



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

The Journey Home: Exploring The Economic And Existential Dimensions Of Reverse Migration In Post-COVID India

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed an unprecedented wave of reverse migration in India, compelling a significant portion of the urban workforce to return to rural areas. This mass movement has profoundly impacted rural labor markets, household incomes, and local economies, creating both challenges and opportunities for rural revitalization. This paper delves into the multifaceted effects of this reverse migration, offering a comprehensive theoretical exploration of its implications. Utilizing a rich array of secondary data and existing research, we examine the transformation of rural labor dynamics, the realignment of household income structures, and the cascading economic consequences on local economies.

The analysis provides insights into the reconfiguration of rural labor markets, where increased labor supply has both revitalized traditional sectors and exposed infrastructural and policy gaps. Additionally, shifts in household income sources and consumption patterns underscore the need for adaptive economic strategies. By contextualizing these changes within the broader economic fabric of rural India, this paper illuminates the potential for reverse migration to serve as a catalyst for rural economic renewal. Furthermore, drawing on global case studies and comparative analyses, we offer policy recommendations designed to harness the positive aspects of reverse migration. These include enhancing rural infrastructure, fostering entrepreneurship, and leveraging remittances for sustainable development. The paper emphasizes a holistic approach to policy-making, aiming to transform the challenges posed by reverse migration into a strategic opportunity for long-term rural growth. In doing so, it contributes to the discourse on rural development by presenting a nuanced understanding of reverse migration's impact and proposing actionable pathways for leveraging this demographic shift towards economic resilience and prosperity.

Introduction

Pandemics have long served as catalysts for migration in India, altering both the demographic and economic landscapes. Historical outbreaks, such as smallpox, cholera, and the plague, triggered mass movements from urban centers like Varanasi and Surat to rural areas, disrupting trade and agriculture. During the Mughal era, plague-induced migrations led to labor shortages in cities, while rural areas faced the strain of accommodating

displaced populations. These migrations left indelible marks on India's demographic patterns, with abandoned urban centers and newly established rural settlements reflecting the long-term impacts of such crises.

India's trajectory of rural-to-urban migration has been driven by aspirations for better employment and living standards. The 2011 Census reported that 62% of the 54 million inter-state migrants moved to urban centers, primarily for employment in informal sectors such as construction and small-scale industries. However, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the precariousness of these informal jobs, leading to a wave of reverse migration that reshaped the socio-economic fabric of the country. The pandemic-induced lockdowns led to industry closures and widespread unemployment, compelling millions of urban workers to return to their rural homes. A World Bank report estimated that over 40 million individuals were affected, with many embarking on arduous journeys back to rural areas. This phenomenon, also observed globally during crises like the Ebola outbreak in Africa and economic downturns in China, underscores the universal nature of reverse migration, which redistributes labor and reshapes rural economies.

In India, the agricultural sector absorbed the brunt of this reverse migration. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) highlighted that the return of migrants expanded the rural labor force, alleviating labor shortages but also depressing wages and underscoring the vulnerability of informal rural employment. The FAO called for comprehensive policies to address these issues, advocating for decent work conditions and social protections for all workers. Empirical data from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) and the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) further illustrate the impact on rural labor markets. The NSSO reported a 6.7% rise in rural labor force participation post-lockdown, while CMIE data showed a peak in rural unemployment at 10.5% in April 2020. Although unemployment rates declined to pre-pandemic levels by late 2021, the reliance on informal employment revealed persistent vulnerabilities, including job insecurity and low wages. An International Labour Organization (ILO) study in 2021 found that the increased competition for limited rural jobs led to a 4.2% reduction in agricultural wages, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to foster sustainable rural employment.

The demographic shift brought about by reverse migration also highlighted the resilience of rural communities. Many migrants returned to their native villages due to urban job losses and health concerns, finding support in familial and community networks. These rural areas acted as vital socio-economic safety nets, providing stability during the crisis. This dynamic underscores the importance of strengthening rural economies to accommodate returning workers without exacerbating existing vulnerabilities. Thus, reverse migration in post-COVID India is a complex socio-economic phenomenon influenced by historical patterns, labor market dynamics, and rural development. Understanding its multifaceted nature is essential for crafting policies that enhance resilience and ensure sustainable development in the face of future crises.

Economic Models on Migration

The Push-Pull Migration Model, first articulated by Everett Lee (1966), provides a foundational framework for understanding migration dynamics, including reverse migration. Migration decisions are influenced by "push" factors, such as urban economic instability, job loss, and overcrowding, and "pull" factors, such as lower living costs, family ties, and opportunities in agriculture or small businesses in rural areas. During the COVID-19 pandemic, urban economic disruptions intensified these dynamics, driving many migrants to return to their villages. However, the model's simplicity overlooks non-economic factors, such as emotional and cultural motivations, which are crucial in understanding reverse migration during crises. Human Capital Theory, proposed by economists like Gary Becker, explains migration as an effort to maximize returns on investments in skills and education. Reverse migration during the pandemic can be understood through this lens, as urban job losses and shrinking informal labor markets made rural areas relatively more attractive due to lower costs of living and

opportunities in agriculture or rural development projects. However, the theory's focus on economic returns often neglects social dimensions, such as family ties and emotional connections, which also influence migration decisions.

Labor Market Segmentation Theory divides labor markets into primary sectors offering stable, high-wage jobs and secondary sectors characterized by low-wage, precarious work. Reverse migration during the pandemic highlights this divide, as disruptions in urban secondary sectors, such as informal labor, pushed migrants back to rural areas. Rural opportunities, often supported by government initiatives, acted as a buffer but also exposed vulnerabilities, including suppressed wages and job insecurity. The Gravity Model of Migration, adapted from Newtonian physics, suggests that migration flows are influenced by population size and proximity. During the pandemic, migration patterns reversed as urban economic instability prompted workers to return to nearby rural areas with strong social networks. While the model effectively captures the role of proximity and networks, it simplifies complex migration decisions by overlooking factors like quality of life and policy incentives.

Migration Network Theory emphasizes the role of social networks in facilitating migration decisions. During the COVID-19 crisis, returning migrants relied on familial and community support in rural areas for housing, employment, and financial assistance. These networks provided a safety net, creating a "snowball effect" where the return of some migrants encouraged others to follow. However, this theory does not fully address broader economic and policy-related drivers of reverse migration. Rural Development Models focus on policies aimed at improving rural livelihoods through agriculture, infrastructure, and entrepreneurship. During the pandemic, government initiatives such as rural employment schemes and subsidies created "pull" factors for reverse migration. These measures enhanced rural economic resilience but often overlooked social and emotional motivations, such as family reunification or avoiding health risks in urban areas. Dual Labor Market Theory highlights the instability of urban secondary sectors, where many migrants work in low-paying, insecure jobs. Economic shocks during the pandemic disproportionately affected these workers, prompting them to return to rural areas where agriculture and small-scale industries offered alternative, albeit limited, employment opportunities. However, this theory does not fully address the challenges migrants face when rural jobs are scarce or mismatched with their skills. Each of these models provides valuable insights into the economic dynamics of reverse migration during the COVID-19 pandemic. Together, they underscore the need for a comprehensive approach that integrates economic, social, and policy factors to fully understand and address reverse migration trends in India.

Review of empirical literature

The COVID-19 pandemic has cast a spotlight on the multifaceted issues surrounding reverse migration, particularly in the Indian context, where millions of internal migrants were compelled to return to their rural homes amid the nationwide lockdown. This review synthesizes existing literature to explore the economic and existential dimensions of this phenomenon like Dhungana (2020) underscores the erosion of human dignity faced by cross-border migrants during the pandemic. His analysis reveals that the crisis exacerbated existing vulnerabilities and highlighted the urgent need for robust international frameworks to protect migrant rights. The study provides a foundational understanding of how pandemics can strip migrants of their basic dignities and rights, necessitating comprehensive international cooperation and policy reform.

Khan and Arokkiaraj (2021) offer a comparative analysis of Indian government policies aimed at addressing COVID-19-induced reverse migration. Their findings indicate that internal migrants faced heightened vulnerabilities due to fragmented policy implementation. The research emphasizes the critical need for coordinated reintegration efforts, suggesting that a holistic approach could mitigate the adverse impacts on returning migrants. Their work sheds light on policy gaps and the necessity for an integrated framework to support

internal migrants. The Social Science Research Council (SSRC) through its COVID-19 Fieldnotes, delves into the impact of reverse migration on indigenous communities. The research documents significant economic hardships, social exclusion, and the strain on already limited community resources. The SSRC recommends targeted interventions to alleviate these challenges, highlighting the necessity of addressing the unique needs of indigenous populations in policy formulations.

A study published in Sage Journals (2021) explores the repercussions of reverse migration on rural labor markets, revealing a temporary oversupply of labor, suppressed wages, and increased competition. The study also points out the critical role of informal employment as a buffer, although it proves inadequate in fully absorbing the returning workforce. This research provides valuable insights into the dynamics of rural labor markets and the pressing need for sustainable employment solutions. Another study in Sage Journals (2021) focuses specifically on migrant workers from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. It highlights significant income losses, insufficient employment opportunities, and glaring gaps in social security for these migrants. The authors advocate for strengthened rural employment schemes and enhanced crisis management strategies, suggesting that such measures are vital for the economic resilience of rural communities. Kapoor (2020) discusses how the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing challenges in India's labor market, including reverse migration. The paper suggests that the pandemic has highlighted the vulnerabilities of migrant workers, particularly those in informal sectors. It advocates for strengthening labor market policies that can cater to the needs of both urban and rural workers, ensuring social security and economic resilience. Khanna (2020) examines the impact of reverse migration on India's labor force, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study finds that the labor market was severely disrupted as millions of workers returned to their rural homes, leading to both labor shortages in urban areas and overburdened rural economies. The author emphasizes the need for comprehensive strategies to address these challenges, focusing on skill development and job creation in both urban and rural settings.

This body of literature highlights the multifaceted challenges faced by internal and cross-border migrant workers during the pandemic, with a particular focus on the psychological and economic impacts of reverse migration. Choudhari (2020) underscores the significant mental health toll of job losses, displacement, and social isolation, advocating for the inclusion of mental health support systems within migrant welfare policies. Damani, Mishra, and Venkateswar (2020) explore the patterns of return migration after the easing of lockdown restrictions, emphasizing the role of rural employment schemes in alleviating the economic distress caused by reverse migration. From a broader perspective, De Haan (2020) examines the global implications of the crisis, revealing systemic inequalities within labor migration and advocating for labor rights reforms, with a specific focus on India. Similarly, Dhungana (2020) addresses the human dignity issues faced by cross-border migrants, highlighting how the pandemic exacerbated their vulnerabilities and calling for stronger international frameworks to safeguard migrant rights. Together, these studies provide a comprehensive understanding of the economic, psychological, and human rights challenges that have shaped the experience of migrants during the pandemic. Research published in Nature examines the experiences of circular migrants, who often oscillate between urban and rural settings. The study notes several vulnerabilities, including livelihood loss, inadequate housing, and limited healthcare access. The authors emphasize the importance of policy interventions tailored to support cyclical migration, arguing for a nuanced understanding of this form of mobility to inform more effective policy responses.

Lastly, a SAGE Journals (2021) study on India's internal migrants underscores the compounded challenges of mobility restrictions, economic distress, and psychological trauma experienced during the pandemic. The research points out that female migrants were disproportionately affected, facing heightened vulnerabilities due to gender-specific challenges. This study calls for gender-sensitive policy responses to address the unique needs of female migrants, advocating for a more inclusive approach to policy-making. This literature review highlights the

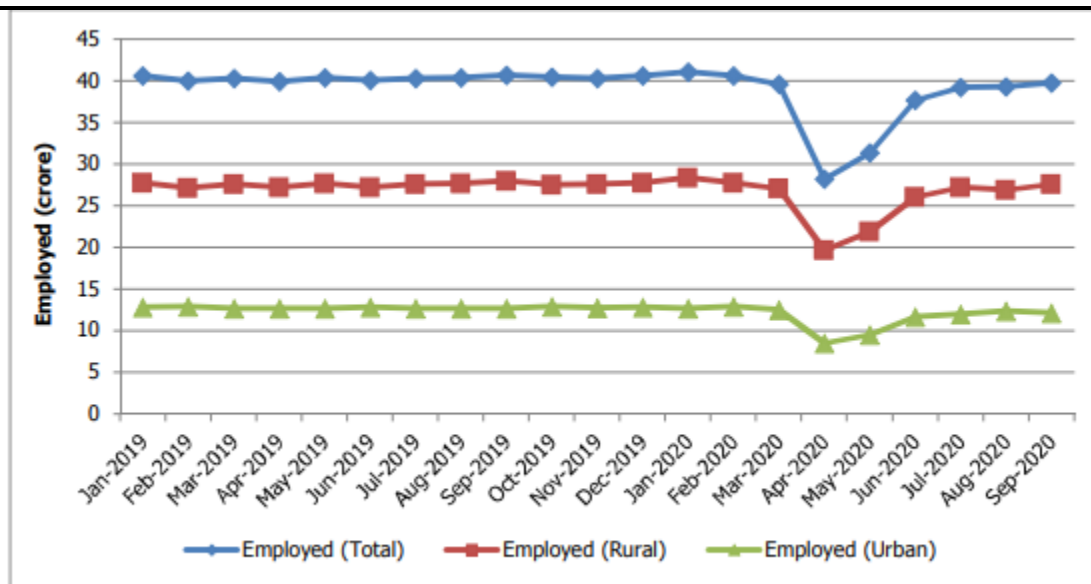
complex interplay of economic and existential challenges faced by reverse migrants in post-COVID India. The findings from these diverse studies underscore the necessity of holistic, coordinated, and inclusive policy frameworks to address the multifaceted dimensions of reverse migration, ensuring the dignity, economic security, and well-being of all migrants.

Dandekar and Ghai (2020) emphasize the need for robust social protection measures to support migrants during crises, while Deshingkar and Akter (2009) highlight the structural drivers of migration and the importance of inclusive development to reduce rural-urban disparities. Bhagat et al. (2020) call for a national-level migrant welfare policy to address livelihood insecurities and facilitate the integration of returning migrants into rural economies. Chakraborty et al. (2020) examine the strain on rural economies due to reverse migration, advocating for a reassessment of urban-centric growth models and enhanced rural self-sufficiency. Choudhury et al. (2020) argue that without improvements in rural infrastructure and livelihood opportunities, reverse migration risks being a temporary phenomenon. Together, these studies underscore the need for comprehensive policy frameworks to transform reverse migration into a catalyst for sustainable rural development.

Collectively, these studies offer a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities presented by reverse migration during the COVID-19 pandemic. They underscore the necessity for comprehensive policy frameworks that address both immediate welfare needs and long-term development goals, ensuring that reverse migration can contribute meaningfully to rural revitalization and economic resilience.

Impact on Rural Labor Markets

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted labor markets across India, with a pronounced divergence in urban and rural employment dynamics. The accompanying graph, derived from data provided by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE, 2020), illustrates the employment trends across rural and urban regions during the pandemic. A dramatic decline in total employment was observed in April 2020, corresponding with the nationwide lockdown. Urban employment experienced a steeper contraction due to the shutdown of industrial, commercial, and service sectors, which dominate urban economies. In contrast, rural employment demonstrated remarkable resilience, rebounding more swiftly owing to agricultural activities and targeted government interventions, such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). These initiatives effectively absorbed surplus labor resulting from reverse migration.



Source: Plotted by the author based on CMIE (2020a).

The reverse migration phenomenon brought an estimated 10 million additional workers into rural labor markets between March and June 2020, according to CMIE data. Initially, this influx placed considerable strain on rural economies, exacerbating unemployment and underemployment. However, over time, the surge in labor supply catalyzed a diversification of the rural workforce. This was further corroborated by NSSO data (2021), which indicated a 3.5% increase in non-farm employment in rural areas, reflecting a gradual transition toward more varied and sustainable economic activities. The divergence in recovery patterns between urban and rural employment underscores the critical role of rural economies in cushioning the employment shock induced by the pandemic. Rural India's rapid adaptation highlights the importance of policy measures aimed at strengthening rural livelihoods, particularly in times of economic crises. By leveraging agricultural stability and promoting non-farm employment opportunities, rural areas became a pivotal buffer in mitigating the nationwide employment crisis.

Gender & Caste

The reverse rural migration triggered by COVID-19 in India has significant implications for gender and caste dynamics, deeply rooted in the socio-economic fabric of rural society. As male migrant workers returned to their villages following lockdowns and job losses, the already precarious economic opportunities in rural areas became more constrained, disproportionately affecting marginalized caste groups who typically occupy the lowest tiers of agricultural and manual labor hierarchies. For women, especially Dalit and Adivasi women, the influx of male laborers disrupted existing informal economies where they often held critical roles, reducing their economic agency. Moreover, patriarchal norms reinforced by the return of male family members have curtailed women's mobility, decision-making power, and access to education or healthcare, exacerbating gender inequalities. The burden of unpaid care work, traditionally borne by women, increased substantially due to the larger household sizes and heightened domestic demands. Additionally, caste hierarchies intensified as access to limited government relief, healthcare, and employment opportunities often favored dominant caste groups, leaving marginalized communities more vulnerable. These dynamics underscore how intersecting axes of caste and gender amplify vulnerabilities during crises, requiring policy interventions that address structural inequities rather than just immediate economic needs.

Changes in Household Incomes

The economic repercussions of reverse migration have been both profound and multifaceted. Data from NSSO's Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2020-21 reveals a 12% decline in income for rural households reliant on remittances, while households engaged in local employment experienced a 7% increase in earnings. A complementary study by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER, 2021) highlighted that households that diversified income sources—balancing agricultural and non-agricultural activities—were more resilient to the economic shocks induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 1, sourced from a study by NABARD, presents the distribution of post-reverse migration income levels. The data emphasizes the stark economic precarity faced by returnees, with 53.53% of the population earning less than ₹6,000 per month post-migration. While a minority managed to secure higher incomes, the percentage of individuals earning above ₹18,000 drops significantly. For instance, less than 1% of reverse migrants reported incomes in the highest bracket of ₹26,000–₹30,000, reflecting the limited upward economic mobility post-migration.

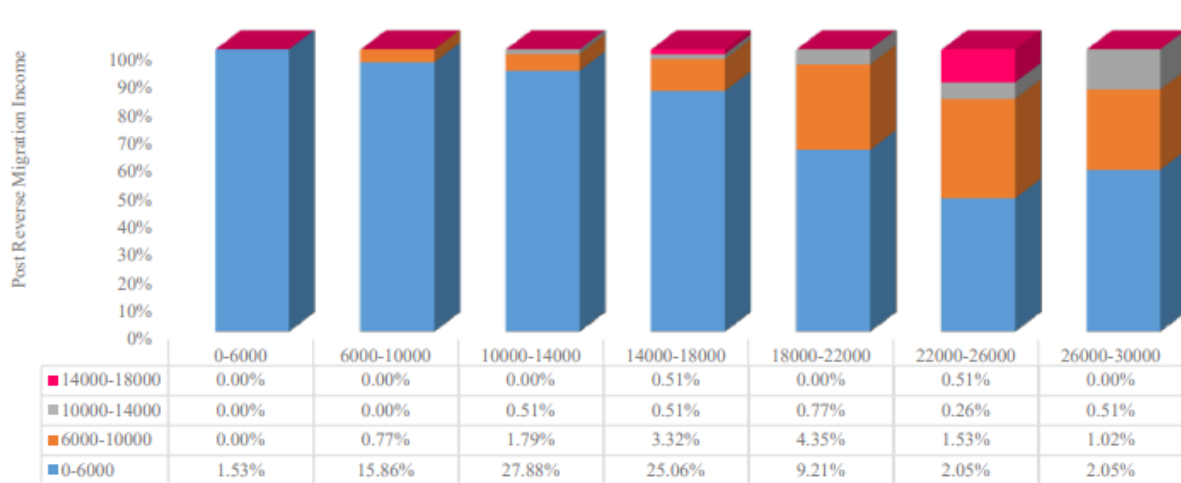


Figure 1: Post Migration Income

This income segmentation underscores the challenges of reverse migration, particularly for workers previously employed in the informal sector. The concentration of migrants in lower-income brackets highlights the vulnerability of rural labor markets to large-scale disruptions. These findings necessitate targeted policy interventions aimed at enhancing income diversification, creating sustainable rural employment opportunities, and integrating reverse migrants into productive economic activities. Such measures are imperative to bridge the rural-urban income gap and build resilience against future economic shocks.

Local Economic Revitalization

The phenomenon of reverse migration, triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, has emerged as a pivotal force in stimulating rural economies across India. As millions of urban workers returned to their hometowns, rural areas experienced a significant influx of both labor and consumption demand, setting the stage for economic revitalization. This shift, while initially challenging, has revealed opportunities for long-term rural development and resilience. A 2021 report by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) documented an 8% year-on-year increase in rural consumption, driven by the expanded labor force and enhanced government support schemes, such as the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). These programs provided crucial financial assistance and employment opportunities, helping to

stabilize rural incomes and boost local spending. The increased consumer demand was evident in sectors such as agriculture, retail, and local services, where rural businesses experienced a notable uptick in activity.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) study underscored the importance of regional disparities in recovery, noting that areas with superior infrastructure and access to markets rebounded more quickly. In these regions, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) reported a 15% increase in revenue compared to pre-pandemic levels. This growth was attributed to improved logistics, better connectivity, and supportive local policies that enabled businesses to capitalize on the increased rural demand. The presence of well-established supply chains and access to financial services further facilitated this recovery, highlighting the critical role of infrastructure in economic revitalization.

Agriculture, a primary sector in rural India, benefited from the influx of labor, with many returnees engaging in farming activities. This bolstered agricultural output and productivity, although it also underscored the need for modernizing agricultural practices to sustain long-term growth. The availability of a larger workforce allowed for the expansion of agricultural operations and diversification into allied activities, such as horticulture and dairy farming. These developments, in turn, generated additional income streams and enhanced rural livelihoods. However, the positive impacts of reverse migration on rural economies were not uniformly distributed. Regions lacking adequate infrastructure, healthcare, and educational facilities struggled to absorb the returning population effectively, leading to increased competition for limited resources and a subsequent rise in underemployment. In such areas, the economic benefits of reverse migration were dampened by structural inefficiencies and a lack of investment in critical sectors.

Krishnan, Brahme, and Yadav (2022) explore the impact of reverse migration during the COVID-19 pandemic in rural Chhattisgarh, highlighting the strain on local economies, marked by increased unemployment and poverty. They suggest that policies focusing on rural industrialization and agricultural reform could mitigate these pressures and reduce long-term migration. Similarly, Behera, Mishra, and Behera (2021) examine the labor supply effects of COVID-19-induced reverse migration in Odisha, identifying challenges such as suppressed wages and limited job opportunities due to the influx of labor. However, they also note the potential for rural industries to absorb returning workers, recommending skill development and entrepreneurship programs for sustainable livelihoods. Gawde, Sivakami, and Babu (2015), while not specific to COVID-19, explore healthcare access for migrants in Mumbai and emphasize the importance of inclusive service delivery models and partnerships between stakeholders to improve migrant welfare. These studies collectively underscore the need for targeted policy measures to address the challenges of reverse migration and leverage opportunities for rural development. Similarly, the Chhattisgarh state report on migrant workers highlights the severe disruption caused by reverse migration during the COVID-19 pandemic. It outlines the issues faced by returning migrants, such as lack of employment opportunities and limited access to social welfare schemes, underscoring the need for the state to focus on enhancing infrastructure and creating sustainable employment opportunities to prevent further migration from rural to urban areas.

Policy Recommendations

The impact of reverse migration has been significant, particularly in states like Uttarakhand, where the return of migrant laborers has exacerbated challenges in agriculture and local industries. According to the TERI report (2020), the state needs a coordinated response that integrates rural development policies with sustainable livelihood initiatives to effectively reintegrate returning workers into their communities. Similarly, The Hindu (2020) notes that the return of workers has set back the rural economy by approximately 15 years, primarily due

to inadequate infrastructure, healthcare facilities, and employment opportunities, calling for urgent policy reforms. Inamdar and Thusoo (2020) argue that reverse migration necessitates comprehensive, long-term rural development planning, emphasizing the need for strategic investments in agriculture, industry, and services to create sustainable employment opportunities and alleviate the pressure on urban centers. Additionally, Irudaya Rajan, Sivakumar, and Srinivasan (2020) highlight the "crisis of mobility" during the pandemic, pointing out that millions of displaced workers in rural areas face inadequate social protection and employment opportunities. These studies collectively underline the critical need for targeted interventions and strategic investments to address the challenges posed by reverse migration and foster long-term rural economic recovery.

To fully harness the potential of reverse migration for revitalizing rural economies, a multi-dimensional policy framework is essential. Policymakers need to prioritize investments in rural infrastructure, enhancing digital connectivity, transportation networks, and access to essential services such as healthcare and education. These improvements will not only facilitate economic activities but also improve the overall quality of life, making rural areas more attractive for both returning migrants and new investments. Skill development programs are critical to equip returnees with the necessary expertise to thrive in local industries. Tailored training initiatives focusing on agriculture, allied sectors, and emerging fields such as digital services can bridge the gap between the existing labor supply and market demands, ensuring that migrants can reintegrate effectively into the rural economy. Support for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) through financial aid, infrastructural assistance, and access to markets can stimulate local business ecosystems, creating sustainable employment opportunities and fostering economic diversification.

In parallel, enhancing social protection measures is crucial to address the vulnerabilities faced by returning migrants. Expanding social safety nets, including unemployment benefits and direct cash transfers, can provide immediate financial relief and economic stability to families affected by job losses. The pandemic exposed structural challenges such as labor oversupply and suppressed wages in rural labor markets, underscoring the need for comprehensive rural employment programs. Public-private partnerships can be leveraged to drive innovation and resource mobilization, particularly in sectors like healthcare, education, and renewable energy, contributing to a resilient rural economy. Empirical insights, such as those from *The Indian Economic Journal*, reveal the income disparities faced by reverse migrants and emphasize the necessity for targeted policy interventions to mitigate these disparities. The experience of Kerala, which effectively managed reverse migration through robust skill development and social safety net programs, serves as a valuable model for other states. By addressing these structural issues through coordinated policy efforts, India can transform the challenges of reverse migration into opportunities for long-term rural economic growth and resilience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, reverse migration presents a pivotal opportunity to reimagine and fortify rural economies in India. The COVID-19 pandemic, despite its profound challenges, has illuminated the structural vulnerabilities of urban-centric economic models and underscored the resilience of rural areas as socio-economic safety nets. By addressing these structural challenges through strategic investments in infrastructure, skill development, and social protection, India can transform crisis-induced reverse migration into a catalyst for sustainable rural growth. Understanding the economic and existential dimensions of this phenomenon is crucial for crafting policies that not only facilitate immediate recovery but also foster a more inclusive and equitable future.

The implications of reverse migration extend beyond immediate economic impacts, influencing labor markets, income distribution, and local economic dynamics. Reports such as the one from the Press Information Bureau

highlight significant setbacks to economic growth due to the abrupt influx of migrants into rural areas. This underscores the necessity of addressing the root causes of migration by focusing on local economic development and employment generation. Similarly, the All-India Report on Migrant Workers emphasizes the strain placed on rural economies and the urgent need for enhanced infrastructure and long-term strategies to reduce dependency on urban centers. By comprehensively addressing these issues, India can harness the potential of reverse migration to drive rural economic revitalization, ensuring resilience and prosperity for its rural population in the years to come.

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