



# Impact of commuting by workers on household dietary diversity in rural India



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## ABSTRACT

Drawing insights from the literature on transformation of rural non-farm employment, pathways from agriculture to nutrition, and linkages between migration and nutritional status of household, we seek to understand differences in dietary diversity across three mutually exclusive types of rural Indian households: where all members work in rural areas, at least one member commutes to urban areas, at least one member has no fixed place of work. Our analysis is based on a nationally representative data set from India for the year 2009–10 and we use propensity score matching methods. We find that as compared to households with no commuters, households with rural–urban commuters have higher dietary diversity; whereas households with no fixed place workers have lower dietary diversity. We also find differences in dietary diversity across households which differ by their primary source of income.

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## Introduction

There are two aspects to labour mobility, viz. migration and commuting. A large literature exists on how consumption expenditure and dietary diversity varies across households with and without out-migrants (Karamba et al., 2011; Nguyen and Winters, 2011). Unlike the case of migration, the issue of how these outcomes vary across households with and without commuters is under researched. This is surprising since, in many developing countries including Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Tanzania, a sizable number of workers commute daily across rural–urban boundaries (Deichmann et al., 2009; Lanjouw et al., 2001; Tacoli, 2006). By commuting, we are referring to the phenomenon of workers living in rural areas who are either commuting to urban areas for work or do not have a fixed place of work. When one or more of the household members engaged in non-agricultural activity commutes for work, it is akin to diversification of their place of work and hence geographical source of income, rural or urban. In addition to the fact that the commuting worker does not change his or her place of residence, there are other differences between the phenomenon of commuting and migration. Unlike the case of migrant worker, the commuting

worker does not face relocation costs and the costs of adjustment and assimilation into labour market are presumably lower. Further, unlike in the case of outward migrants, the family structure is intact when the individual commutes.

By examining the impact of commuting on household well-being, this paper complements the literature on how migration affects dietary diversity of households at the source. We also contribute to the literature that empirically examines the pathways linking the form and extent of participation of rural households in agriculture and non-agricultural activities to dietary diversity. We seek to understand whether there are discernible differences in dietary diversity across three types of rural households: households where all the individuals work in rural areas, households with one or more individuals engaged in non-agricultural activity and commuting to urban areas for work, and households with one or more individuals engaged in non-agricultural activity and not having a fixed place of work.

Diversification of the workplace, a phenomenon where individuals commute daily across rural and urban areas without changing their place of residence is under researched. Even from a theoretical perspective, Haas and Osland (2014) point out that there exists no coherent theory that models the complex interactions between commuting, migration, labour market outcomes and the resultant effect on household welfare. In the absence of a coherent theory, for providing an overall framework, we draw upon from different strands in the literature.

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The first strand relates to the three stages of transformation of rural non-farm employment and how the importance of commuting increases over these stages (FAO, 1998). In the first stage, rural–urban linkages are relatively weak. In the second stage, among other things, one observes, “a rapid rise in the labour force obliged to commute between the countryside and rural towns and intermediate cities” (p. 295, FAO, 1998). In the third stage, the rural–urban linkages become stronger, commuting by labour becomes more important, and expansion in rural nonfarm employment is not driven by linkages with agriculture. At its current level of development, India is traversing from the second to third stage.<sup>2</sup> Based on data from a survey of employment and unemployment conditions conducted by India’s National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) in 2009–10, we estimate that 8 million workers living in rural areas commuted to urban areas for work while an additional 5 million did not have a fixed place of work. Together, the rural–urban commuters and rural residents without a fixed place of work constitute 13% of the rural workforce engaged in non-agricultural activity. There are 4.64 million households with at least one member working in urban areas and 3.4 million households with at least one member with no fixed place worker. The number of commuting workers has increased nearly two and a half times over the period 1993–94 to 2009–10 from 5.3 million to 13 million. In contrast, during the intercensal periods 1991–2001 and 2001–11, the contribution of rural–urban migrants to urban population growth remained relatively unchanged at 21% (Pradhan, 2013). This suggests the increased importance of rural–urban commuting which has been facilitated by investments in roads and improved transport connectivity.

The second strand in the literature relates to the pathways from agriculture to nutrition. Among the seven pathways identified by Gillespie and Kadiyala (2012) includes agriculture as a source of food and as a source of income. Both these pathways affect dietary diversity, which is considered as an intermediate development outcome eventually contributing to improved nutrition intake. However, these two pathways have weakened in India in the intercensal period 2001–11 even though 54.6% of workers are engaged in agriculture sector in 2011. The pathway has weakened because of an important change in the occupation structure. The share of cultivators in the workforce declined by 7.1 percentage points during the intercensal period 2001–11 while proportion of agricultural laborers increased by 3.5 percentage points (Registrar General of India, 2013).<sup>3</sup> The decline in number of cultivators and hence the decline in the number of households who are net sellers of food could be because farming is not profitable for the small and marginal landholders. The implication of the increase in proportion of agricultural laborers is not necessarily positive from the perspective of well-being of households. This is because poverty is concentrated among agricultural labour households, i.e. households with at least half the income coming from working as agricultural labour. One reason why agriculture has not been a viable source of income for either small and marginal farmers or agricultural labourers is because “... land distribution is more unequal, and yield growth has not sparked as much reduction in poverty and undernourishment” (FAO et al., 2012, p. 30). In this scenario, for some rural households the income accruing on account of a member commuting has gained importance. Basically, income diversification by commuting is an alternative to non-agricultural income or remittances in rural

India. Recent studies have established that commuting is as important as migration for augmenting income of rural households (Datta et al., 2014).

The third strand in the literature relates to how migration affects consumption expenditure and dietary diversity of households at the source. Drawing on the insights of Zezza et al. (2011) in the context of migration, we can outline the channels through which commuting affects food consumption and dietary diversity. First, there could be the direct effect on account of higher wages. Second, the decision to commute is without doubt a decision taken jointly by the household as part of diversifying the source of income and also smoothing consumption over the agricultural season. This too has implications for dietary diversity. Third, the rural–urban commuters have a greater chance of being exposed to information on health and nutrition outcomes. This can affect the consumption basket and hence dietary diversity which is important in the context of nutrition. Despite the intuitive appeal of these channels, it is an empirical question to what extent, having a commuting worker in the household affects dietary diversity. Akin to the case of migration status, since the decision to commute across rural–urban boundaries can be endogenous, we use propensity score matching methods to address the issue of differences in dietary diversity across the three types of households.

## Data and methods

### Data and descriptive statistics

We use a nationally representative survey on employment and unemployment conducted by National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) in 2009–10. The survey covered a sample of 59,129 rural households collecting information on a total of 281,327 rural individuals. In addition to household characteristics, detailed information on demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the members was also collected. Each household is given a sampling weight and the estimated number of households is arrived at by adding the household weights. The details of the sampling procedure are available in the report published by Government of India (2011).

This survey is the primary source of information on place of residence (rural) and place of work (rural, urban, or no fixed place) for individuals engaged in non-agricultural activities. An individual is deemed to have no fixed place of work “if the enterprise in which they are working does not have a fixed premises or in other words if these enterprises do not have fixed workplace, irrespective of whether the enterprise is operational in rural or urban areas.”

In 2009–10, 13.1 million rural workers were commuters of which, 8.05 million were rural–urban commuters and 5.04 million were commuters with no fixed place of work. We group the rural households into three categories as follows: (a) household having no commuter i.e. all members of the household work and live in rural areas; (b) household has at least one commuter i.e. at least one member commutes on daily basis between rural and urban areas; (c) household has at least one no fixed place worker i.e. who has no fixed workplace location and keeps on shifting between rural and urban areas based on job availability.

It is estimated that there are 143.1 million rural households with no commuters i.e. household members in these households live and work in rural areas. This estimate includes households where all its members live and work in rural areas in agriculture or on farm work and households where all its members live and work in rural areas with one or more of its members engaged in non-farm work. There are 3.58 million households with at least one member working in urban area and 2.58 million households with at least one commuter with no fixed place of work (Table 1).

<sup>2</sup> The commuting worker can take advantage of the wage gradient, because wages and income increase as distance from the city decreases. This pattern was established by Kundu et al. (2002). In the State of World Population Report 2011, there is a discussion on commuting has become important in many developing countries including India (UNFPA, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> The definition of a cultivator and agricultural labour are available on the Census of India website. Source: <http://censusindia.gov.in/Metadata/Metada.htm#2m>.

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