

Process of Economic Reintegration of Reverse Migrants – A Review

*Dr.Suguna Basavaraj, Associate Professor of Commerce, Govt. First Grade College for Women, Raichur.

Abstract

This paper attempts to study the process of economic reintegration of reverse migrants in India. India has a predominant share of internal migration and is also the top origin country of international migrants (De, 2019; UNDESA, 2019). The Indian Census (2011) data calculated the total number of internal migrants accounting for inter and intra-state movement to be 450 million, an increase of 45% since the Census 2001 (De, 2019). The Economic Survey of India 2017 estimated the inter-state migrant population as 60 million and the average annual flow of migrants between states was calculated at 9 million between 2011 and 2016 (Sharma, 2017). Uttar Pradesh (UP), Bihar, Madhya Pradesh (MP), Rajasthan are among the major origin states, while Delhi, Kerala, Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Tamil Nadu are among the important destination states for these migrant workers (Kamal, 2018). Reverse migration also entails loss of income for migrant workers. This can be very significant for poorer states. A 2018 World Bank paper by Gaurav Nayyar and Kyoung Yang Kim found that migrant remittances had a share of 35% in Bihar's gross state domestic product (GSDP) and positively affected consumption at the household level. Any severe disruption of these remittances, which is what the lockdown must have inflicted, can result in a massive income shock in poor states. India's workforce was already under distress even before the pandemic. The unemployment rate, according to the 2017-18 Periodic Labour Force Survey, was 6.1%, the highest in four decades. Real rural wages declined continuously between September 2019 and January 2019

Key words: Labour Market, Diaspora, GDP, Rural, remittances, wages, post-pandemic.

Introduction

Migration thus gives an optimistic livelihood strategy for migrant workers and their families, contributes to the economic growth of the destination state/country, while the origin state/country benefits from the remittances and the skills acquired during their migration. Migrants from Kerala, a southern state in India, earn high wages as high-skilled workers in the Gulf, allowing them to remit more (Rajan & Zachariah, 2019). Even though labour migration compensates for labour shortages in the destination states/countries, workers employed in the low-skilled, labour-intensive sectors suffer malpractices such as wage-related abuse, working overtime without compensation, lack of social security cover and lack of protection during recruitment and employment (Srivastava, 2013; International Organisation for Migration, 2019). This points to the vulnerable position of these migrant workers which was heightened further during the COVID-19 crisis. On 24th March 2019, in order to contain the virus, a strict nationwide lockdown was imposed by India with immediate sealing of the inter-state and international borders within four hours of its announcement. This shocked the unprepared migrant workers, both internal and those working abroad. Similarly, with the spread of COVID-19, the Gulf economy was also halted which led to migrant workers being stranded without food, livelihood, safe place to stay and being desperate to return to India. The lack of governmental planning to ensure the well-being of migrant workers within India and abroad

led to a “crisis within a crisis”. In this context, this study conducts a comparative analysis of the challenges of reverse migration of India’s internal and international migrant workers. Three major research questions have been covered a) what are the economic and social challenges during their reverse migration, b) what are the varied governmental responses towards the repatriation of both the categories of migrant workers and c) what is the process of economic integration for the reverse migrants. This paper is divided into five parts. First, the introductory part which provides a basic overview of internal migration within India and international migration from India. The second part explains the research methodology and the third consists of the primary findings presented in a comparative manner in accordance with the research questions. The fourth part consists of the analysis which examines the common themes emerging from the experiences of the internal and international migrants from India.

Objective:

This paper intends to explore and analyze **Migration** and competition in the **labour market**: the classical enquiry do immigrants reduce wages and increase unemployment in the receiving countries.

Migrant workers’ mobility challenges

Initially, the central government was reluctant to rescue the stranded migrants both within and abroad, despite appeals from different stakeholders such as state governments, civil society and trade unions (Desai, 2019; Haider, 2019). Despite the strict mobility restrictions imposed by the government, the distressed internal migrants kept moving on foot or in unsanitary lorries or trucks towards their origin states due to their inability to sustain in the expensive urban areas (Rather & Yousuf, 2019). They faced numerous problems while attempting to cross state borders such as police brutality, grievous injuries with reports of even death due to exhaustion and dehydration (FPJ Bureau, 2019). There was a lack of coordination among the central and state governments resulting in contradictory stances while handling the mass migration (Rather & Yousuf, 2019). At the same time, the employers retrenched the migrant labourers as their businesses were shut due to the lockdown. This resulted in thousands being stranded on various inter-state borders such as Karnataka-Maharashtra and Delhi-Uttar Pradesh (Abi-Habib & Yasir, 2019). Rannvijay, a construction worker who returned from Delhi to Bihar, was rendered jobless and due to lack of proper transportation arrangements by the government, he had to travel back independently in a truck to his village. One of the social workers we interviewed described the desperate circumstances that the low-skilled workers had to face in Delhi due to the imposition of the sudden lockdown.

Process of economic reintegration of reverse migrants

Before discussing the experiences of the respondents with regard to their economic reintegration, we will mention the short-term and long-term measures taken by the central government to reintegrate the migrant workers in the post-COVID-19 economy. The central government announced a Rs 1.70 lakh crore (US\$ 22.8 billion) relief package for the vulnerable sections which included categories of people who are migrants (Ministry of Finance, 2019). The central government urged the state governments to mobilize the Building and Other Construction Workers (BOCW) Welfare Fund which would benefit around 35 million construction workers registered under the Act (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2019). However, it should be noted that there are an estimated 56 million workers in the construction sector (Nag and Afonso, 2019).

Additionally, several state governments such as UP, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan announced one-time immediate cash benefits of Rs 1000 to 5000 (USD 13.59–67.12) and free rations through the Public Distribution System (PDS) (Anand and Thampi, 2019). Subsequently, after immense media attention, another relief package was announced of Rs. 20 lakh crores (USD 270 billion approx.) to benefit the migrant workers, self-employed and small traders. (Ministry of Finance, 2019a). The scheme ‘One nation one ration card’ was announced to be implemented across India in 2019 to enable migrants to access ration from any fair price shop in India using a digital card. Between April 1 and May 20, 2019, there was a sudden increase in the registrations (around 3.5 million workers) for MGNREGA, a rural employment scheme promising 100 days of work, pointing to increased need for employment (Chauhan, 2019).

It should be noted that such short-term relief packages by the central government were absent in the case of international migrants. Kerala was the only state in India which provided a one-time cash benefit of Rs. 5000 to them (Mathrubhumi, 2019) Also, the Kerala government aimed to help around 5000 Non-Resident Keralites under the Non-Resident Keralites Affairs (NORKA) Department Project for Returned Emigrants (NDPREM) scheme by offering Rs. 50 lakhs (USD 67,123) to each expat to facilitate their own business ventures (ET Bureau, 2019). Acknowledging the huge amount of remittances from the international migrants which benefitted the economy, Kerala also launched an exclusive integration programme called the ‘Dream Kerala Project’. It provides a platform for the business sector to tap the expertise of skilled human resources returning to Kerala after losing jobs abroad (Press Trust of India, 2019). The role of Kerala government in caring for its migrant community from organising community kitchens for stranded migrants to introducing long-term reintegrative measures has been praiseworthy.

As a long-term measure for the labour market integration of both internal and international reverse migrants, the central government announced a Rs 50,000 crore (USD 6.9 billion) ‘Garib Kalyan Rozgar Abhiyan’ which involved skill mapping of migrant workers and connecting women with self-help groups for enhancing employment opportunities. (Ministry of Rural Development, 2019). In view of the lack of data on internal migrants, the government also announced to conduct an All India Survey on Migrant Workers and develop a National Database of Unorganised Workers (NDUW), which would include details of the migrants such as name, occupation, address, educational qualifications and skill type, etc. in order to secure employability and social security benefits for the inter-state migrant workers (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2019).

SWADES (Skilled Workers Arrival Database for Employment Support), a joint initiative of the Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship, the Ministry of Civil Aviation and the MEA, aimed to create a database of migrant workers based on their skill set and experience to fulfil the demands of Indian and foreign companies (Ministry of Civil Aviation, 2019). For facilitating employment opportunities, details of SWADES registrations were integrated with Skill India’s ASEEM (Aatmanirbhar Skilled Employee Employer Mapping) portal. As per the latest data, i.e. January 25th, 2019, more than 30,500 workers have registered for the SWADES Skill Card, out of which more than 24,500 are returnees

from GCC countries (Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, 2019). Further, all data regarding Indians returning under VBM was shared with the state governments. The internal migrants interviewed reported a sparse coverage of the government relief package as only a few respondents received immediate cash benefits. Only half of the respondents from UP and Bihar received a one-time cash benefit while the remaining did not. Sudesh, a construction worker, reported that he received free ration which would sustain his family only for 15–20 days of a month. A survey of 11,000 migrant workers conducted in April 2019, by SWAN (Stranded Workers Action Network) reported that none of the workers had received ration by the government during the lockdown period (Pandey, 2019). Our study (conducted between May – August, 2019) revealed that half of the respondents were able to avail rations at their native states even though its quantity and duration varied from within and across states included in our study. Those who did not receive free ration reported that they did not have a ration card, or their name was not included in the family's ration card or were not present to provide a thumb impression to the biometric machine as they migrated to other states hinting at the non-portability of benefits. The data of the Ministry of Consumer Affairs indicated that the free ration scheme had failed because almost 11 states distributed less than 1% of food grains allocated to them (Sharma, 2019). Also, an RTI revealed that barely 10% of the Rs. 20 lakh crore stimulus package was distributed (The Tribune, 2019).

Ineffective reintegration measures

Since labour is in the concurrent list, it is important for the central government to set a standard for the other states to follow. In this context, the non-inclusion of international migrants in the relief package was blameworthy. Though international migrants bring in huge remittances benefitting the Indian economy but amidst a crisis, they were left on their own instruments to cover their basic needs, travel fare during repatriation and survival in their origin country. This aspect did not receive enough media attention in comparison to the internal migrants. However, this was not enough to ensure the smooth reintegration of internal migrants as well, as more than 90% of India's workforce is in the unorganised sector, which includes the low-income migrant workers, who are not registered under welfare schemes, lack wage protection and bank accounts (Express News Service, 2015). This, along with the faulty distribution of the stimulus packages, deprived them of its benefits. Even for those who managed to receive the one-time financial assistance, the amount was extremely small to meet the basic needs for even a month. The continuing pandemic and repeated lockdowns makes the situation for migrants difficult as they are unable to find jobs in their village and face travel restrictions which hinders their job search in urban areas simultaneously. Though skill mapping and maintenance of database are steps in the right direction, it has to be followed up with proper implementation and, most importantly, job creation in the origin states and under rural employment guarantee schemes like MGNREGA. In fact, renowned economist Jean Dreze has touted the idea of a state-sponsored urban employment scheme which will integrate the urban poor (Vij, 2019). A universal social protection cover, not only for the internal migrants but also international migrants upon their return, is important without which any reintegrative measure will remain futile.

This study highlighted the various aspects where the experiences of the internal and international migrants differed as well as converged especially during the pandemic. Some obvious differences were on account of them being separate categories in terms of their work destinations and migration process. However, as far as the differences in terms of the

disparate media attention, share in relief package and reintegrative measures, high costs of migration, maintenance of proper database, all these can be commonly attributable to governmental neglect of migrants. The convergences drawn in this study are therefore important to highlight the general vulnerability of the migrants, irrespective of their category, even though both the origin and destination states benefit from migration. Their experiences converged in terms of the lack of planning and protection for the migrant community which led to them being stranded, economic challenges such as wage theft, retrenchments, survival on meagre savings, lack of social security protection, lack of governmental and employer accountability, social discrimination and hostility, mobility issues both before and after repatriation, difficulty in access to justice, ineffective reintegrative measures and vulnerability especially of the low-skilled workers. These commonalities reveal a general precarity of the Indian Migrant community and glaring caveats in migration policy making and implementation. There is a need to work on these aspects to make both internal and international migration a smoother process where all the stakeholders benefit especially in a post-crisis situation.

Conclusion

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the number is likely to be far more than 5 million. For example, the Uttar Pradesh government alone was looking at expanding daily employment under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme by 3 million in March. The humanitarian aspect of the reverse migration has caught everybody's imagination. But its economic impact is equally important. Migrants have an important role in India's economy. The Indian Community Welfare Fund should be mobilized not only in times of crisis but also in reducing the migration costs for international migrants. For better policy making, government must integrate with the civil society which has good outreach with the migrant communities at the grassroot level.

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