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Reverse Migration During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Bihar

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 triggered an unprecedented reverse migration of workers in India, especially to high out-migration states like Bihar. This study examines the phenomenon of reverse migration during the pandemic in Bihar, focusing on its economic impact, social implications, policy responses, and the lived experiences of returning migrants. Using a mixed-methods approach, we synthesize quantitative data from surveys and reports alongside qualitative accounts of migrant workers. The findings reveal severe economic shocks: massive job losses, income decline, and a surge in rural unemployment and poverty. Socially, returning migrants faced stigma, inadequate healthcare access, and community-level challenges upon reintegration. The paper reviews the policy measures implemented by the central and state governments – such as relief packages, employment schemes, and social assistance – and evaluates their effectiveness and limitations. Lived experiences of migrants are highlighted through narratives of hardship during transit, struggles in home villages, and coping strategies. The study also observes migrants' future intentions, with many expressing willingness to re-migrate due to insufficient local livelihood options. These insights underscore the need for strengthened social safety nets and long-term rural development strategies to address the vulnerabilities exposed by the reverse migration crisis.

Keywords: Reverse migration; COVID-19; Bihar; migrant workers; economic impact; social impact; policy response; mixed-methods

Introduction

In late March 2020, India's sudden nationwide lockdown to contain COVID-19 brought economic activity to a standstill. One immediate consequence was a mass exodus of migrant workers from cities to their home villages – described as the largest population movement in India since the Partition of 1947 (Ellis-Petersen & Chaurasia, 2020). Bihar, one of India's poorest states and a major source of migrant labor, became a focal point of this **reverse migration**. Estimates suggest that by June 2020 roughly 2.5–3 million migrant workers had returned to Bihar (Arnimesh, 2020; Press Trust of India, 2020). More than half of rural households in Bihar had at least one member working outside the state before the pandemic (Datt, Dutta, & Mishra, 2023). The abrupt return of these workers en masse over a short period (many spending months in their native villages) had far-reaching economic and social ramifications.

Bihar's heavy dependence on migrant remittances and its limited local industrial base meant the reverse migration posed a serious development challenge. Even prior to COVID-19, Bihar had among the lowest per capita incomes and highest poverty rates in India – over 50% of its population is multidimensionally poor (ILO, 2020; Sengupta & Jha, 2020). The incoming wave of returnees – mostly informal sector workers rendered jobless overnight – added enormous stress to rural economies and public services. This

paper seeks to analyze the multi-dimensional impact of the COVID-induced reverse migration in Bihar. We specifically address: (a) the **economic impact** on employment, income, and rural livelihoods; (b) the **social impact** in terms of community response, stigma, and well-being; (c) the **policy response** by governments to manage the crisis; and (d) the **lived experiences** of migrants during exodus and reintegration.

Methodology

This study employs a **mixed-methods approach**. We draw on quantitative data from various surveys, government reports, and academic studies, combined with qualitative evidence from news reports, case studies, and interviews documented in the literature. Key data sources include household surveys conducted in Bihar during 2020–21 (Dhar, Nupur, & Dutta, 2022; Kaur & Shubham, 2021) and rapid assessments by research organizations (Chakravorty et al., 2020). These provide metrics on job loss, income changes, aid received, etc. Qualitative insights are gleaned from field reports and narratives of migrant workers recorded by journalists and researchers (Agrawal, 2020; Slater & Masih, 2020). By triangulating these sources, we analyze both macro-level trends and personal experiences.

The analysis is structured thematically. First, we review the economic consequences of reverse migration using indicators like employment status, wages, and consumption. Next, we examine social consequences such as health, education, and community dynamics. We then evaluate the policy measures rolled out in response, at both the central and state level, assessing their reach and impact in Bihar. Finally, we synthesize testimonies and case examples to illustrate migrants' lived experiences and coping strategies. This mixed-methods design helps contextualize statistical findings with human stories, yielding a comprehensive understanding of the crisis. All information is cited in-text in APA format, and a reference list is provided.

Ethical considerations: The study relies on publicly available data and published accounts; no human subjects were directly approached by the authors. Nonetheless, care is taken to respectfully portray migrant workers' experiences, acknowledging the trauma and dignity of the individuals involved.

Economic Impact of Reverse Migration in Bihar

The reverse migration dramatically disrupted Bihar's rural economy and labor market. **Employment and Income Loss:** With urban industries shut and no alternative jobs ready back home, returning migrants faced immediate unemployment. One village survey in Bihar found that **92% of migrant workers lost their jobs due to the lockdown** (Dhar et al., 2022). In a phone survey of rural youth from Bihar and neighboring Jharkhand, nearly **45% of interstate migrants returned home**, and **32% of those who had held salaried jobs became unemployed** (Chakravorty, Imbert, Lohnert, & Panda, 2020). Those who retained jobs often experienced pay cuts or unpaid leave. According to The Hindu's data analysis, **90% of migrant workers did not receive any wages during the lockdown period**, and 96% got no rations from their employers or local authorities (The Hindu Data Team, 2020). The sudden loss of income for thousands of households meant a sharp rise in economic insecurity in rural Bihar.

Decline in Household Earnings: Migrant earnings form a substantial part of many Bihari rural families' income (often over half, per pre-pandemic estimates). The pandemic effectively severed this lifeline. A study of eight villages in Bihar found an average income loss of about **₹50,000 per migrant worker** during the lockdown months (Dhar et al., 2022). Table 1 illustrates findings from that survey on income loss by type of migration. Households that sent out temporary migrants (workers who travel seasonally or

for short-term jobs) experienced slightly higher average income losses than those with permanent migrants. This likely reflects the fact that most returning workers were in low-wage informal jobs with no savings or severance, thus losing all earnings for the period of forced idleness.

Table 1: Types of Migrants and Average Income Lost During Lockdown (Bihar survey)

Type of Migration	Proportion of Households (%)	Average Income Loss (₹)
Temporary migrants	84%	54,603
Permanent migrants	13%	48,438
Both (temp. & perm.)	3%	51,333

Source: Household survey in 8 villages of Bihar (2020–21), reported in Dhar et al. (2022).

The **economic shock** was not uniform across all groups. Poorer households were the worst hit. Landless and marginal farming families (who depend heavily on migrant earnings) had virtually no fallback. Dhar et al. (2022) report that landless households accounted for about **49% of the total income loss** observed in their sample, whereas households with larger landholdings bore only a small fraction of the loss. Migrants from the lowest income quintile of households lost a greater share of income than those from middle or higher quintiles, partly because the poorest were engaged in casual labor that vanished instantly with the lockdown. Even relatively better-paid migrant workers (e.g. those in skilled trades) suffered absolute income losses commensurate with their higher pre-pandemic wages – in some cases losing bigger sums, even if their households had other assets (Dhar et al., 2022). Thus, in terms of sheer vulnerability, *the crisis amplified pre-existing inequalities*: those who could least afford loss of earnings were impacted the most.

Another key economic consequence was the strain on **livelihoods and consumption** in villages. Surveys indicate most returning migrants had to **deplete savings or take on debt** to survive. In one multi-state rural survey, over 70% of migrant households had to borrow money (mostly from informal sources) or use savings to meet consumption needs during the first few months back home (Kaur & Shubham, 2021). With meager local income opportunities, migrants' families reduced expenditures, often cutting down on food intake. Reports suggest significant hunger and food insecurity in migrant-sending communities during the lockdown: one assessment found barely 39% of households never ran out of food, implying **around 61% experienced some form of food shortage or had to skip meals** (Kaur & Shubham, 2021). This period has been described by migrants as one of "bhookho marne ki naubat" (on the verge of starving) in the absence of meaningful government support (Arnimesh, 2020).

Despite agriculture being a somewhat resilient sector (Bihar's farm output even grew modestly in 2020), the massive influx of labor led to **underemployment** in rural areas. Many returnees joined agricultural work on family plots or as laborers, but not everyone could be absorbed. A NABARD survey across multiple states including Bihar found that **41% of returning migrants resorted to farming** as a primary livelihood after returning (Kaur & Shubham, 2021). There was a noticeable uptick in agricultural activity – for instance, sown area for the summer (kharif) crop in India increased by 21% in 2020 compared to 2019, partly due to migrant labor availability (Kaur & Shubham, 2021). However, farm incomes are low and seasonal. Those who couldn't work enough hours on farms remained effectively unemployed or in casual odd jobs. **Rural unemployment spiked in April–May 2020** following the migrant influx. While exact district-level figures for Bihar are scarce, national data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy show rural joblessness hit ~22.9% in April 2020, before subsiding to around 6–8% by late 2020

as harvesting and government schemes provided temporary work (ILO, 2020; Kaur & Shubham, 2021). The **labour force participation** in rural areas also dropped, indicating many simply stopped looking for work during the strict lockdown phase.

On a positive note, government rural employment programs helped somewhat cushion the employment shock (more on policy responses in a later section). Bihar saw record engagement in the public works under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). By May–June 2020, the state had utilized **over 90% of its MGNREGA funds for the quarter**, providing short-term wage jobs to millions of villagers, including returnees (Arnimesh, 2020). In fact, demand for MGNREGA work in Bihar was about 72% higher in mid-2020 compared to the previous year (Kaur & Shubham, 2021). This surge indicates how crucial the program was in absorbing idle labor. Nonetheless, MGNREGA could not fully substitute the income migrants earned in cities – it offers at most 100 days of work at minimum wages. Many migrant workers therefore **returned to cities as soon as lockdowns eased**. By late 2020, reports noted that most able-bodied male migrants had left the villages again because local work (even with MGNREGA and farming) was insufficient for sustenance (Arnimesh, 2020). The economic impact of reverse migration thus evolved in two phases: acute rural unemployment and hardship in the short term, followed by a gradual outflow of migrants back to urban areas in search of better livelihoods once cities reopened.

In summary, the pandemic-induced reverse migration delivered a severe economic blow to Bihar's migrant households. Job losses, income shocks, and increased indebtedness pushed many families to the brink. While emergency welfare measures and agricultural work mitigated complete destitution for some, the crisis laid bare the fragility of rural livelihoods in migrant-dependent regions. The **economic hangover** of this episode – in terms of lost earnings and increased poverty – is likely to persist for years unless addressed by robust development policies.

Social Impact and Community Challenges

Beyond economics, reverse migration also had profound **social impacts** in Bihar's villages. The sudden return of a large population posed public health challenges during a pandemic and tested the social fabric of rural communities. Key social dimensions include health and sanitation, community perception of returnees, education, gender roles, and psychological well-being.

Health and Stigma: Early in the pandemic, returning migrants were often viewed with suspicion as potential carriers of the coronavirus. In many villages, fear of infection led to stigmatization of returnees. Instances of **social ostracism** were reported, where migrant families were shunned by neighbors upon arrival (Agrawal, 2020). In one case from Lakhisarai district, a migrant's family was not allowed to draw water from the common hand-pump until intervention by local activists – they were relegated to using water meant for animals (Agrawal, 2020). Villagers put up barricades and signs saying "Outsiders not allowed" at village entrances, effectively labeling returning natives as outsiders (Agrawal, 2020). Such stigma sometimes persisted even after migrants completed the mandatory 14-day quarantine. In May 2020, the **police and health officials were inundated with calls** from villagers reporting any newcomer with cough or fever (Agrawal, 2020). This atmosphere of fear created tensions and instances of vigilante behavior – migrants being reported or even turned away – reflecting a breakdown in trust.

The Bihar government had set up quarantine centers (often makeshift camps in school buildings) for returning migrants, but conditions were frequently poor. Overcrowding, lack of food, and unsanitary facilities in some quarantine centers were documented. One migrant described finding **worms in the food**

provided at a school quarantine and noted that basic amenities were lacking (Arnimesh, 2020). Many migrants, therefore, tried to avoid these centers or left them early, preferring home isolation. However, home quarantine was hard to enforce in joint families with limited space, contributing to anxiety among neighbors. While these issues were partly due to under-prepared public health infrastructure, they fueled the narrative of migrants as "spreaders," exacerbating stigma. Studies confirm that returnees in 2020 commonly faced **discrimination and were seen as vectors of disease** in their home areas (Khan & Arokkiaraj, 2021). Such social labeling not only hurt community cohesion but could also discourage sick migrants from coming forward for testing or treatment (a phenomenon observed similarly in urban settings with COVID-19 stigma).

Community Response: On the other hand, there were positive community responses too. In many cases, **villagers organized to assist** returnees by providing food during quarantine or helping them find temporary work. The role of local officials and panchayats was crucial: they maintained lists of incoming migrants, facilitated health screenings, and mediated between fearful residents and returnees. However, resources were stretched thin. By the end of May 2020, the state government claimed to have screened over 400,000 people at border transit points (Agrawal, 2020), but identifying and monitoring every returnee in thousands of villages was a daunting task. Community surveillance sometimes turned into vigilantism when government systems lagged (Agrawal, 2020). This underscores a need for better risk communication – experts pointed out that reliance on fear to enforce compliance (a strategy in the early lockdown) can backfire into social stigma (Agrawal, 2020). In Bihar's case, **lack of public awareness and clear guidelines initially led to panic at the village level**, gradually easing as more information and testing became available.

Education and Children: The reverse migration also impacted families and children. Migrant workers often move alone, leaving spouses and children in villages, but many had their family with them in the city who also returned. School closures during lockdown meant migrant children's education was disrupted. Those who returned to villages faced difficulties joining local schools or accessing online education (due to connectivity and language differences if they previously studied out of state). The long-term educational impact is still being assessed, but there is concern of increased drop-out rates among migrant children who lost months or even a year of schooling continuity.

Gender Implications: Migration in Bihar is highly gendered – the vast majority of interstate labor migrants are young men, while women often stay behind or migrate for marriage rather than work. The pandemic and reverse migration influenced gender dynamics in several ways. First, women in migrant households had to shoulder additional burdens when men returned jobless. Many households lost their primary earners, and women had to manage scarce resources and care for quarantined family members. Second, some female migrants who were working in cities (though fewer in number) also returned. Surveys indicate **female migrants were less inclined to migrate out again** compared to males; for example, **only 37% of returned female migrants expressed willingness to re-migrate, versus 68% of males** (Chakravorty et al., 2020). The reasons include women's safety concerns, increased domestic responsibilities, and possibly families pulling women out of the workforce during the crisis. This trend could entrench gender disparities in employment if women migrants do not return to cities at pre-pandemic levels.

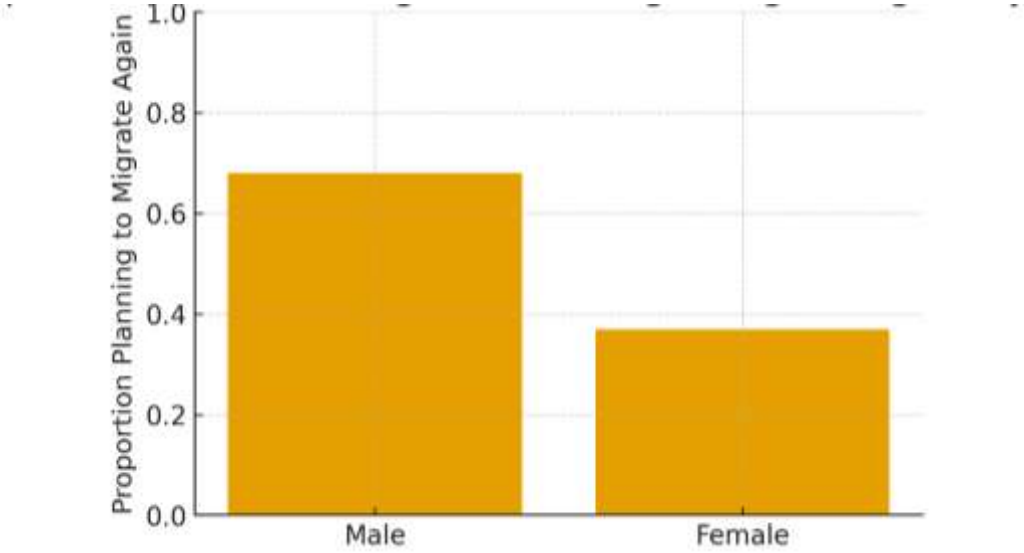

Figure 1: Proportion of returned migrants planning to migrate again, by gender (based on survey data from Chakravorty et al., 2020). Male migrant workers showed a much higher intent to return to cities for work than female migrant workers, many of whom were more likely to remain in villages or were undecided.

The psychological impact of the crisis on migrant workers and their families is another critical social aspect. Migrants endured tremendous stress during their journey home – many walked hundreds of kilometers or spent days in overcrowded trucks/trains, unsure if they would survive the ordeal (Slater & Masih, 2020; Dandekar & Ghai, 2020). Upon reaching home, the stress did not vanish: unemployment, debt, social stigma, and the threat of COVID-19 created a climate of anxiety. A survey of migrant youth noted **high levels of anxiety and low life satisfaction** among respondents compared to before the lockdown (Chakravorty et al., 2020). Mental health services were virtually absent in rural Bihar, so most migrants coped through family support or informal community networks. Unfortunately, cases of distress have been recorded – from depression to even suicides – linked to the hopelessness some felt in losing livelihoods (Sengupta & Jha, 2020).

In summary, the social fabric in many Bihari villages was strained by the influx of returning migrants but showed resilience in parts. The initial reaction of fear and stigma gradually gave way to accommodation, especially as infection fears ebbed. The crisis highlighted the **social vulnerabilities of migrant-sending communities** – inadequate healthcare, risk of discrimination, and a lack of institutional support for reintegration. It also affected vulnerable sub-groups like women and children in unique ways. Addressing these social challenges requires policy measures (discussed next) and community-level interventions, such as awareness campaigns to combat stigma and programs to support mental health and education in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Policy Response to Reverse Migration

The scale of reverse migration in 2020 constituted a humanitarian and governance challenge. Both central and state governments in India had to respond swiftly to address the immediate needs of returning migrants (food, shelter, transport) and to mitigate longer-term impacts on employment and welfare. This section evaluates the key **policy responses** deployed, with a focus on Bihar. It covers emergency relief measures, livelihood programs, and systemic policy changes prompted by the crisis.

Emergency Relief and Welfare: In late March 2020, as the lockdown commenced, the Government of India announced a relief package under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, worth ₹1.70 lakh crore (approximately US $22.6 billion) (Khan & Arokkiaraj, 2021). This package aimed to support vulnerable groups including migrants. Major components affecting migrants were:

- **Free Food Grain Distribution:** Every ration-card holding household was entitled to additional 5 kg of grain per person per month for several months, and 1 kg of pulses, under the Public Distribution System. However, a major limitation was **ration cards were location-specific**, and many migrants' families did not have cards in Bihar or had left them behind. To fix this, the "One Nation, One Ration Card" scheme (portability of ration cards across states) was accelerated, though it only rolled out nationwide by 2021 (Khan & Arokkiaraj, 2021). In the interim, many migrants indeed fell through the cracks in food support due to documentation issues (Bhagat et al., 2020).
- **Cash Transfers:** Poor women, elderly and farmers received small cash payments in their Jan Dhan bank accounts or via direct benefit schemes. While not migrant-specific, these helped some households. Additionally, **state governments announced one-time cash assistance for stranded or returning migrants.** Bihar's government, for example, provided a **₹1,000 grant to each returning migrant worker** as a form of disaster relief (Arnimesh, 2020; NIPFP, 2020). This was delivered through an online portal (the Bihar "Aapda" relief app) where migrants registered for the assistance. By some accounts, about 61% of returning migrants in Bihar received this state cash relief (Chakravorty et al., 2020). There were, however, complaints of delays and exclusions – e.g., migrants without bank accounts or proper ID struggled to get the money, and local bureaucratic hurdles (or corruption) impeded disbursement in certain areas (Arnimesh, 2020).
- **Transport Arrangements:** Initially, the abrupt lockdown left migrants stranded. After public outcry, the central government ran special "Shramik" trains in May–June 2020 to ferry migrants home free of cost (Khan & Arokkiaraj, 2021). Over 150 trains to Bihar brought hundreds of thousands of people back. The Bihar state government also arranged buses at state borders and reportedly reimbursed train/bus fares (the ₹1,000 aid was officially to cover travel expenses). Despite these efforts, many migrants could not access formal transport in time and undertook perilous journeys on foot or in overcrowded vehicles. The requirement of registration and ID for train travel proved a barrier for some, since **an estimated 94% of migrant workers did not possess any formal work identification** in one survey (Khan & Arokkiaraj, 2021 citing Jan Sahas NGO report).
- **Quarantine and Healthcare:** The government issued guidelines for quarantine (14 days institutional/home). Bihar set up thousands of quarantine centers and earmarked ₹100 crore for running them (Agrawal, 2020). However, oversight was patchy. Medical screening of returnees (temperature checks, etc.) was done at major entry points and some larger villages. Free COVID-19 testing and treatment were offered in principle. Yet the sheer volume (over a million returnees in a few weeks) overwhelmed local health systems. This policy area saw some failures – for instance, *lack of a robust migrant health database* and insufficient staffing at quarantine facilities.

Livelihood and Employment Generation: Recognizing that migrants would need jobs if they stayed in villages for long, the government launched targeted employment programs:

- The existing **MGNREGA** rural job scheme was scaled up. Bihar was urged to enroll returning migrants in public works. The central government advanced funds; as noted, Bihar utilized most of its allocation quickly. Panchayats were mobilized to create work projects (road maintenance, pond

digging, etc.) to employ people. In the first three months after lockdown, Bihar provided MGNREGA employment to a record number of households (Arnimesh, 2020). This was a critical stop-gap policy that likely averted extreme destitution. However, MGNREGA has limitations: it guarantees only 100 days of work/year and pays around ₹200 per day, much less than migrants earned in cities. Still, surveys show about **51% of returned migrants in Bihar benefited from some form of government assistance**, mainly food or MGNREGA wages, during the lockdown period (Chakravorty et al., 2020).

- In June 2020, the central government launched the **Garib Kalyan Rozgar Abhiyaan (GKRA)**, a special 125-day employment campaign for 116 high-migrant districts across 6 states (including Bihar). Bihar had 32 districts covered under this scheme (Ministry of Rural Development, 2020). The GKRA pooled funds from various ministries to create rural infrastructure projects (building roads, wells, housing, etc.) that could provide work to returning migrants. With a budget of ₹50,000 crore, it aimed to provide at least 125 days of wage employment to each migrant worker and also undertake skill training (Khan & Arokkiaraj, 2021). In Bihar, which was the launch site for this scheme, initial reports suggest thousands of assets were created and many migrant workers got short-term jobs. However, the implementation varied; by October 2020, GKRA's active period ended, and it wasn't a permanent program. Its success was modest in mitigating unemployment in the interim. The scheme did highlight the need for **skill mapping** of migrants – data was collected on the skills of about 0.6 million workers to help channel them into appropriate local jobs or entrepreneurship (Khan & Arokkiaraj, 2021). But with a constrained rural economy, the capacity to absorb skilled labor locally remains limited.
- Several states, including Bihar, explored the idea of **job portals** for migrants to connect with employers or **promoting local industries** (Sengupta & Jha, 2020). Bihar's government promised efforts to attract investment and create jobs so that workers would not have to leave the state in such large numbers. In practice, results have been slow. Some short-term initiatives, like engaging migrants in mask production units or tailoring PPE kits, were tried on a small scale. Long-term strategies (such as developing industrial parks in Bihar or enhancing vocational training) have been discussed in policy circles as a response to the reverse migration lesson – essentially, *to bring jobs to people so people don't always have to migrate for jobs*. These are ongoing and largely aspirational, but the crisis did add urgency to Bihar's discourse on local development.

Social Protection Reforms: The migrant crisis also exposed gaps in India's social security framework for informal workers. Policy responses in this arena included:

- **Creating a Migrant Workers' Database:** The central government acknowledged the lack of data on internal migrants. In late 2020, it announced the development of a National Database of Unorganised Workers (NDUW) with a portal for registering migrant workers, to facilitate portability of benefits and emergency assistance in the future (Khan & Arokkiaraj, 2021). Bihar, too, has been compiling data on the skills and home locations of its migrant workers. While still in progress, this is a policy reform that could yield better support mechanisms going forward.
- **Portability of Welfare Benefits:** As mentioned, "One Nation, One Ration Card" was a major reform accelerated by the pandemic. By 2021, Bihar joined the system allowing migrants to claim subsidized food anywhere in India. Such portability is crucial since **the lack of interstate coordination had been a key reason many migrants were denied aid** when away from home (Bhagat et al., 2020). There have also been proposals to make other benefits like healthcare and education portable for migrants' families. The crisis amplified calls to strengthen the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act (1979) – which mandates registration and certain protections for interstate workers – but historically was weakly

enforced (NIPFP, 2020; Sengupta & Jha, 2020). Bihar's experience underscored that enforcement; for example, hardly any contractors had registered their Bihari workers, so when the exodus happened, **there was no official record of who these workers were or any obligation on employers to support them**.

- **Urban Employment Scheme (proposed):** Inspired by MGNREGA, some economists and policymakers suggested creating an **urban public works program** to employ laid-off migrant workers in cities (Sengupta & Jha, 2020). While not implemented at the national level, a few states (not Bihar) experimented with this idea on a pilot basis. The principle is to provide a fallback employment guarantee in urban areas as well, which could prevent distress migration back to villages in future crises.

Evaluating these policy responses, one finds a mix of **short-term relief** and **long-term lessons**. In the short term, food distribution and cash transfers were necessary lifelines but did not fully reach all migrants. Surveys show about **31% of interstate migrants received no support from any source during the lockdown** (Chakravorty et al., 2020). The reasons often related to exclusion errors – no local ration card, not being on beneficiary lists, or simply lack of awareness. Community kitchens and NGO efforts filled some gaps by providing cooked meals to stranded migrants in transit. Bihar, for its part, coordinated with civil society to run hundreds of feeding centers for returning migrants in quarantine. But given the magnitude, government relief often fell short in the initial phase.

On the positive side, the mobilization of MGNREGA and the introduction of GKRA in Bihar demonstrated the government's ability to redirect resources toward migrant-heavy areas. MGNREGA's flexibility and nationwide presence made it arguably the most effective tool to provide immediate employment in rural Bihar. Meanwhile, GKRA, though time-limited, brought much-needed infrastructure investment to backward districts.

From a policy perspective, Bihar's migrant crisis highlighted the need for better **interstate collaboration**. Bihar had to coordinate with origin states for trains and with destination state governments for data on their workers. The crisis prompted conversations between states; e.g., some source states demanded compensation from wealthier destination states for the sudden burden of returning migrants (this did not materialize, but it's an ongoing policy debate regarding allocation of central funds).

In conclusion, policy responses to reverse migration during COVID-19 in Bihar were a combination of **relief (reactive)** and **reforms (proactive)**. While immediate measures alleviated some suffering, the pandemic also served as a wake-up call, leading to systemic changes like portable ration cards and plans for migrant databases. These measures, if effectively implemented, could improve resilience for migrant workers in the face of future shocks. However, the ultimate policy challenge remains: providing adequate local livelihood opportunities in states like Bihar. Without addressing the regional economic disparities that drive migration, any relief is temporary. The next section delves deeper into migrants' own experiences and how they navigated the situation, which in turn can inform more human-centric policy making.

Lived Experiences of Migrant Workers

Statistics alone cannot fully capture the human toll of the reverse migration crisis. The lived experiences of migrant workers – their journeys, struggles upon returning, and hopes for the future – provide crucial context for understanding the impact of the pandemic in Bihar. This section compiles narratives and

observations from migrants, as reported in various studies and media accounts, to shed light on their perspective.

The Journey Home: When the lockdown was announced with just a few hours' notice on 24 March 2020, millions of migrants across India were left stranded without work, income, or transport. **Many Bihari workers in cities like Delhi, Mumbai, and Surat decided to return to their distant villages on foot or by any transport available.** Journeys of hundreds of kilometers were undertaken in peak summer. One widely reported account described groups of migrants walking 1,200–1,400 km from Delhi/Gurgaon to reach their villages in Bihar (Slater & Masih, 2020; Arnimesh, 2020). They walked along highways, often with families and children in tow, facing hunger, dehydration, and police curfews. Some managed to use bicycles or crowded trucks. Tragically, dozens of migrants died en route – due to exhaustion, accidents (as in the Aurangabad rail track tragedy), or lack of timely medical care (Dandekar & Ghai, 2020). These harrowing journeys were seared into the collective memory as a symbol of the pandemic's human cost. **Migrants recounted sleeping on roadsides**, subsisting on biscuits or food given by good samaritans, and the uncertainty of whether they would make it home alive (Slater & Masih, 2020).

Even those who waited for government-arranged Shramik trains faced hardship. Many spent days in shelter camps or train stations with limited food. Tickets were nominally free, but corruption meant some migrants had to pay middlemen for a seat. A qualitative study by Khan & Arokkiaraj (2021) includes an interview where an internal migrant noted that those who couldn't navigate the online registration or lacked information ended up paying ₹1,500–₹2,000 to agents for arranging travel – a significant sum for someone who had just lost their income. Such anecdotes illustrate how **informational asymmetry and desperation made migrants vulnerable to exploitation** during the exodus.

Yet, amid these struggles, migrant workers often showed remarkable resilience and solidarity. Many walked in groups, helping each other along the way. Communities and gurdwaras along highways set up langars (free kitchens) to feed migrants. These acts of kindness were lifelines. Migrants frequently mention that *"people gave us food along the way"* as a saving grace (Arnimesh, 2020). The solidarity among migrants themselves – sharing the little resources they had, encouraging each other to keep going – was a powerful aspect of their lived experience.

Arrival and Reintegration: For those who made it back to Bihar, the reception was mixed as discussed earlier: some faced fear and hostility due to virus concerns, while others were welcomed. **Quarantine** was often the first experience upon arrival. Accounts differ – some migrants said they were treated relatively well in quarantine centers, getting basic meals and a place to stay safely. Others, as noted, had negative experiences (poor food, etc.) and felt they were being "jailed" after an already traumatic journey. The mental state of many returnees was fragile: relief at being home mingled with worry about the future. One migrant described reaching home only to find *"there is no work here and nothing from the sarkar (government); I had no option but to go back to Delhi"* (Arnimesh, 2020). This statement was made a few months after return, reflecting the disappointment and economic compulsion that many felt.

Struggles at Home: In village interviews, returnees often highlighted the lack of support after initial quarantine. A common refrain was *"सरकार ने कुछ नहीं दिया, ना पैसा ना रोज़गार"* ("The government gave nothing – no money, no employment") (Arnimesh, 2020). Many families fell into debt; migrants had borrowed to travel home (in one case ₹14,000 for a makeshift cart) and now had loans to repay with no income (Arnimesh, 2020). Women in migrant families expressed distress over their husbands having to leave again so soon, but also acknowledged that staying without work was not viable.

The social experience within the village varied. Some migrants felt a sense of dignity in returning – being back with family and participating in communal life (especially around planting/harvest seasons or festivals like Chhath Puja). Others felt a loss of identity and respect. In cities they had been earning and sending money home; now suddenly they were seen as burdens or "jobless" at home. A cultural observation from one study noted that some returned migrants, especially younger men, experienced a blow to their self-esteem and independence, having to rely on parental support once back in the village (Sengupta & Jha, 2020).

There were also **positive narratives**: a few migrants used the unexpected return as an opportunity. For instance, media reported on returnees who started small businesses – a group in Bihar used their savings to open a motorcycle repair shop when they realized they might not go back to the city soon. Another example is migrants bringing new skills: some who worked in cities as plumbers or electricians found demand for those skills in their home area and earned modestly by offering those services locally. These cases were not the majority, but they show that migrants are not merely victims; they are agents who try to adapt and rebuild when possible.

Future Plans and Aspirations: A critical part of migrants' lived experience is their outlook for the future. Many returning workers initially hoped to remain in their village if livelihoods could be found. However, as the economy reopened, the **pull of the cities reasserted itself**. Surveys by late 2020 showed a large share of migrants intended to migrate again. In one survey, over **55% of reverse migrants in Bihar expressed a desire to go back to their city jobs** when conditions permitted, while about 20% were undecided (Kaur & Shubham, 2021). The driving factor was straightforward: lack of steady income in the village. Figure 1 (above) highlighted the gender gap in these intentions – men in particular were eager to return to urban work, whereas more women migrants were inclined to stay behind.

By early 2021, anecdotal evidence confirmed that **bus and train stations in Bihar were again crowded** with workers heading back to metropolises like Delhi and Mumbai. Industries in those cities actively recruited experienced Bihari labor once restrictions eased. Thus, for many migrants, the reverse migration turned out to be a temporary retreat rather than a permanent resettlement. They left home as soon as they could, albeit with lingering uncertainties about health and job security.

From the lens of the migrant, what lessons did they take from this ordeal? Interviews suggest a mix of resilience and resignation. Resilience in how they coped and found ways to survive an unimaginable crisis; resignation in the sense that many felt nothing had changed fundamentally – they still had to leave their homes to earn, and in a crisis, they could rely more on their own community networks than any formal support. A telling quote from a migrant in a research interview: *"If there had been any work here (in Bihar), would we ever have gone so far? We will go again because we have no choice"* (Chakravorty et al., 2020, field notes). This encapsulates the compulsion that underlies migration and was only reinforced by the pandemic experience.

In summary, the lived experiences of reverse migrants in Bihar during COVID-19 were marked by extreme hardship, but also by courage and adaptability. Their stories reveal systemic gaps – in social security, in local development, in crisis preparedness – even as they also showcase human solidarity. For policymakers and researchers, these voices emphasize that any future solutions must be **people-centric**, taking into account the ground realities migrants face, rather than just abstract policy formulations.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns precipitated a massive reverse migration that had a profound impact on Bihar. This research has examined the phenomenon through multiple angles –

economic fallout, social challenges, policy actions, and human experiences – yielding a comprehensive picture of both the immediate and longer-term implications.

Economically, the return of millions of migrant workers to Bihar led to widespread joblessness, income loss, and added strain on already poor rural households. The evidence indicates a sharp, albeit temporary, spike in rural poverty and unemployment. Emergency employment schemes like MGNREGA and GKRA provided partial relief, but could not fully offset the loss of urban incomes. Over time, the economic push factors (lack of stable jobs locally) reasserted themselves, compelling many migrants to leave again as soon as they could. This underscores a critical lesson: **addressing regional economic disparities is crucial**. Bihar's development trajectory needs to generate adequate local employment to absorb its labor force. Otherwise, cyclical migration will continue, and any future shock may replay a similar crisis.

Socially, the reverse migration tested community resilience and highlighted gaps in social infrastructure. Initial stigma against returning migrants exposed the need for better public health communication and inclusive attitudes. Over the course of the pandemic, communities adapted – many migrants were eventually re-accepted and even integrated into local activities. The role of grassroots governance (panchayats, self-help groups) proved vital in managing quarantine, ration distribution, and MGNREGA works. Going forward, **investing in rural healthcare, sanitation, and awareness** is essential so that villages can handle health crises without panic or discrimination. The experiences of migrant families also call for strengthening social support systems – for example, counseling services or community mental health programs could help migrants deal with trauma and anxiety. Education loss for migrant children and the burden on women are issues that merit policy attention, perhaps via bridge schooling programs and women-centric livelihood schemes.

From a **policy response** perspective, the crisis catalyzed several initiatives. Some were successful in the short run (e.g., mobilizing MGNREGA), while others exposed limitations (e.g., difficulties in reaching unregistered migrants with aid). A positive outcome has been the acceleration of reforms like the One Nation One Ration Card and the creation of migrant worker databases, which, if maintained, will improve the delivery of entitlements to migrants in the future. The study also highlights that **coordination between states and the central government** must improve for managing internal migration. Migrant-sending states like Bihar alone cannot cope with such crises; a national approach is needed, perhaps institutionalizing a protocol for disaster-induced migration (Bhagat et al., 2020). Additionally, revisiting labor laws to formalize the status of interstate migrant workers (so they have some security and employer accountability) is an important policy frontier.

The **lived experiences** of migrants, as documented, serve as a poignant reminder that policies on paper do not always translate to protection on the ground. Many migrants relied on self-help and community solidarity when state support was delayed or inadequate. This suggests that empowering local institutions and civil society is as important as top-down schemes. Migrant workers' voices also reflect a desire for dignity and stable livelihoods. Ultimately, any long-term solution must create an environment where migration is a choice made for growth and opportunity, not a distress compulsion. If workers do migrate, they should not be rendered invisible or unprotected, as was largely the case before COVID-19.

In conclusion, the reverse migration during the COVID-19 pandemic was a watershed moment for Bihar and India as a whole. It laid bare the vulnerabilities of migrant workers but also brought their importance to the economy and society into sharp focus. Bihar's experience illustrates that crises disproportionately affect the marginalized – but it also shows pathways of resilience. The lessons learned call for a holistic policy approach: **boost rural development, ensure portable and inclusive social services for migrants,**

enforce labor protections, and build disaster-resilient support systems. By doing so, Bihar can transform this humanitarian crisis into an opportunity to create more robust socio-economic structures that better serve migrant workers and their communities in the future.

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