



11<sup>th</sup> November 2020

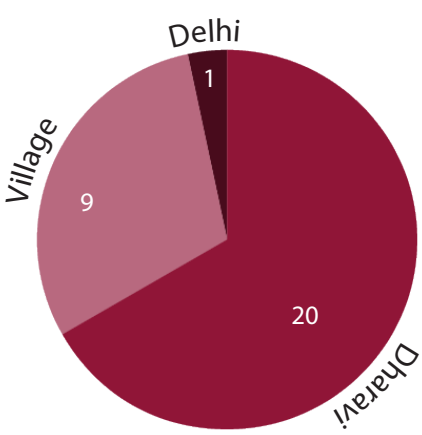
The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic compelled a large number of Dharavi's residents to travel under difficult circumstances to their villages and hometowns. We are now seeing a lot of them returning back to Dharavi, whether it is to resume their work or to return to their homes and resume the new normal. What makes Dharavi so unique is that it is a diverse and dense home-grown settlement that not only is home to millions of people but is also a hot spot for commercial and industrial activity. The locality is also an excellent example to illustrate the concept of Circulatory Urbanism<sup>[1]</sup>, a theory that aims to explain the dynamic and ceaseless connection between various parts of the country, both urban and rural, developed and

developing. In this issue of the Dharavi Fortnightly, we interviewed 30 people who either travelled back to Dharavi or are planning to. We also interviewed one bus driver to understand the perspective of the service providers.

Dharavi has developed a very distinctive identity from an influx of residents and workers from far reaching parts of the country. For many of these people, Dharavi is not a final destination or ending point but an integral part of their life as they make journeys back and forth from their hometowns. In itself, the neighbourhood is a blend of cultures and communities having developed from sharing spaces, but it is also a significant point on a continuous loop or network that connects individuals

and communities, as well as rural and urban areas to one another.

Our aim was to understand the experiences of people now returning or seeking to return to Dharavi, the connections they have to their hometowns, and ways in which they are keeping these connections alive in the fast-paced world today.



*This graph shows the number of respondents in the village compared to those back in Dharavi or elsewhere.*

[1] <https://urbz.net/circulatoryurbanism>

# The Flow is not Unidirectional

An important question we addressed in our survey was whether people wanted to return to Dharavi, and if so what the primary reasons for their return were. A large majority of our respondents stated that they wanted to return to Dharavi, there were only two respondents who preferred to remain in their villages. For the people returning to Dharavi, the two main reasons they provided were that their homes were in Dharavi, or that they were returning to resume working. One of the respondents who did not want to return explained that the city was much too expensive and life in the village was more stable and relaxed.

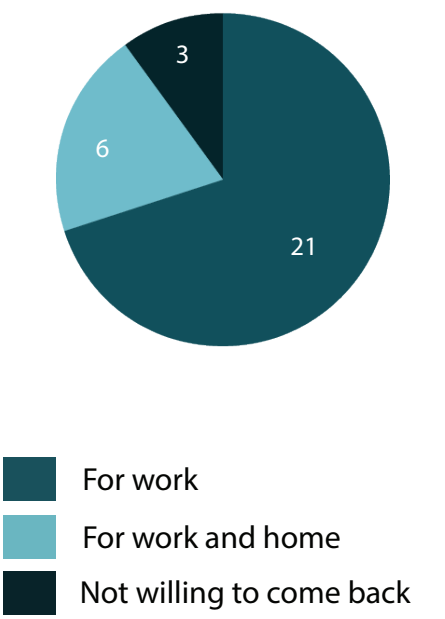
While many of the respondents were compelled to travel to their villages or hometowns during the lockdown, they usually visit their hometowns for a variety of reasons. Some of them return annually, while others

only go for vacations or special occasions such as festivals and weddings.

Answers from our respondents verified and illustrated a crucial tenet of Circulatory Urbanism- that the flow between rural and urban areas is not unidirectional<sup>[2]</sup>. People may travel to Dharavi in Mumbai and other megalopolises for a variety of reasons, but they do so without cutting off ties with their hometowns or ancestral villages.

Due to the fact that their livelihoods are divided between their

villages and cities, dual-household families have contributed a great deal towards the urbanization or development of their villages or rural homes<sup>[3]</sup>.



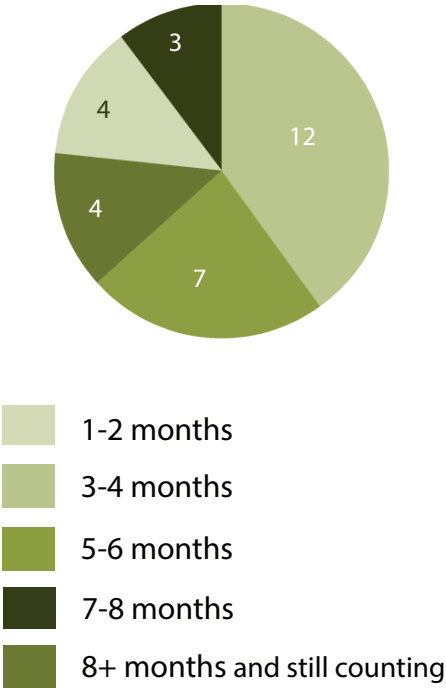
The above pie chart illustrates why people are choosing to or choosing not to return to Mumbai from their villages.

## Life between two places

Stephen Raj works as a driver and is originally from Tamil Nadu. He visits his village once every three years, but his children visit every summer. He lost his job immediately when the lockdown was imposed. As a response to this unforeseen challenge, he decided to go back to his village and stayed there for three months. A strong sense of home along with the need to find a new job brought Stephen Raj back to Dharavi. His journey back to the city was almost the same as what it used to be during pre-Covid days. He underwent a basic testing before leaving for Mumbai. He made it a point to mention that washrooms were particularly clean on his journey back.

[2] <http://www.brokennature.org/circulatory-urbanism/>  
[3] <https://www.thehindu.com/society/history-and-culture/our-lives-are-5050/article17442248.ece>

In Dharavi today, there are many residents who live there and travel seasonally, while others are second or third generation families with links to their respective villages<sup>[2]</sup>.



This chart shows the number of months respondents spent in the village and those who are planning to stay back longer.

## Mobility, Expenses, and Experiences

The journey to the city was much less of a hassle compared to the one to the village. Back in the months of April, May, and June, the country at large witnessed a massive movement of people from the city to its hinterlands by road as the aftermath of the nation

wide lockdown. Although it was wrongly termed as an “exodus”, these people have always been moving between cities and villages with the help of the well connected railways. In the Dharavi Weekly 01, we talked about the people from Dharavi who travelled to their native places and tried to shed some light

on their hardships<sup>[4]</sup>. This time to continue the loop, we asked our respondents about their experiences of the journey back to Dharavi.

“Since there were no trains (from Bareilly), I came till Mathura and first paid Rs.1200. I paid an extra Rs. 1200 from my village to Mathura railway station”

- Shabbu

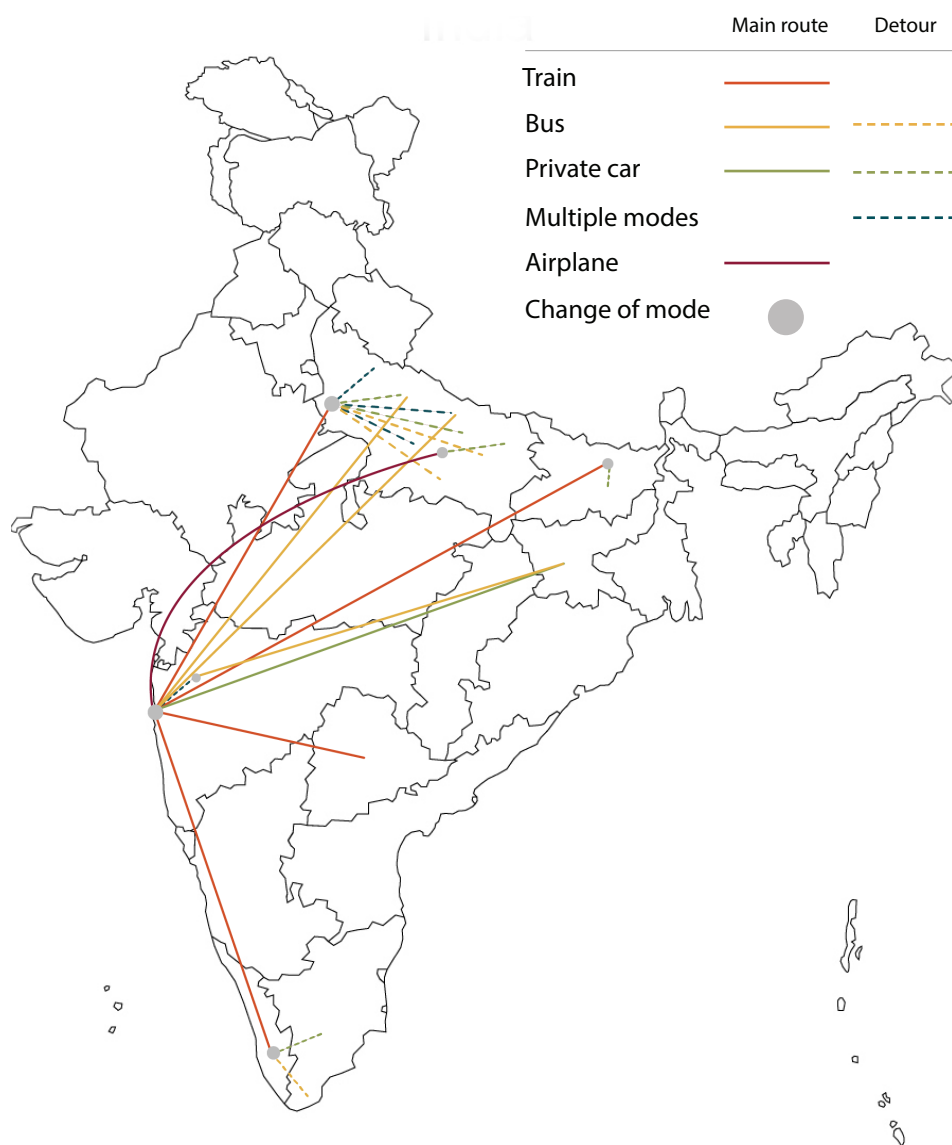
## Ticketing mess

Sanjay Chaturvedi had to travel to Azamgarh in Uttar Pradesh due to an emergency when his uncle passed away. He had difficulty acquiring train tickets which were either twice the original price or were being sold on the black-market. As of June, the number of trains running from Mumbai to Uttar Pradesh had also significantly reduced. In order to avoid paying extra, he and his family ended up taking a flight after booking tickets online. The travel company he used to book his tickets was not functioning fully and he had trouble while trying to change his travel dates and ended up incurring a huge loss due to booking issues.

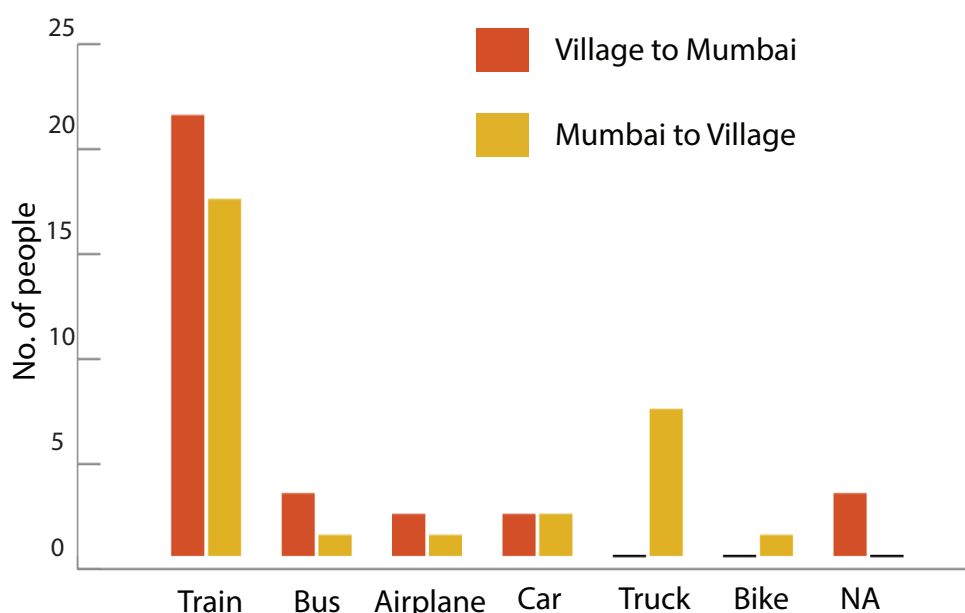
Sanjay is back in the city now and has been working remotely throughout the lockdown at a non-governmental organization. He observed that the airports had now become more cautious as well.

[2] <http://www.brokennature.org/circulatory-urbanism/>

[4] <https://urbz.net/articles/dharavi-weekly-01>



*This map shows the journey of our respondents from their villages to Mumbai and the irregularities within their travel routes*



*This chart shows the different modes of transport used during Covid19 lockdown*

*\*Note : NA for respondents who are still back in the village*

Most of our respondents experienced a trouble-free journey back to Dharavi in comparison to the journey to their villages. However, there were some irregularities within their travel routes compared to the pre-Covid times. Our respondents from Uttar Pradesh (northern province in India) had to travel to Mathura train station to come to Mumbai. In normal circumstances, they would have to catch a direct train from the nearest train station in Uttar Pradesh (Bareilly, Kanpur, or Lucknow) to Mumbai. Our respondents from Tamil Nadu (southern province of India) also had similar experiences, who travelled via Trivandrum, Kerala to Mumbai. Trains were the primary means of transport for 21 respondents and the others opted for buses or air travel. However, from the village to the train station, people took connecting means of transport which was either a bus, hired car, auto rickshaw or in some cases they even carpooled.

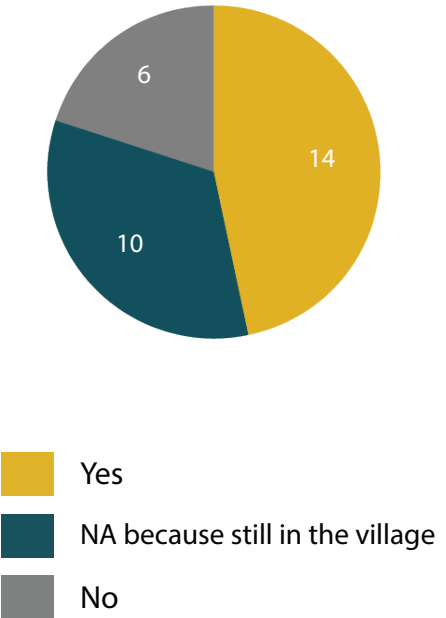
Altogether, the journey back to Dharavi turned out to be an expensive one compared to pre-Covid times. People paid higher fares for whatever means of transport they opted to complete their journey. The train tickets were almost double the fare than the pre-Covid time. The train journeys within past months were smooth and special care was taken with regard to sanitary conditions and social distancing norms. Unlike regular times, only one person was allowed per seat. Our respondent Shanti talked about her train experience -

*"It was clean. One could go to washrooms as and when needed. The compartments (of the train) were kept shut; one could not cross from one to the other. Passengers were not allowed to step out of the train at any station. Food, breakfast, and other snacks were provided in the train (and) policemen were in charge of distribution".*

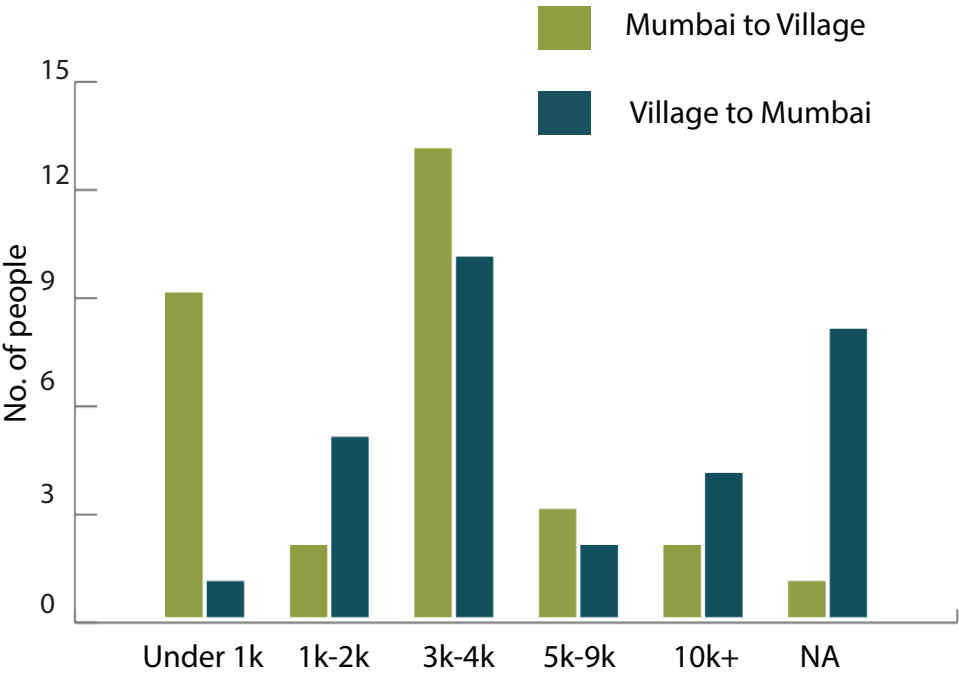
As we spoke in our third issue of Dharavi Fortnightly, the functioning of local and inter-state trains is crucial to people’s livelihoods<sup>[5]</sup>.

With regard to Covid precautions, we received mixed reviews. These depended on when and where people were travelling from. Some respondents answered that they were tested at state borders or their temperature was checked, however the rest answered that no testing procedures were implemented.

However, none of the respondents were asked to quarantine after their arrival in Mumbai.



*This chart shows the number of respondents who went through a temperature check during their journey.*



*This chart shows the change in travel expenses during Covid19 lockdown*  
*\*Note : NA for respondents who are still back in the village and who made the journey just before the lockdown*

[5] <https://www.urbz.net/articles/dharavi-fortnightly-03-dharavi-move-pandemic>



## The detour

Our respondent Shabbu had a difficult time getting to his home town when the lockdown was first announced. His journey to Aonla in Bareilly consisted of walking long distances, paying large sums to trucks, an unpleasant encounter with the police, and quarantining at two different locations. It took him a total of twelve days to get home in Aonla, when usually it takes him two to three days. While the trip caused him and his family a great deal of stress, he also received help on the way from various individuals, such as his village chairman who provided his wedding hall for quarantining. Shabbu told us about the hardships faced by a lot of people, where individuals had to worry about their next meal and subsequently sold their livestock and gold or mortgaged their houses in order to cope with the difficult times. His journey back to Dharavi was substantially different from what he was used to. He came back by train via Mathura, which is not the usual route. He found the journey extremely comfortable with few passengers and a very clean environment.



Shabbu's story in a local newspaper

## Night journey

Shanti is a second generation migrant in Dharavi and only visits her village in Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu for special occasions and festivals. Being the only earning member of her family, she faces many hardships when it comes to expenses. She went to her village with her pregnant daughter, thanks to a free bus service was arranged by a social worker. She travelled with a few other community members who belong to the same village as hers. In order to return to Dharavi, she had to first go to Thiruvananthapuram in Kerala, to catch a 7 am train to Mumbai. Since there was no bus that would get them to Thiruvananthapuram on time, she had to arrange for a private

car which left at midnight for which she was charged Rs. 500 per passenger. This became an expensive trip because she was travelling with her elderly parents and received no concessions on the train tickets.

She noted that the journey on the train was comfortable and convenient, however when she returned to Dharavi she was welcomed by a flooded house and a higher rent.

## Through the bus driver's lens

One of our respondents, Anil, owns a private bus and makes regular trips within Maharashtra. He and his friends noticed the difficulties people were facing in order to get back to their hometowns. They procured permissions to run their buses during lockdown and transported people both in and outside of Maharashtra. They were able to earn extra money by transporting people to their destinations but would return to Mumbai with empty buses. In the few instances that there were passengers returning to Mumbai, the drivers would be fined Rs. 5000 per passenger. The drivers themselves struggled

while doing their jobs since restaurant and store-owners did not want them making stops at their establishments and treated them disrespectfully. For this reason, Anil would have to stock up on food and water beforehand. Anil's own family in Dharavi would worry for him, but Anil believed the work he was doing was important. Now that travel in and out of the city has resumed and things are relatively normal, some passengers still call Anil to express gratitude for the aid he provided them during a time of crisis.

*"We were not doing these trips to earn extra money. For us, it was a public service."*

*- Anil Trimurti*

## Settling Back in the City

Returning to Dharavi and resuming their normal lives in such turbulent times has not been an easy task for many. Many respondents said that they were paying rent and electricity bills for their homes in Dharavi even though they stayed in their village. One of our respondents, Meena Jaiswal, spoke about her distress regarding the spike in price of her electricity bill for the months that her Dharavi home was empty. Another of our respondents, Shanti, is struggling to pay her children's school fees and was forced to withdraw one of her sons from his school. Being a single mother and the only earning member of the family, she is desperately in need of some income sources. Both Meena and Shanti, along with a few other respondents, are currently looking for new jobs.

## Follow Up Story : Abhimanyu Modi

Abhimanyu Modi returned to his village in May and came back to Mumbai only in October. He was not planning on visiting his village, but the pandemic threw off his plans and his children were bored in Mumbai. He returned to Mumbai along with three strangers in his taxi, however the fare they paid him was not enough to cover the costs of the travel and he had to pitch in Rs. 3,500 as well. His family arrived a week later in a sleeper bus that cost him Rs. 8000. The bus dropped them off 50 km away from Dharavi from where they took another local bus and taxi to get home. Modi struggled in his village during lockdown because his doctors were unable to send him medicines for his brain tumor. His earnings in the city aren't substantial either. Even though his family supports him from time to time, his health status makes it difficult for him to work more than 5 to 6 hours a day. He was able to work for a short while in the village once he received his medicines in July, but even back in Dharavi now he is earning less than half of his pre-Corona earnings.

On the other hand, there are also new doors opening up for some residents of Dharavi, aiding them to cope with the challenges the pandemic and lockdown have brought on. Some respondents had to search for new sources of

income, while others saw a shift in their family dynamic in terms of responsibilities where members who didn't earn previously have begun working. Some of our male respondents shared how their homemaker wives had begun looking for work

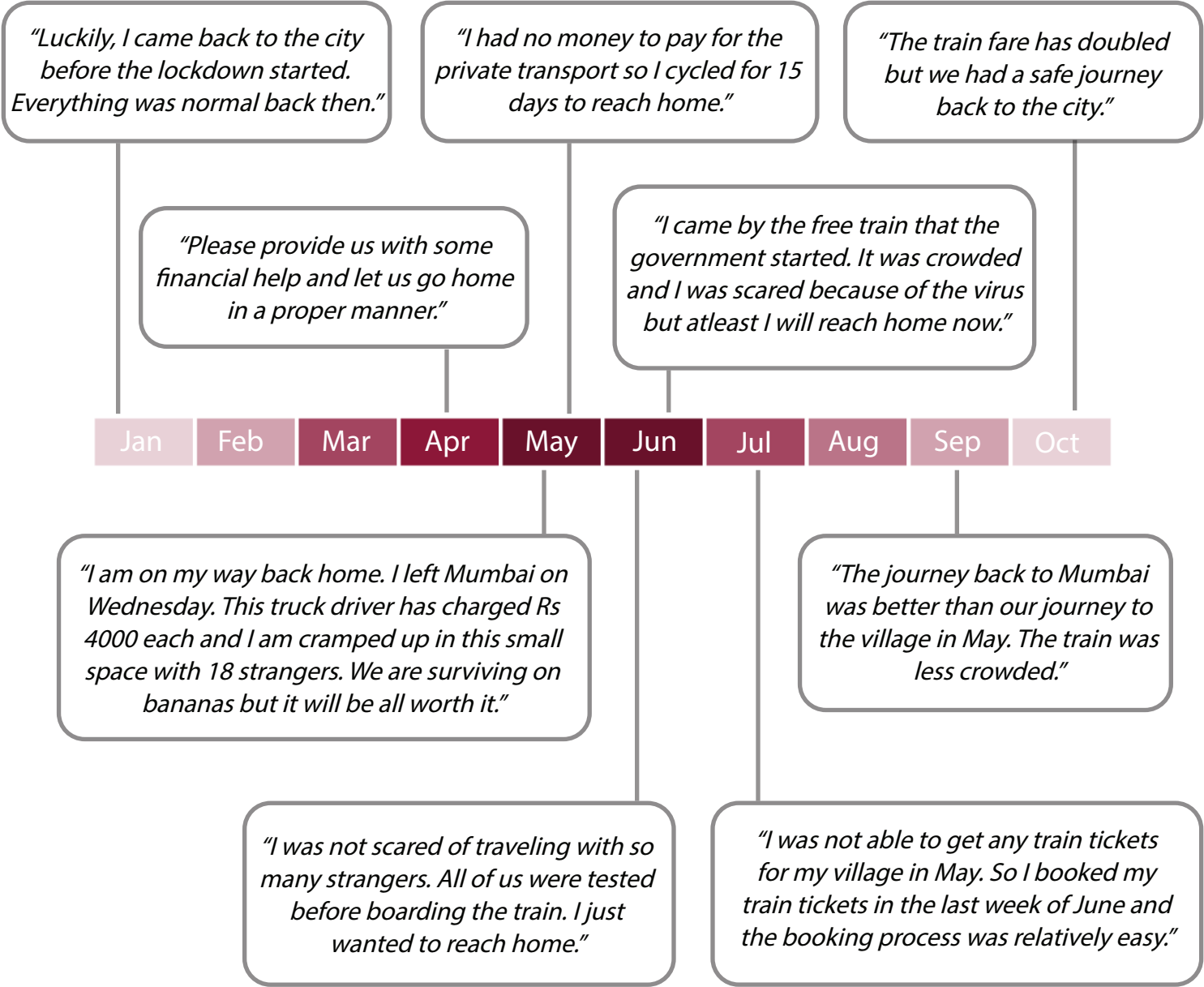
or were now employed in professions such as exports business, embroidery, making beedis, or were waiting to hear back from prospective employees.

## Plan B

Taufiq was our only respondent who moved to a new city looking for work. Taufiq, who is a tailor by profession, is originally from Bisoli in Uttar Pradesh. He did not return to Dharavi, but instead moved to Delhi recently.

He plans on returning to his village soon, but before that he will travel solo to Mumbai. Taufiq was able to receive some work through government schemes but noted that it was not rewarding work.





A timeline showing the progression of people's thoughts on their travel experiences between the city and villages during the pandemic.