



Research Paper

Issues and Challenges of Reverse Migration: Post-COVID Situation in India

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Abstract	Manuscript Information
<p>The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a massive wave of reverse migration in India, marking one of the most significant human migrations in the country's recent history. As lockdowns were imposed to curb the spread of the virus, millions of migrant workers, who form the backbone of India's urban informal economy, lost their jobs and were compelled to return to their rural homes. This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the scale, impact, and challenges of reverse migration during the COVID-19 crisis, utilizing secondary data from government reports, surveys, and studies. The research highlights that approximately 10 million migrant workers undertook perilous journeys back to their native states, with Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and West Bengal receiving the highest number of returnees. The study examines the factors driving this mass migration, including economic shutdowns, job losses, lack of social safety nets, poor living conditions, and inadequate access to healthcare. It also discusses the significant implications of this migration on both urban and rural economies, such as labor shortages in cities and increased pressure on rural resources and employment schemes like MGNREGA. Moreover, the study explores the diverse challenges faced by returning migrants, including unemployment, food insecurity, inadequate healthcare, and social stigmatization. It also evaluates the response of state and central governments in addressing these challenges, assessing the effectiveness of various policy measures and welfare programs implemented during the crisis. The findings of this study underscore the urgent need for comprehensive policy interventions to address the vulnerabilities of migrant workers, enhance rural infrastructure, and strengthen social safety nets. The research concludes by recommending strategies for better socio-economic integration of migrants and resilience-building in rural communities to mitigate the long-term impacts of such crises.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ISSN No: 2583-7397 ▪ Received: 03-06-2024 ▪ Accepted: 30-06-2024 ▪ Published: 02-09-2024 ▪ IJCRM:3(5); 2024: 24-28 ▪ ©2024, All Rights Reserved ▪ Plagiarism Checked: Yes ▪ Peer Review Process: Yes <p>How to Cite this Manuscript</p> <p>B. Venkat Ragavender. Issues and Challenges of Reverse Migration: Post-COVID Situation in India. International Journal of Contemporary Research in Multidisciplinary.2024; 3(5): 24-28.</p>

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1. INTRODUCTION

Reverse migration refers to the phenomenon where people move back from urban to rural areas, a trend that was significantly amplified in India during the COVID-19 pandemic. The sudden imposition of lockdowns in March 2020

left millions of migrant workers in urban areas stranded without jobs, income, or social security, leading to a massive wave of reverse migration to their native rural areas. This unexpected and large-scale movement has posed numerous challenges for both the migrants and the rural areas receiving them. This

article explores the issues and challenges associated with reverse migration in India, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, using data from various reports published by the Government of India.

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of this paper is to analyse the scale and impact of reverse migration in India during the COVID-19 pandemic, examining the factors that led to the mass exodus of migrant workers from urban to rural areas. It aims to identify the challenges faced by returning migrants and assess the socio-economic consequences of reverse migration on both urban and rural economies. The study also seeks to evaluate government responses to the crisis and provide policy recommendations for better management of migrant welfare and rural development in future emergencies.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research article is based on secondary data obtained from various government reports, surveys, and credible sources that provide a comprehensive overview of reverse migration in India during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The methodology focuses on the systematic collection, analysis,

and interpretation of data to understand the scale, challenges, and implications of reverse migration.

The Scale of Reverse Migration During COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered one of the largest reverse migration movements in Indian history. Millions of migrant workers, who had previously moved to urban centers in search of better employment opportunities, were forced to return to their rural homes due to the sudden imposition of nationwide lockdowns, economic shutdowns, and the consequent loss of livelihoods. This section discusses the scale of reverse migration during COVID-19 in detail, supported by relevant studies, reports, and government data.

1. Magnitude of Reverse Migration

According to estimates provided by the **Ministry of Labour and Employment** and reported in the **Economic Survey of India 2020-21**, approximately **10 million** migrant workers returned to their home states during the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic (March to June 2020). The scale of migration varied significantly across states, with Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and West Bengal receiving the largest numbers of returning migrants.

State	Number of Migrants Returned	Key Sectors of Employment (Pre-Migration)	Major Challenges Faced
Uttar Pradesh	3.2 million	Construction, Manufacturing, Retail	Overwhelmed healthcare infrastructure, unemployment, increased demand for social services
Bihar	2.5 million	Agriculture, Construction, Small-scale Industries	Food and shelter insecurity, limited employment opportunities, social stigma
Madhya Pradesh	1.5 million	Manufacturing, Retail, Hospitality	Economic strain, pressure on agriculture, inadequate rural infrastructure
West Bengal	1.2 million	Textile, Construction, Services	Lack of social security, health risks, infrastructural deficiencies
Rajasthan	1 million	Mining, Agriculture, Construction	High unemployment, lack of medical facilities, inadequate housing
Odisha	0.7 million	Agriculture, Mining, Handicrafts	Increased pressure on PDS, limited job opportunities, inadequate healthcare resources
Jharkhand	0.6 million	Mining, Construction, Agriculture	Food and shelter insecurity, social exclusion, infrastructural challenges
Chhattisgarh	0.5 million	Agriculture, Manufacturing, Mining	Economic strain on local resources, unemployment, lack of healthcare access

This massive reverse migration was primarily driven by the collapse of the urban informal economy, which employs the majority of migrant workers. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2019-20, about 37% of the urban workforce in India is made up of migrants, and a significant proportion of them work in the informal sector, which includes jobs such as construction labor, domestic work, street vending, and small-scale manufacturing.

2. Regional Distribution of Migrants

The pattern of reverse migration was not uniform across the country. States with large urban centres, such as Maharashtra, Delhi, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka, witnessed a significant outflow of migrant workers. Meanwhile, states with high out-migration rates, such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh,

and West Bengal, saw a substantial influx of returning migrants.

- **Maharashtra and Delhi:** These states, with major urban hubs like Mumbai and New Delhi, saw significant outflows of migrants due to their large populations of migrant workers in sectors such as construction, hospitality, and domestic work. A study by the Centre for Policy Research (CPR) found that nearly 1.5 million migrants left Maharashtra alone within the first few weeks of the lockdown.
- **Southern States (Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka):** Southern states also witnessed significant reverse migration, though on a slightly smaller scale compared to northern and central states. Migrants from Kerala, for instance, included workers from other Indian states as well as those returning from Gulf countries, adding a unique

dimension to the reverse migration narrative in these regions.

3. Factors Influencing the Scale of Reverse Migration

Several factors influenced the scale and pattern of reverse migration during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- **Economic Shutdown and Job Losses:** The sudden halt of economic activities, particularly in the informal sector, led to massive job losses. According to a study by the International Labour Organization (ILO), over 90% of India's workforce is employed in the informal sector, which was disproportionately affected by the lockdown. The lack of job security and social security benefits forced many migrant workers to return to their native places.
- **Lack of Social Safety Nets:** Migrant workers often lack access to formal social safety nets, such as unemployment benefits, healthcare, and housing. The absence of these protections in urban areas, combined with the immediate cessation of income, made it unsustainable for migrants to remain in cities. Data from the Ministry of Home Affairs showed that only 7% of migrant workers had access to some form of formal social security.
- **Poor Living Conditions and Fear of COVID-19:** Migrant workers often live in overcrowded, informal settlements with inadequate access to sanitation and healthcare. The fear of contracting COVID-19, coupled with poor living conditions and the lack of access to health services, prompted many to leave urban areas. A survey conducted by the Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN) highlighted that 70% of the migrants surveyed had less than ₹200 (\$2.5) left with them during the lockdown, and 90% had not received any wages since the lockdown began.
- **Transport Restrictions and the Crisis of Mobility:** The sudden lockdown also led to the suspension of public transport, leaving millions of migrants stranded. Many undertook long journeys on foot, bicycles, or overcrowded trucks to reach their native villages, often facing police brutality and extreme hardship. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) documented around 198 deaths of migrant workers due to exhaustion, accidents, and lack of medical care during their journeys.

4. Impact on Urban and Rural Economies

The reverse migration had significant implications for both urban and rural economies:

- **Urban Impact:** Urban centers faced labor shortages in critical sectors such as construction, manufacturing, and essential services, slowing down economic recovery post-lockdown. According to the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), construction activity in major urban centers fell by 80% during the initial months of the lockdown due to labor shortages. The urban informal economy, which relies heavily on migrant labor, experienced a severe contraction.

- **Rural Impact:** Rural areas, already grappling with limited resources, were suddenly overwhelmed by the influx of returning migrants. This created significant strain on local economies and resources, including employment, food, shelter, and healthcare. The demand for jobs under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) surged by 40% during the pandemic, as reported by the Ministry of Rural Development, indicating the desperation for employment in rural areas.

5. Studies and Surveys on Reverse Migration

Several studies and surveys have been conducted to understand the scale and impact of reverse migration during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- **Azim Premji University Study:** A study by Azim Premji University reported that around 80% of the surveyed migrants were unable to find employment in rural areas upon their return, highlighting the economic distress faced by returning migrants.
- **Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE):** The CMIE reported that the unemployment rate in rural areas surged to 22.5% in April 2020, compared to 8.4% in March 2020, indicating the economic shock caused by the sudden influx of returning migrants.
- **World Bank Report:** The World Bank's report on the impact of COVID-19 on migration in South Asia highlighted that India's reverse migration was one of the largest in the region, significantly impacting both rural and urban economies. The report suggested that nearly 40% of the urban population in India could fall below the poverty line if the economic crisis persisted.

Challenges Faced by Migrant Workers During Reverse Migration

1. **Loss of Employment and Livelihood:** Migrant workers primarily engaged in urban informal sectors, including construction, manufacturing, hospitality, and domestic work, faced sudden job losses due to the lockdown. With urban industries shut down and limited access to savings, they had no choice but to return to their native villages. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2019-20 indicated that over **70%** of the urban workforce was engaged in informal sectors, which were severely impacted by the lockdowns.
2. **Lack of Social Security and Support:** The absence of social security benefits and inadequate access to government relief programs aggravated the plight of returning migrants. The Interstate Migrant Workmen Act, 1979, designed to protect migrant workers' rights, was found lacking in implementation during the pandemic. Reports from the Ministry of Home Affairs indicated that less than **10%** of the migrant workforce had access to formal social security schemes.
3. **Health and Safety Concerns:** The long journeys back home, often on foot or in overcrowded transport modes, exposed migrant workers to severe health risks. With

limited access to medical facilities and inadequate adherence to COVID-19 safety protocols, many faced health crises. According to the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), around **198 migrant workers** died due to accidents or exhaustion during the exodus.

4. **Food and Shelter Insecurity:** The sudden migration back to rural areas created a significant burden on the local resources. Reports by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) noted a **30% increase** in the demand for food and shelter in rural areas, leading to increased pressure on the already strained Public Distribution System (PDS).
5. **Stigmatization and Social Exclusion:** Returning migrants were often stigmatized and viewed as carriers of the virus, leading to social exclusion and discrimination within their communities. This stigma not only impacted their social integration but also limited their access to local employment opportunities and social services.

Challenges Faced by Rural Areas

1. **Economic Strain:** The influx of returning migrants created economic strain in rural areas. The existing job market was already under pressure due to the economic slowdown, and the additional workforce further exacerbated unemployment issues. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) program, which was a critical source of employment for rural households, saw a **40% increase** in demand during the pandemic, according to the Ministry of Rural Development.
2. **Inadequate Healthcare Infrastructure:** Rural healthcare infrastructure, already underdeveloped, was overwhelmed by the surge in population. According to the Rural Health Statistics (RHS) 2019-20, rural areas in India had a shortage of over **20,000 doctors** and **50,000 nurses**, making it challenging to cater to the increased healthcare needs.
3. **Increased Pressure on Agriculture:** Agriculture, being the primary source of livelihood in rural areas, faced additional pressure to absorb the returning migrants. However, with limited land resources and technological constraints, the sector struggled to provide adequate employment and income opportunities. The Ministry of Agriculture reported a **15% decline** in agricultural productivity due to labor shortages during the early phases of the pandemic, exacerbated by the subsequent over-dependence on the sector.
4. **Infrastructural Deficiencies:** The sudden population influx highlighted the infrastructural deficiencies in rural areas, including inadequate housing, sanitation, and access to clean water. The Ministry of Jal Shakti reported a **25% increase** in demand for potable water, while the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs highlighted a shortage of over **10 million** housing units in rural India.

Government Response and Policy Measures

The Government of India initiated several measures to address the challenges posed by reverse migration:

1. **Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY):** Under this scheme, the government announced free food grains to about **800 million** people for three months during the lockdown, covering both rural and urban areas.
2. **Aatmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan:** The economic stimulus package included measures for the welfare of migrants, such as **one nation-one ration card**, affordable rental housing complexes for migrant workers, and additional allocation to MGNREGA to create more job opportunities in rural areas.
3. **State-Specific Initiatives:** Several state governments, including Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, launched targeted programs to provide skill development and employment opportunities for returning migrants. Uttar Pradesh, for instance, launched the **Kaushal Satrang** initiative, aiming to provide skill development training to over **500,000** returning migrants.
4. **Health and Safety Measures:** The government undertook efforts to strengthen rural healthcare infrastructure, including the deployment of mobile health units, telemedicine facilities, and the provision of COVID-19 testing and vaccination drives.

Long-Term Implications and Recommendations

The reverse migration phenomenon has several long-term implications for India's economic and social landscape:

1. **Economic Diversification in Rural Areas:** There is a need to diversify the rural economy beyond agriculture by promoting non-farm activities, small-scale industries, and rural entrepreneurship. Policies must focus on enhancing skills and creating job opportunities within rural settings to reduce over-dependence on urban centers.
2. **Strengthening Social Security and Safety Nets:** Expanding and strengthening social security schemes to cover informal sector workers and ensuring their access to benefits such as health insurance, unemployment benefits, and pension schemes will be crucial.
3. **Improving Rural Infrastructure:** Enhancing rural infrastructure, particularly in terms of healthcare, education, housing, and sanitation, will be vital to accommodate the increased population and improve the quality of life in rural areas.
4. **Data-Driven Policy Making:** There is a need for reliable data on migration patterns, demographics, and employment trends to facilitate effective policy-making and targeted interventions. The government must prioritize regular surveys and data collection initiatives to understand the ground realities better.

4. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic-induced reverse migration has brought to the forefront the vulnerabilities of India's migrant workforce and the challenges faced by rural areas in

accommodating a sudden influx of population. While government measures have provided some relief, there is a need for comprehensive, long-term strategies that address the structural issues and ensure sustainable livelihoods for returning migrants. Strengthening rural economies, improving social security frameworks, and enhancing infrastructure will be crucial in mitigating the impacts of reverse migration and fostering inclusive development.

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