

Research Article



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Pandemic and Reverse Migration in India

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As the most significant contributor to the world's migrant population, India witnessed a massive reverse migration during the COVID-19 pandemic. The unprecedented return of international and internal migrants to their domicile challenged the Indian economy. Integration of returnees was a colossal task for the government. Against this backdrop, this study analysed the extent of reverse migration, the socioeconomic challenges faced by migrants during the repatriation, the government response to reverse migration and the economic integration of returnees. By reviewing relevant literature, this study exposed the inability of the Indian economic sectors to absorb the reverse migrants and the limited power of migration to bring about a structural transformation in the Indian economy.

INTRODUCTION

World Migration Report 2022 highlights India as the most significant contributor to the international migrant population, which received 83.15 billion USD in remittances in 2020 from the 18 million Indians living abroad (McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou, 2021). According to this report, the world's third largest migration corridor is India to the United Arab Emirates, with more than 3 million migrants, mainly labour migrants. Historians noted the presence of Indian settlements in major Gulf ports even before the discovery of oil, which fuelled the migrant labour market in the Gulf (Rajan and Oommen, 2020). In India, wage disparities and slow growth in formal employment force workers to consider cross-border migration as an alternative to improve their economic well-being (Sasikumar and Timothy, 2015). Economic necessities, structural inequalities and social practices drive Indian migration to the Gulf (Wright, 2020). A distinctive feature of Indo-Gulf migration is its occupational and skill profile, which is concentrated in low and semi-skilled occupations (Chanda and Gupta, 2018). While the percentage of migrants from relatively wealthy states like Kerala and Karnataka decreased significantly, the flow of labours from relatively poor states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar increased considerably (Sasikumar and Timothy, 2015).

Migration includes permanent migration and circular migration (long-term and seasonal). Circular migrants move

back and forth between their home and host lands. However, most people do not migrate across borders; Huge numbers migrate within the country. Circular migration within the country is more likely to be a distress-based coping mechanism against poverty and constrained livelihood options in the places of origin (Mishra, 2020). The two primary data sources on migration in India are the quinquennial migration surveys conducted by National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) and the decennial population Census. According to the 2011 Census, there are 450 million (37% of the total population) internal migrants in India. Inter-district, inter-district and inter-state migrations are internal migrations. Uneven development and variations in population structure across states are drivers of inter-state migration (Srivastava et al., 2020). Due to internal migration, the workforce in the Indian labour market has become mobile and informal. Moreover, circular migrants work informally, occupy the lowest employment levels, face discrimination and lack social protection (Srivastava, 2019).

Development theories and literature have long recognised migration and development links (Srivastava et al., 2020). Economists consider labour migration an essential determinant of an economy's structural transformation (Thakur, 2020a). Nevertheless, migration's embeddedness in broader social transformation and development processes shows that its ability to affect structural change is limited (De Haas, 2020). Similarly, in the context of the Indian economy, the models linking

migration to development largely failed (Jha and Thakur, 2017). Moreover, although the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) reported an \$ 87 billion remittance inflow in 2021 (MEA, 2021a), The Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development (KNOMAD) confirmed that it constituted only 3% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of India (KNOMAD, 2021).

Migration-led development theories emphasise the driving force of high and growing urban wages in the labour migration of the Indian economy (Thakur, 2020a). However, studies have shown that the wage gap in rural India is narrowing, negating the importance of wage differentials in urban migration (Das and Usami, 2017). The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) increased agricultural production, urbanisation, construction sector growth and a rise in literacy rate, leading to an increase in rural wages, effectively reducing the wage gap between different regions of India (Himanshu and Kundu, 2016). However, migration continues to grow in India.

The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated a mobility crisis (Rajan, Sivakumar and Srinivasan, 2020), inducing a dangerous effect on the lives of migrants (Dandekar and Ghai, 2020; Jesline *et al.*, 2021; Khan and Arokkiaraj, 2021). India imposed a 68-day four-phase lockdown between 24 March and 31 May 2020 to combat the COVID-19 pandemic (Ghosh, Nundy and Mallick, 2020). The lockdown announcement closed the national and international borders with immediate effect. In a country where more than 90% of the total workforce is engaged in informal employment with inadequate social security coverage, such an unexpected lockdown was disastrous (Dandekar and Ghai, 2020; Thakur, 2020a). Likewise, the spread of COVID-19 crippled Gulf economies and left Indian migrants without food, sustenance or a safe place to stay (Khan and Arokkiaraj, 2021). The lack of government policies to ensure the welfare of migrants worsened the crisis and forced migrants to return to their homelands, leading to massive reverse migration. Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to present a comparative analysis of the challenges faced by international and internal returnees during the COVID-19 crisis. Further, it details the government initiatives for the repatriation and reintegration of migrant workers.

METHOD

This study explored (1) the extent of reverse migration to and in India, (2) the socioeconomic challenges faced by the migrants during reverse migration, (3) the government response to reverse migration and (4) the economic integration of returnees in their homelands. It analysed reverse migration in the context of development theories. By reviewing the published literature (scholarly and grey articles) on reverse migration during the pandemic, this study collected data and analysed it to answer the research questions.

RESULTS

Reverse Migration Statistics

According to the MEA, 3,611,373 Indians stranded in other countries were repatriated during the Covid-19 lockdown (Ananth, 2021). This report stated that most of them were from Kerala, followed by Delhi, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and other states. An accurate estimation of the reverse migration of internal migrants was found unavailable. However, based on data collected from state governments, the labour and employment minister stated in the parliament that around 10 million migrant workers returned home during the pandemic (Sharma, 2020). Whereas, India Spend presented an estimated 23 million internal migrant returnees during the lockdown (Kundu, 2020) and Indian Express reported that 2,169,000 and 1,000,000 migrants returned to Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, respectively, while 1,100,000 left Maharashtra and 2,050,000 Gujarat (Chishti, 2020).

Socioeconomic Challenges faced by the Migrants

Circular migrants were the worst hit during the lockdown (Nanda, 2020). In India, a substantial portion of internal migrants work in the gig economy and is blue-collar workers (Bhattacharyya and Menon, 2021). Cessation of all economic activities during the lockdown left migrant workers jobless and incomeless. They struggled with the lack of food, health care and basic amenities and faced severe financial and psychological stress (Bhagat *et al.*, 2020). Migrant workers who worked in the informal sector without social security were forced to return, but the absence of any transport facility led to an exodus on foot. The country witnessed poor migrant workers dying

on the streets due to starvation, exhaustion and police brutality (Guha, Islam and Hussain, 2021).

Of the 18 million Indians living abroad, 8.4 million are migrant workers in the Gulf region (MEA, 2021). The stagnation of economic activity in the Gulf due to the lockdown led to mass layoffs, leaving migrants without jobs or money to survive (Khan and Arokkiaraj, 2021). Besides retrenchments, wage theft was also reported during the COVID-19 crisis (Khan and Arokkiaraj, 2021). The delay in forming air bubble pacts in the context of the border closure brought uncertainty to repatriation. The stranded Indians in the host country were also hit by exorbitant airfare. Moreover, returnees were unfairly stigmatised and blamed for the spread of the virus and uncertainty about quarantine rules and facilities left them confused.

Government Response to Reverse Migration

On 28 March 2020, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) granted states permission to set up relief camps along highways to aid migrant workers returning home with food and shelter (MHA, 2020a). In a directive released on 29 April 2020, MHA permitted states to coordinate the bus transportation of migrants (MHA, 2020b). On May 1, the Indian Railways commenced *Shramik* Special trains for migrants to return home (Iyer, 2020). On the other hand, the repatriation of international migrants started on 7 May 2020, Under Vande Bharat Mission, the bilateral air bubble pact between Indian and selected countries. Besides, Operation Samudra Sethu was also launched to bring stranded Indians back by the sea. But the fact that the expatriates had to bear the fare led to another crisis.

The Ministry of Finance implemented the 'One Nation, One Ration Card Scheme' for better public distribution. Through this scheme, people with ration cards can buy subsidised food grains from any Fair Price Shops (FPS) across the country. The finance minister urged the states to ensure the implementation of MGNREGS, which seeks to employ migrant workers returning to their villages (Sakhadeo, 2020).

Economic Integration of Returnees

During the lockdown, all economic activities came to a standstill, leading to a collapse in the labour market. Unemployment shot up due to the COVID-19 restrictions that induced layoffs. On the one hand, employment stagnated; On the other hand, reverse migration increased

labour-force participation (Thakur, 2020b). Scholars did not find much potential for the rural economy to absorb migrant returnees (Thakur, 2020a). However, this study analysed the potential of the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors to absorb the additional labour force due to reverse migration.

Agriculture Sector

The agriculture sector is the largest employer of the workforce in India, accounting for 18.8% of the Gross Value Added in the country (Ministry of Finance, 2022). However, the 77th round of the National Sample Survey by the National Statistical Office (NSO) identified that 54% of rural households in India are agricultural households with an average monthly income of Rs. 10,218 and 50.2% of them are indebted (NSO, 2021). India's agriculture sector has long been in dire straits and since the 1990s, land use has been steadily shifting away from agriculture due to the country's rapid urbanisation (Thakur, 2020a). Although agriculture is India's most populous economic sector, its contribution to GDP is shrinking due to broad-based economic development (Solanki, Singh and Murthy, 2022). Moreover, the food supply system has been significantly interrupted by the declaration of a nationwide lockdown to stop the spread of COVID-19 (Vikas and Ankur, 2020). The closure of the markets caused considerable losses to the farmers. Thus, the lockdown deepened the sector's inability to maintain existing employment, leaving no possibility of absorbing the influx of labour from reverse migration (Thakur, 2020a).

Non-agriculture Sector

Manufacturing, construction and trade come under the non-agriculture sector. The expansion of this sector is attributed to agrarian distress, which forced out a considerable workforce from the agriculture sector (Abraham, 2017). The workforce shifted from the agriculture sector occupy the non-agriculture sector. Moreover, this sector remains in the informal economy, leaving no pull factor for additional workforce participation. Therefore, the non-agricultural sector is less likely to absorb reverse migrants. In addition, the influx of workers led to a wage decline (Thakur, 2020b).

In the context of the employment crisis caused by reverse migration, MGNREGA guaranteed refuge to returnees (Lokhande and Gundimeda, 2021). The

government allocated an additional Rs 400 billion under the MGNREGA scheme to address the employment needs of returning migrants. (Ministry of Finance, 2020). This incentive helped 35% of returnees secure 28% of their pre-crisis daily income (Lokhande and Gundimeda, 2021). It demonstrates that the allocated impetus was insufficient to absorb the surplus workforce.

Further, Prime Minister launched *Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyaan* to enhance livelihood opportunities for migrant workers returning home (Government of India, 2020). Rs. 500 billion was allocated for this project. However, the denial of jobs was happening due to insufficient funds being transferred to the state governments despite rising unemployment (Varma, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Massive reverse migration during the COVID-19 lockdown poses challenges to the development discourse pursued by the Indian economy. Since the workforce mobility in India is primarily attributable to agrarian distress, it is just expulsion from the agriculture sector, not a vertical movement from low-income to high-income jobs. The workforce on the move largely remains in the informal sector. Therefore, migration in India neither conforms to Lewisian transformation (Tripathi, 2015) nor brings about structural change.

Since the primary push factor for out-migration arises from the agriculture sector, policy revisions are needed to revive it by promoting public investment and allocating institutional credit (Thakur, 2020a). Also, redistribution of surplus land and price support for agricultural products can significantly enable the sector to absorb reverse migrants and reduce the seasonal or circular migration in India. Besides, job creation strategies that encourage the formalisation of the workforce need to be formulated in the non-agriculture sector. Finally, this paper recommends an information system that collects and presents accurate data on labour force supply and demand at regular intervals.

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