



Northeast-IAS Compilation (Open Sourced)

Reverse migration Is it an Opportunity for Economy?*

Post COVID19 lockdowns in India, thousands of daily wage labourers belonging to the informal sector have been leaving big cities in droves. They have no other alternative but to return to their villages though their future there is also bleak. Having no public means of transport, many have left on foot to remote places like Bihar from the national capital of Delhi. Some have taken rickshaws to reach their destinations. They will take a long time to reach their villages. And, their plight is beyond imagination.

Back in the villages, they may even infect some people having caught the virus in the cities. COVID19 has a 14-day incubation period. Hence the spread of the virus in the villages may take place easily. To make the situation worse, our villages have only rudimentary health infrastructure and lack proper hospitals with ventilators which are needed to fight the virus. There is less than one doctor per 1,000 population. In such a situation, it would be very difficult for rural India to fight COVID19 virus. With a high density population of 450 persons per square mile, the government has done the right thing in calling for a lockdown across the country. In cities, it would be hard to maintain hygiene and even washing hands with soap can be a problem in slums as it requires running water. Social distancing is a problem too when a room of 10 by 10 feet houses four people.

In normal times, decongesting cities would have been a good idea. A migrant labour lives in inhuman conditions in slums and shanty towns. There is also heavy pressure on essential services. They lack water, toilet facilities and living space. Indeed, there has been a trend for reverse migration over the last few years, and Kolkata and Hyderabad have, in the recent past, received less number of migrants than before. Workers have been forced to go back because of the lull in construction activities due to environmental reasons. Some have gone back because they could not live in the horrible conditions anymore. But voluntary reverse migration has been less than forced migration.

Some adventurous young men have gone from big IT cities to Tier II to start new ventures in agritech and similar startups. But the problem of finding the right co-workers has remained a perpetual challenge for entrepreneurs. Migrants who return home have few alternatives of earning cash. Their small pieces of land if they have any, cannot sustain them and daily wage labour and artisanal work is not possible in an economy which is under great stress. In fact, rural demand has been declining as a result because of the increase in joblessness. There are no light industries except in some villages and the nearest town is the only place they can find work. From small towns, they often migrate to cities in search of work. Most of the migration that has taken place in recent years has been from small towns to cities.

In Hubei district near Wuhan, China, now the epicentre or fulcrum of COVID 19, which this author visited a few years ago, in an ordinary village, each and every person was employed in small workshops and factories making cigarette lighters or socks. They told us that all the socks and lighters in the world were made there. The villagers seemed quite satisfied with their lives, having nice accommodation equipped with basic gadgets like TV, fridge and washing machine, but everything — doors, windows and furniture — were made of plastic. They had eight types of social insurances. There seemed little reason for them to migrate.

China also has controlled the flow of people from villages to cities by the Hukou system which is still there, but in a milder form. It is a family registration programme that serves as a domestic passport regulating population distribution between rural and urban population. It controls rural to urban migration, but has

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been relaxed because there has been a shortage of labour in big factories in cities and migration has been encouraged.

We can also have light industries in villages, especially in food processing. India is the second biggest producer of fruits and vegetables. Most of it goes waste. Some startups are trying to develop cold chain logistics, but more are needed except that it is difficult to attract new talent. There has to be a proper startup ecosystem. Most importantly, the infrastructure in villages is creaky and insufficient.

Such conditions leave the rural economy weak and investors both domestic and foreign are unhappy going there to establish factories. Regular supply of power, water, proper roads and connectivity are most needed. Even the remote parts should have pucca roads. Otherwise, there will always be poverty in the deep interiors and people would migrate in large numbers.

In this context, one is reminded of Mahatma Gandhi's advice to first develop the rural economy and make it self-sufficient. But at that time, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and P.C. Mahalanobis, the famed economist, went for the Soviet model of development, laying emphasis on developing heavy industries and rapid industrialisation. The neglect of the rural economy has been a long-drawn process.

To give gainful employment to those migrants who do not want to go back to the cities as it happened during demonetisation is a big challenge for the government. Otherwise, they will return to cities to live in dismal conditions to earn a livelihood. The villages have to be developed rapidly because otherwise the unemployed will opt out of the labour force as happened in 2016, making the labour force participation rate go down further.

During this time of crisis, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's relief package of Rs 1.7 trillion can go a long way, provided that the beneficiaries do not undergo many hassles in accessing the money as many don't have bank accounts. A lot of paper work will steal all the gains and people will remain in distress for long. This lockdown crisis has been an unforeseen calamity, but it can happen again. It is better to decongest cities and let the migrant labour have the option of remaining in the villages or move to the cities.