories Act, 1948, which should ideally apply due to the number of workers and power-operated systems. Basic occupational safety provisions, including first aid, sanitation, rest breaks, and protective equipment, are absent. The isolation of workers within farms, the prohibition on movement outside the ponds, and the installation of surveillance cameras further restrict workers’ autonomy and expose them to coercive work environments. However, at present, aquaculture farms are regulated by the Coastal Aquaculture Authority under the Coastal Aquaculture Authorities Act, 2005 and the Coastal Aquaculture Authority Act and the 2023 Coastal Aquaculture Authority (Amendment) Act. CAA is mandated to register farms, formulate regulations for the construction and operation of aquaculture farms in coastal areas, and monitor their adherence to guidelines, which mostly pertain to the environment; but it does not address labour standards, wages, working conditions, or any specific rights of workers engaged in coastal aquaculture. Export-oriented shrimp farms are required to be registered with the MPEDA, with the farm receiving a unique ID and the farmer getting an enrolment card.

These conditions fall significantly short of global norms such as ILO Convention C188 (Work in Fishing) and the labour requirements embedded in seafood certifications like the Best Aquaculture Practices (BAP) and the Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC). The absence of written contracts, retention of wages, restriction of movement, and lack of health and safety systems would disqualify farms from any credible responsible-sourcing schemes. This also presents compliance risks for exporters in light of the OECD Due Diligence Guidance, the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, and regulations such as the EU's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive and the US Trafficking Victims Protection Act.

Thus, the structural features of shrimp farm labour, i.e. wage withholding, coercive controls, unsafe conditions, and isolation, as evidenced through the study in Surat, create an ecosystem where forced labour is not incidental but embedded in the ways in which the work is structured. The denial of labour rights is not unusual but a functional component of the capitalistic production model, demanding low-cost operations at the expense of worker dignity and legal protections.



# Recommendations and Way Forward

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The labour conditions experienced by tribal migrant workers on shrimp farms in Surat mirror the systemic challenges encountered by tribal migrants in construction, brick kilns, agriculture, domestic work, and factory labour — as seen by CLRA in its work over the last two decades. These recommendations, therefore, combine sector-specific measures with broader migrant rights interventions, addressing both destination (Surat farms) and source regions (Jharkhand and Odisha). Any structural change requires coordinated governance, regulatory enforcement, community mobilisation, and collaborative efforts involving government departments, regulators, certification bodies, and civil society.

## Destination-based interventions

- 1. Mandatory Registration of Workers at Farms:** Each shrimp farm must maintain worker registers, employment contracts, identity details, and wage records. Panchayats or municipal authorities should be notified of every new migrant group arriving on farms. Registration helps prevent wage theft, track the movement of workers, register them for destination-based schemes, and improve safety and monitoring on the farms.
- 2. Introduction of Monthly Wage Payments:** Monthly wages must be mandated and monitored through regular monitoring. Wages should be transferred to workers' personal accounts, and employers must compulsorily prohibit withholding of wages. Wage slips and digital payment records should be compulsorily maintained. This would directly address forced-labour indicators such as retention of wages and restriction of movement.
- 3. Ensuring social security entitlements for workers:** Seasonal migrants, as evidenced in this study as well, are deprived of basic social protections enshrined in labour laws and regulations — at both source and destination. Efforts need to be undertaken at all levels — local, state, and national to ensure that workers are mapped and identified and have access to entitlements such as provident fund and ESI.
- 4. On-Site Health Access:** Mobile Medical Units: District health departments should deploy health check-up vans to large clusters of shrimp farms. Services should include basic diagnosis and first aid, occupational-injury treatment, counselling on alcohol use, mental health, and isolation, and maternal health for women workers. This reduces dependence on owners and mitigates medical neglect in isolated farms. It also helps in collecting evidence-based data around the occupational injuries and health-related challenges to make larger changes at the worksites.
- 5. Labour Department Monitoring:** Labour officers should conduct periodic inspections focusing on: payment of minimum wages, accommodation and sanitation, working hours, and safety and emergency protocols. Teams must have the authority to impose penalties, call hearings, and block the sale of shrimp from non-compliant farms.
- 6. Enabling ONORC for Food Security:** Workers must be allowed to draw their PDS rations through One Nation One Ration Card, instead of owners deducting Rs 2,000–3,000 per worker per month for groceries. If mobility is a concern and it is unsafe to leave the ponds because of virus-related risks, ration can be periodically delivered to clusters of workers.
- 7. Dignified living standards:** Farms should be required to provide: Safe and ventilated housing, proper drinking water and sanitation, electricity and charging points, clean cooking areas, waste disposal and mosquito control, and clear walkways.

8. **Collaboration with MPEDA:** MPEDA must integrate labour criteria into its farm audits, support training programs on safety, hygiene, and biosecurity, enforce traceability for labour practices in farms supplying to exporters, and restrict non-compliant farms from exporting.
9. **Grievance Redressal and Worker Helplines:** Local authorities can establish a dedicated aquaculture labour helpline in Surat. Panchayat-level committees should include worker representatives, and NGOs or unions should have access to workers on the farm.
10. **Compliance with international standards:** Various standards operate in the shrimp industry, such as Global Aquaculture Alliance Best Aquaculture Practices (BAP) and Aquaculture Stewardship Council certification, which processing companies should ensure they comply with in terms of sourcing. Non-compliance should ideally lead to suspension from export supply chains, mandatory remediation plans through support from brands, and monitoring through independent auditors.

## Source-based interventions

1. **Registration at Source:** Gram Panchayat-Level Migration Tracking: Migrant workers should be compulsorily registered before departure, at the GP level. This registration should capture: Destination, contractor details, expected duration (in case of seasonal migration), and emergency contacts. This can prevent disappearance, trafficking, and exploitation. Efforts should be made to prevent debt-based recruitment, and workers are migrating with written contracts.
2. **Strengthening Local Employment Opportunities:** To address distress migration, local governments should intensify MGNREGA allocations in high-migration blocks and ensure timely payment of MGNREGA wages. Local governance should also promote irrigation and land development to stabilise agriculture in these regions.
3. **Skill Building and Livelihood Diversification:** Programs in high-outmigration districts can include skill-based training such as welding and machine operation, hospitality and services.
4. **Safe Migration Training:** CLRA has experience in conducting safe-migration training at the key source villages from where workers migrate for brick kiln and construction work. These trainings cover legal rights and toll-free numbers of unions and NGO contact points.
5. **Land Back and Secure Tenure Initiatives:** Even though many tribal families are displaced or land-poor because of historical land-theft, political conversations around land-related reparations are not pushed too sternly. Local governments should be pushed to implement and expedite the Forest Rights Act (FRA) titles, strengthen land records and protection against encroachment, and promote community farming models.
6. **Organization of workers at source:** Since union activity is difficult at the worksites due to the isolation and constant watch, attempts should be made to build worker collectives at source, which should maintain a communication network with workers at destination, and also link them to existing unions and legal support at the destination. WhatsApp groups can be managed by civil society, which can facilitate any emergency reporting of accidents, wage-related complaints, and provide support and a network to workers.



# Appendix

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## A.1 Survey schedule

### 1. Demographic and socio-economic information

- Name
- Age
- Gender - M / F / Others
- Religion - Hindu / Muslim / Christian / Sikh / Buddhist / Jain / Animist / others \_\_\_\_\_
- Caste - SC / ST / OBC / General
- Marital status - Married / Single / widow / divorce / separated
- Occupation of spouse (if applicable) - \_\_\_\_\_
- Number of dependents \_\_\_\_\_
- Education level - No formal schooling / primary schooling / secondary schooling / university education / skill-based or vocational training
- Years of work experience \_\_\_\_\_
- Migration status - Local / Migrant
- Source of migration (District) \_\_\_\_\_
- Source of migration (State) \_\_\_\_\_
- Migrating since (No of years) \_\_\_\_\_
- Nature of Migration - Family / single male / single female
- Number of months at destination \_\_\_\_\_
- Land at source - N / Y (Specify \_\_\_\_\_)
- Livelihood opportunity at source - N / Y (Specify \_\_\_\_\_)

### 2. Employment details

- Nature of work - Pond preparation and management / Harvesting / Post-harvest / Others \_\_\_\_\_
- Years of experience - \_\_\_\_\_
- Wages \_\_\_\_\_
- Wage structure - Monthly / daily / piece-rate / others \_\_\_\_\_
- Nature of contract - Permanent/contractual
- Whether written contract - Y / N
- Mode of payment - Cash / cheque / bank transfer / others \_\_\_\_\_
- Payment delays? - N / Y (Specify longest delay)

### 3. Health and Safety

- PPEs provided - Y / N
- If yes, specify - Gloves, Boots, masks, others \_\_\_\_\_
- Frequency - Only once, monthly, quarterly, yearly, when required
- Whether health and safety challenges at work - Y / N
- Nature of health and safety challenges - Physical injuries due to cuts and falls / electric shock / sunburn / frequent headache / chemical injury / skin infection / breathing issues / body pain / fever and cough / others \_\_\_\_\_
- Regular health checkup - Y / N
- Health benefits / insurance - Y / N
- Healthcare expenses (Monthly) \_\_\_\_\_
- Social Security - Y-PF / Y-ESIC / N
- Training - Y / N

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## 4. Living conditions

- Housing type - On-site / rental / owned
- Structure - Kutcha / Pucca / semi-pucca
- Source of drinking water - Tank / ground water / tap / others \_\_\_\_\_
- Access to toilets - Y / N

## 5. Worker Organisation

- Whether part of a union/collective/cultural group at the destination? Y / N
- Whether part of a union/collective/cultural group at source? Y / N

## A.2 Interview schedules

### I. In-depth interview with workers

1. Name:

2. Age:

3. Gender:

4. Caste category:

5. Religion:

6. Number of years of experience in shrimp farming:

7. Migration category: Single male / Family (with children) / Family (without children) / Non migrant

8. Source village:

9. Farm location:

Q. What does your day look like - what all activities / tasks do you perform at the shrimp farm?

Q. How did you first get to know about this work? Who helped you migrate? Why did you choose to do this work?

Q. Do you prefer migrating? Is there a lack of opportunities in your village? Would you prefer working in the village itself if you have that option?

Q. What documents do you hold out of these? - Aadhar, ration card, Ayushman card - Is there any benefit of having these at the destination, such as through government programs like ONORC, health services?

Q. Do you know about eShram portal? Are you registered on it? If yes, have there been any benefits?

Q. What work were you engaged in before you took up shrimp farming? What do you think about this work, as compared to your earlier work? Do you think it is hard? Why?

Q. How did you learn how much feed and medicine to put, and what all to check regarding the health of the shrimp and pond?

Q. We got to know that shrimp farming workers get paid at the end of the season. Do you prefer that or would you like to receive monthly payments? Why is that?

Q. Are you free to leave the job if you want to? Would you receive compensation for the time you worked? Have there been cases where someone tried to leave and wasn't able to?

Q. Has there ever been a situation when you were paid less than what was promised because of less production or loss faced by the owner because of shrimp catching diseases? Do they hold you responsible?

Q. Do you receive any advance when you migrate? How do you manage expenses here - apart from the ration which the owner provides? What if you have any emergency or any other need for which you require money?

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- Q. Do you think the compensation you receive is sufficient? How much do you think you should be getting ideally?
- Q. Do you know how much the shrimps are sold for to agents and companies?
- Q. Do you think there are any health and safety related issues here? People have told us about fear of getting hurt because of electric shock, slipping during rains, and feeling fatigued because of the heat during summers. Do you agree with that?
- Q. What are your ways of coping with such challenges?
- Q. If you face any issues, do you complain to the owner directly? Do you feel comfortable raising your issues? How is your relationship with them?
- Q. Is the owner / supervisor helpful when you raise an issue? Is there any fear of retaliation by the owner if you complain about something?
- Q. Do you face any discriminatory attitude based on your identity - for instance foul language, slurs, scolding and intimidation - both physical and verbal, or untouchability?
- Q. Have you recently suffered from any health-related challenges at work? Has it led to any significant financial burdens? What was the response / support provided by the company?
- Q. Are you able to meet workers at other farms, especially those who may have come from the same village? Where do you generally meet? If not, do you feel a sense of loneliness or alienation?
- Q. Do you get any opportunity to visit a church or temple if you wish to? How often do you go?
- Q. What do you do for leisure? Do you think you need that?
- Q. Do you think it would make sense to form a group or organise together to demand better wages and working conditions? Has that been attempted before?
- Q. Have there been cases of discrimination because of your identity, language, or place of origin?
- Q. How is it like living at the worksite? Do you think your living conditions are adequate? What sort of challenges do you face while living here?
- Q. We see that there are no toilets on most of the farms. Why do you think that is? What sort of challenges do you face because of lack of access to toilets?
- Q. If you migrate with your family, is there any schooling or childcare available?
- Q. (If it is a woman worker) Do you feel safe on the farms? Have there been any instances where you felt fear?
- Q. What do you think needs to change here for you to have a better working and living environment? Do you want to continue doing this work or leave it?

## II. In-depth interview with farm owners

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Gender:
4. Caste category:
5. Religion:
6. Number of years of experience in shrimp farming:
7. Migration category: Local / Single male / Family (with children) / Family (without children)
8. Farm location:
9. Farm size:
10. Number of ponds:
11. Number of workers:
12. Land ownership status:

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- Q. Why did you decide to get into shrimp farming? Have you been involved in it since the time it was first introduced in your area or did you enter it later? What were you doing before this?
- Q. Tell us a bit about the history of shrimp farming in this region? What are the different modes in which this business is carried out (Direct purchase by processing companies through captive farms / Purchase through agents / Sale in the open market / Other modes)
- Q. What was the process of setting up the operations? Did you already own the land or did you have to acquire it? What was that process like?
- Q. What challenges did you face in getting the license to operate? What bureaucratic hurdles exist presently?
- Q. How did you recruit the workers? Was it directly or through agents?
- Q. What are the challenges faced in the process of hiring and retaining workers? Why not hire local workers?
- Q. What is your opinion about the condition of migrant workers on your farm? Have they raised any demands? Or have there been any disputes?
- Q. Do you think they should be earning more than they do right now? Do you pay them at the end of the season? Why not pay them monthly?
- Q. What facilities are you able to provide to them? Do you deduct something from their compensation for this?
- Q. What are the major issues you face? Have there been any instances of major losses? Do workers still get paid the decided amount?
- Q. Do you feel the government is supportive about this business, such as through subsidies / credit? What support should the government ideally provide?
- Q. How do you get the required technical knowledge to run the operations?
- Q. How are your relations with the big processing and export companies? Do they dominate the market? Are prices fixed in advance or are they negotiated during harvest as well?
- Q. How much profit are you able to earn? Do you feel you're able to get a good share of the profits companies might be earning through exports? Tell us a bit about the economics of this trade.
- Q. Do you think there have been any changes in the land, water, and agriculture related aspects in the surrounding areas because of this trade? Is everyone in the local community okay with it?
- Q. Are you affiliated with any cooperative or association of shrimp farmers? What are the benefits of that?
- Q. What suggestions do you have for this trade to improve? Is it a sustainable long-term business? Do you think young people in the community would want to get into it?

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