

# PANDEMIC, PRECARIETY AND REVERSE MIGRATION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF INFORMAL WORKERS RETURNING TO RURAL EASTERN UTTAR PRADESH

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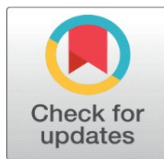
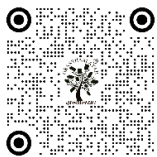
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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic and the nationwide lockdown in India triggered an unprecedented reverse migration of informal workers from urban centers to rural regions, exposing long-standing structural vulnerabilities within the country's labor regime. This paper examines the lived experiences of semi-skilled and unskilled informal workers who returned to rural Eastern Uttar Pradesh during the later phase of the pandemic. Using a qualitative research design, primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with twenty-five returning migrant workers at transit locations in Gorakhpur, a major entry point for migrants in the Purvanchal region.

The findings reveal acute livelihood insecurity marked by wage denial, employment termination, food scarcity, and hazardous mobility under a lack of ample safeguards and conditions of institutional absence. The study highlights a stark safety-hunger dichotomy in which survival imperatives outweighed health risks, compelling workers to undertake dangerous journeys home. At the same time, rural households and village-based social networks emerged as critical, though fragile, absorptive safety nets in the absence of effective state support.

This qualitative study argues that the pandemic did not merely constitute a temporary disruption but amplified the long-standing structural precarity of India's informal workforce, particularly in migrant-sending regions (International Labor Organization [ILO], 2020a; Pentini and Lorenz, 2020). It not just presents the lived reality but also provides some grassroots policy suggestions emphasizing the need for region-specific rural employment strategies, strengthened social protection mechanisms, and institutional preparedness to address future mobility shocks.

**Keywords:** Informal Labor, Precarity, Reverse Migration, Rural Absorption, Rural Development, COVID-19, Eastern Uttar Pradesh

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic constituted not only a global public health emergency but also a profound socio-economic disruption that destabilized labor markets across the world. In India, the sudden imposition of a nationwide lockdown

in March 2020 exposed the deep structural vulnerabilities of an economy heavily dependent on informal labor. Among the most visible and distressing consequences was the mass reverse migration of millions of informal workers from urban and industrial centers back to their rural places of origin. This movement, unprecedented in scale in post-independence India, foregrounded the fragile conditions under which informal workers sustain their livelihoods and the limited institutional safeguards available to them in times of crisis. (Pandey, 2020; ILO, 2020a)

India's informal sector employs over ninety per cent of the workforce, with informal and migrant labor forming the backbone of urban service delivery, construction, manufacturing, and transport sectors (ILO, 2020b; CMIE, 2020), with a significant proportion comprising migrant labor originating from economically backward and agrarian regions such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, and parts of Madhya Pradesh. These regions have historically functioned as labor-sending areas due to limited industrialization, agrarian distress, and uneven regional development. Migration to metropolitan and industrial hubs has long served as a survival strategy rather than a pathway to social mobility for large sections of the rural poor. The pandemic disrupted this fragile arrangement by simultaneously collapsing urban employment opportunities and immobilizing migrant workers through abrupt restrictions on mobility.

While early policy discourse largely focused on containment of the virus and macroeconomic recovery, the everyday experiences of informal workers during the return phase of migration received comparatively limited analytical attention. Primarily due to field limitations such as lockdown and the airborne nature of the virus spread. Doing field visits and taking interviews becomes a challenging task due to the heightened vulnerability of the respondents and higher susceptibility of the researcher. The return journey of migrant laborers itself—often marked by hunger, uncertainty, physical exhaustion, and exposure to health risks—became a site where multiple dimensions of precarity converged. Wage denial by the employer, lack of access to food and shelter, absence of reliable transport, and weak communication from authorities compounded the vulnerability of workers who were already excluded from formal social protection systems. (Network Ideas, 2020; Pandey, 2020)

Eastern Uttar Pradesh, particularly the Purvanchal region, emerged as one of the principal destinations of this reverse migration. Cities such as Gorakhpur functioned as critical transit and entry points for returning workers due to their rail and road connectivity. It acts as a transit node to reach the hinterlands of Eastern Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Nepal. The sudden influx of migrants placed additional pressure on rural households, local labor markets, and public health infrastructure, raising important questions about the capacity of rural regions to absorb displaced labor during systemic shocks. At the same time, villages and family networks provided immediate, but limited, forms of support that substituted for lack of existing institutional capacities.

This study intervenes in ongoing debates on migration and rural development by offering a micro-level qualitative analysis of the return experiences of informal workers during the COVID-19 lockdown. Rather than treating reverse migration as a temporary logistical problem, the study conceptualizes it as a manifestation of deeper structural challenges embedded within India's informal labor regime and rural-urban development model. By examining the in-depth narratives of returning workers in Eastern Uttar Pradesh, this research aims to illuminate how precarity is produced, experienced, and negotiated at the intersection of labor markets, state policy, and rural social structures.

Specifically, the study addresses the following questions: How did the sudden social disruptions, such as the COVID-19 lockdown, affect the livelihood security and mobility of informal migrant workers? What institutional and non-institutional support mechanisms shaped their return journeys? And how did rural households and village communities function as sites of absorption and survival in the absence of effective state intervention? By engaging with these questions, this research underscores the need to rethink and recalibrate rural development and labor policy frameworks in ways that recognize mobility, vulnerability, and crisis preparedness as primary concerns.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1. RESEARCH DESIGN**

This study draws on a qualitative, exploratory research design to examine the lived experiences of informal migrant workers who returned to rural Eastern Uttar Pradesh during the COVID-19 lockdown. A qualitative approach was considered most appropriate given the unprecedented nature of the pandemic-induced reverse migration and the need to capture the lived realities, subjective experiences, nuanced meanings, and coping strategies that are often obscured in large-scale quantitative analyses. Rather than seeking statistical generalization, the study aims to provide analytical

insights into the processes through which precarity was experienced and negotiated by informal workers during the return phase of migration. (Pentini and Lorenz, 2020)

## **2.2. STUDY AREA**

The fieldwork was conducted in Gorakhpur, a major urban center in the Purvanchal region (Eastern Uttar Pradesh). Gorakhpur serves as an important railway and road junction and functioned as a key transit and entry point for returning migrant workers during the lockdown period. The region is historically characterized by high rates of out-migration due to limited industrial development, agrarian stagnation and uncertainties, and constrained local employment opportunities. The sudden influx of returning migrants during the pandemic made Gorakhpur a strategically significant site for capturing return migration experiences at the moment of transit.

## **2.3. SAMPLING AND PARTICIPANTS**

The study is based on in-depth interviews with twenty-five informal migrant workers, comprising both semi-skilled and unskilled laborers. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, focusing on workers who had recently returned or were in the process of returning to their rural homes following the cessation of employment in urban or industrial centers. The sample included workers previously engaged in construction, textile manufacturing, transport services, and other forms of informal employment.

While the sample size is limited under conditions of restricted mobility and public health constraints. It consists of detailed and rich experiences necessary for exploratory qualitative study. The intention here was not to claim representativeness but to capture diverse occupational backgrounds and return experiences that reflect broader patterns of informal labor precarity during the pandemic.

## **2.4. DATA COLLECTION**

Primary data were collected during the later phase of the COVID-19 lockdown through semi-structured interviews conducted at transit locations near the Gorakhpur Railway Station and adjoining bus stands. These sites were chosen because access to railway platforms was restricted, and returning migrants were temporarily concentrated in these areas while arranging onward travel to their villages.

Interviews were conducted in a short conversational format due to time constraints, physical exhaustion of respondents, and the need to maintain physical distancing. The interview schedule included questions related to pre-pandemic employment conditions, wage payment and job loss, access to food and shelter, experiences during the return journey, awareness of health risks, and perceptions of support from the state, employers, and non-governmental organizations. Open-ended questions allowed respondents to narrate their experiences in their own words, enabling the emergence of unanticipated themes.

## **2.5. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Given the vulnerability of the respondents, ethical sensitivity was central to the research process. Participation was entirely voluntary, and verbal informed consent was obtained prior to each interview. No personal identifiers such as names or exact village locations are disclosed in this paper to protect anonymity. Interviews were conducted in a non-intrusive manner, and no audio or visual recordings were made to minimize discomfort and risk. The study was carried out with due regard to existing public health guidelines prevailing at the time of fieldwork.

## **2.6. DATA ANALYSIS**

The interview data were analyzed using a thematic analytical approach commonly employed in qualitative studies of labor precarity and crisis-induced vulnerability (Pentini and Lorenz, 2020). The field notes were reviewed repeatedly to identify recurring patterns and shared experiences across narratives. Key themes such as wage denial, food insecurity, hazardous mobility, institutional absence, reliance on informal support networks, and the safety–hunger trade-off were

inductively generated from the data. These themes were then interpreted in relation to broader debates on informal labor, migration, and rural development.

In order to provide a broader thematic analysis instead of treating individual narratives as isolated cases, the analysis situates them within larger structural conditions. It enables shaping informal employment patterns and rural-urban labor circulation in times of social disruption in India. This approach enables the study to move beyond descriptive accounts and offer deep analytical insights into how crises amplify existing inequalities. The pattern observed amplifies the earlier research while providing new insights into conditions of unprecedented migration.

## **2.7. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

This study has certain limitations that must be acknowledged. The small sample size and focus on a single transit location limit the scope for broader generalization. The absence of a sufficient number of women respondents reflects gendered constraints on public participation rather than an analytical oversight, and it itself points to important dimensions of gendered invisibility in migrant labor experiences. Additionally, the rapidly evolving nature of the pandemic meant that the findings capture a specific moment during the later lockdown phase rather than complete pandemic picture. These should be considered as an essential standpoint rather than long-term research.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable micro-level insights into the return experiences of informal workers. This is immensely essential to understanding the precariousness of informal labor and helps in calibrating the rural development strategies and shaping long-term outcomes. This research will overall contribute to understanding of pandemic-induced migration and its rural implications.

## **3. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **3.1. INFORMAL LABOR, PRECARIETY, AND STRUCTURAL VULNERABILITY**

A substantial body of scholarship has documented the centrality of informal labor to the economies of developing countries, particularly in South Asia. In India, informal employment constitutes the dominant mode of labor absorption, characterized by the absence of written contracts, social security, job stability, and legal protection. Scholars have consistently highlighted how informality produces a condition of structural precarity, wherein workers remain perpetually exposed to income volatility, employment insecurity, and heightened vulnerability to external shocks. This vulnerability is not episodic but embedded within broader political-economic arrangements that prioritize labor flexibility and cost minimization. (ILO, 2020b; Pentini and Lorenz, 2020)

From a rural development perspective, informal labor markets are deeply intertwined with uneven regional development. Migration from rural to urban areas has historically functioned as a coping strategy for agrarian distress and surplus labor in regions marked by low industrialization and limited non-farm employment opportunities. Rather than facilitating upward mobility, such migration often reproduces cycles of insecurity, as workers enter urban labor markets under highly exploitative conditions. Existing studies emphasize that informal workers' dependence on daily wages leaves them particularly exposed during periods of economic disruption, when employment contracts are easily terminated without compensation.

### **3.2. MIGRATION, RURAL-URBAN LINKAGES, AND DEVELOPMENTAL IMBALANCES**

Migration scholarship in India has long emphasized the structural links between rural underdevelopment and urban labor demand. Regions such as Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar (Poornima, 2020) have been identified as persistent labor-sending areas, shaped by historical neglect, agrarian stagnation, and limited state investment in rural employment generation. Seasonal and circular migration patterns have allowed rural households to diversify income sources while maintaining social ties to villages, reinforcing a dual dependence on rural subsistence and urban wage labor.

However, much of the existing literature conceptualizes migration as a one-way movement driven by economic opportunity, with limited attention to the return phase of migration. Return migration has often been examined in the context of life-cycle transitions or retirement, rather than as a sudden and involuntary process triggered by crisis. This analytical gap became particularly visible during the COVID-19 lockdown, when the collapse of urban livelihoods and restrictions on mobility forced millions of workers to return to rural areas simultaneously. The scale and speed of this

movement challenged prevailing assumptions about the absorptive capacity (Poornima, 2020) of rural economies and the resilience of village-level support systems.

### **3.3. COVID-19, REVERSE MIGRATION, AND INSTITUTIONAL ABSENCE**

The COVID-19 pandemic generated a rapidly expanding body of literature examining its economic and social impacts, with several studies focusing on labor market disruptions and migrant vulnerability. Early analyses documented widespread job losses among informal workers (CMIE, 2020; ILO, 2020a), wage denial, food insecurity, and the suspension of transport services that left migrants stranded in urban centers. Reports by international organizations and independent research groups highlighted the disproportionate burden borne by informal workers, many of whom lacked access to social protection schemes and emergency relief measures.

Within this literature, the phenomenon of reverse migration emerged as a defining feature of India's pandemic experience. Scholars have noted that the return journeys were marked by extreme hardship, including long-distance travel on foot, exposure to health risks, and encounters with administrative barriers at state borders. However, much of the existing work relies on macro-level data, media reports, or policy briefs, offering limited insight into how workers themselves interpreted and navigated these conditions. There remains a relative paucity of micro-level qualitative studies that capture the subjective experiences of return, particularly at transit points and in migrant-sending regions.

### **3.4. RURAL ABSORPTION, INFORMAL SAFETY NETS, AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION**

From a rural development standpoint, the return of migrant workers raised critical questions about the capacity of rural households and communities to absorb displaced labor. Several studies suggest that villages functioned as residual safety nets (Network Ideas, 2020), providing food, shelter, and social support in the absence of effective state intervention. Family networks, shared agricultural labor, and informal credit arrangements played a crucial role in mitigating immediate distress. At the same time, scholars caution that these mechanisms are fragile and unevenly distributed, often reinforcing existing social hierarchies related to caste, land ownership, and gender.

The literature also points to the gendered dimensions of migration and return, noting that women's labor and care work remain largely invisible in both policy responses and empirical research. While women often accompany male migrants or sustain rural households during periods of migration, their experiences during return migration are rarely documented due to social norms that restrict public participation and voice.

### **3.5. GAPS AND CONTRIBUTION OF THE PRESENT STUDY**

Despite the growing volume of research on COVID-19 and migration, significant gaps remain. First, there is limited qualitative evidence from migrant-sending regions that captures return migration as it unfolds at transit points. Second, existing studies often treat reverse migration as a temporary humanitarian crisis rather than situating it within longer-term processes of informalization and rural underdevelopment. Third, the role of rural regions as both sites of refuge and renewed precarity remains under-theorized in the literature.

The present study seeks to address these gaps by offering a micro-level qualitative analysis of informal workers returning to rural Eastern Uttar Pradesh during the COVID-19 lockdown. By foregrounding workers' narratives, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how precarity is experienced and negotiated across rural-urban spaces and how rural development frameworks must account for mobility, crisis response, and labor vulnerability as central concerns.

## **4. PRIMARY DATA AND ANALYSIS**

This section presents and analyzes qualitative data generated from interviews with twenty-five informal migrant workers returning to rural Eastern Uttar Pradesh during the COVID-19 lockdown. Instead of treating the interviews as isolated case studies, this analysis organizes these rich narratives into thematic analytical vignettes that illuminate the shared patterns of precarity, mobility constraints, and coping strategies. The themes presented below emerged inductively from the interview data and are situated within broader debates on informal labor, rural migration, and rural development.

#### **4.1. SUDDEN LIVELIHOOD DISRUPTION AND WAGE DENIAL**

A dominant theme across all interviews was the abrupt termination of employment following the imposition of the lockdown. Respondents reported an immediate cessation of work without prior notice, no to inadequate compensation, or any assurance of future employment. Workers employed on construction sites, in textile units, and in transport services experienced wage denial for work already completed, reflecting the absence of enforceable contracts and legal safeguards in informal employment arrangements.

One construction worker described how payments stopped overnight once building activities were halted, leaving workers without income or food supplies. Similarly, a textile worker employed in an industrial unit reported that despite long-term engagement in the sector, wages were withheld under the justification of “no work, no pay.” These narratives reveal how informality enables employers to externalize crisis-related risks onto workers, intensifying livelihood insecurity during periods of economic disruption. (ILO, 2020b)

#### **4.2. FOOD INSECURITY AND THE EXHAUSTION OF SAVINGS**

The loss of employment was closely followed by acute food insecurity. Respondents consistently indicated that their limited savings were exhausted within a short period, often less than two weeks. In the absence of regular income, workers relied on collective cooking arrangements, sporadic assistance from non-governmental organizations, or informal borrowing to meet basic subsistence needs. Misinformation of price rises, food hoarding, black marketing of essentials contributed to sudden price rise.

For several respondents, the depletion of savings acted as the immediate trigger for return migration. As most of the laborers required to buy groceries and food daily. The inability to secure food in urban settings—rather than fear of the virus itself—emerged as a decisive factor shaping mobility decisions. This highlights the precarious balance under which informal workers operate, where survival is contingent on uninterrupted daily earnings and where urban spaces quickly become untenable in times of crisis.

#### **4.3. HAZARDOUS MOBILITY AND THE SAFETY–HUNGER TRADE-OFF**

The return journeys undertaken by migrant workers were marked by significant physical risk and uncertainty. Respondents recounted travelling long distances under unsafe conditions, including overcrowded transport, open trailers, and prolonged exposure to heat, with little access to food, water, or medical assistance. Despite awareness of health risks associated with COVID-19, respondents prioritized reaching their villages over concerns for personal safety.

This pattern reflects a stark safety–hunger dichotomy, wherein the threat of starvation outweighed the perceived danger of infection. One respondent, travelling with his family on an open vehicle for multiple days, articulated a sense of fatalistic resignation, underscoring the absence of viable alternatives. Such accounts illustrate how constrained choice, rather than irrational behavior, shaped mobility decisions during the pandemic. (Pandey, 2020)

#### **4.4. INSTITUTIONAL INADEQUATENESS AND FRAGMENTED SUPPORT**

Across interviews, respondents expressed disappointment and confusion regarding institutional support during the crisis. Government relief measures were either inaccessible or inadequately communicated, particularly at the initial stages of the lockdown. Respondents reported limited access to food distribution, healthcare guidance, or transport facilitation, especially prior to the introduction of special migrant trains. Lack of digital literacy also played a limiting factor in accessing timely information. Most of the respondents relied on word of mouth from fellow workers.

In contrast, informal assistance from civil society organizations, public-spirited persons, non-government organizations, and local volunteers acted as a safety valve for the distressed migrants. They have played a critical role in sustaining workers during periods of acute distress. The reliance on non-state actors underscores the fragmented nature of crisis response and the limited reach of formal welfare mechanisms among informal workers. This institutional absence further reinforced migrants’ decision to return to rural areas where familial support was perceived as more reliable. (Network Ideas, 2020; ILO, 2020a)

#### **4.5. RURAL HOUSEHOLDS AS SITES OF ABSORPTION AND SURVIVAL**

Despite uncertainty about employment prospects in rural areas, respondents consistently viewed their villages as safer and more dependable spaces for survival. Rural households and kinship networks provided immediate access to food, shelter, and emotional support, even in the absence of stable income. For some respondents, seasonal agricultural activities offered temporary employment opportunities, along with MGNREGA jobs, reinforcing the role of rural economies as fallback systems during urban labor market collapse.

However, these absorptive mechanisms were described as fragile and conditional, dependent on family resources, land access, and social relations. While villages mitigated immediate distress, they did not eliminate precarity, raising questions about the long-term sustainability of rural safety nets in the face of large-scale return migration.

#### **4.6. GENDERED SILENCE AND INVISIBLE LABOR**

Although women accompanied male migrants during return journeys, their perspectives were notably inadequate from direct interviews. Respondents indicated that women were reluctant to speak in public settings, reflecting deeply embedded gender norms that restrict visibility and voice. Even where they were answering, the male members kept on adding and interrupting. These do hamper the free flow of women's experiences. Often their responses shadowed the responses of their husband or male family members. This challenge of capturing unfiltered women's experience points to the gendered dimensions of migration and crisis, where women on one hand experience similar hardship, but they do lack agency in expressing their lived experiences. This adversely impacts the research and raises the issue of representativeness in policy discourse.

The inadequate women's narratives do not indicate a lack of impact but rather highlight structural and cultural constraints that shape whose experiences are documented and acknowledged. This finding underscores the need for more inclusive research approaches that address gendered invisibilities within informal labor migration.

To sum up, these findings reveal that sudden social disruptive events such as COVID-19 functioned as a catalyst that exposed and intensified existing vulnerabilities within India's informal labor sector. Reverse migration was not merely a response to a health emergency but a manifestation of structural precarity, uneven rural-urban development, lack of policy awareness and institutional safeguard mechanisms. While rural households absorbed returning workers in the short term, the sustainability of these informal safety nets remains uncertain, particularly in regions with limited employment opportunities and public infrastructure.

### **5. POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

The findings of this study highlight critical gaps in India's labor and rural development policy framework that were exposed and intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. The reverse migration of informal workers should not be viewed as a reactionary crisis in light of disruptive events. But as a structural challenge rooted in the informal sector, the precariat working class, uneven regional development, and limited institutional preparedness. Based on the empirical insights from Eastern Uttar Pradesh, the following policy implications are proposed.

#### **5.1. STRENGTHENING RURAL EMPLOYMENT AS A SHOCK-ABSORPTION MECHANISM**

The return of migrant workers underscores the need to strengthen rural employment systems to function as effective buffers during economic shocks. Programs such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) require enhanced flexibility in times of crisis, including rapid expansion of workdays, timely wage payments, and inclusion of semi-skilled tasks relevant to returning migrants. Region-specific planning is particularly crucial for migrant-sending areas like Eastern Uttar Pradesh, where sudden labor inflows place pressure on already limited rural employment opportunities. (CMIE, 2020)

Beyond public works, rural non-farm employment should be systematically promoted through small-scale manufacturing, agro-processing, and local service enterprises. Schemes like Standup India and Drone Didi, which were launched later, could be institutionalized for a longer period. Strengthening these sectors can reduce overdependence on urban labor markets and improve the resilience of rural livelihoods.

## **5.2. INSTITUTIONALIZING TRANSIT-TIME PROTECTION FOR MIGRANT WORKERS**

The hazardous conditions experienced during return journeys point to the absence of institutional mechanisms to protect migrants in transit. Reactionary approach of Shramik Special trains should be minimized. Instead, a permanent arrangement of contingency transit should be kept in place. Future disaster response frameworks must include explicit provisions for migrant mobility, such as coordinated interstate transport arrangements, regulated pricing by adding a cap on maximum fare, access to food and water during travel through IRCTC facilities, and basic health screening facilities at every major checkpoint. Clear communication channels between central, state, and local authorities are essential to prevent confusion and misinformation that exacerbate migrant vulnerability. Use of citizen charters in local languages and announcements of government facilities with the help of loudspeakers and on-the-ground municipal staff need to be done.

Establishing migrant support desks at major transit hubs and railway junctions in labor-sending regions can help facilitate access to information, grievance redressal, and emergency assistance during crises.

## **5.3. ENFORCING WAGE PROTECTION AND EMPLOYER ACCOUNTABILITY**

The widespread denial of wages reported by respondents highlights the need for stronger enforcement of labor protections in the informal sector. Crisis-response policies must prioritize mechanisms that ensure payment of due wages and prevent arbitrary termination of employment. Temporary wage protection funds or emergency employer contributions during declared disasters could help distribute risk more equitably between labor and capital. There should also be a requirement of ample cash supplies in ATMs. Many of the employers were not able to give the wages due to a lack of currency in ATMs. Establishing provisions for engaging CSC centers and bank mitras at the onset of crisis will ensure wage protection.

In the long term, simplifying labor registration processes and incentivizing formalization, without increasing compliance burdens on workers, can enhance accountability and access to social protection. Expansion of EPFO in emerging sectors needs to be explored.

## **5.4. EXPANDING SOCIAL PROTECTION COVERAGE IN MIGRANT-SENDING REGIONS**

The pandemic revealed significant gaps in the coverage and portability of social protection schemes. Migrant workers often fall through the cracks of location-based welfare systems, limiting access to food rations, healthcare, and income support. Policies should focus on improving portability of benefits across states and ensuring that migrant workers can access benefits irrespective of place of work or residence.

Strengthening nationwide portable public distribution systems, health insurance coverage, and cash transfer mechanisms in migrant-sending regions can reduce the compulsion for distress migration and provide a safety net during periods of labor market disruption. (ILO, 2020a)

## **5.5. REINFORCING PRIMARY HEALTHCARE INFRASTRUCTURE IN RURAL AREAS**

The rapid return of returning migrant laborers had overburdened the existing infrastructure. Many PHCs lack resident doctors and supporting staff. Medical equipment and basic medical kits should be procured and locally outsourced through a decentralized plan. Lack of purchasing power of the precariat migrant forces them to over-rely on public healthcare facilities. It highlights the importance of strengthening primary healthcare infrastructure in rural regions.

Investment in Primary Health Centers (PHCs), including staffing, equipment, and medicine availability, is essential to manage both routine healthcare needs and emergency situations. Support from retired doctors and medical staff, contractual recruitment and empanelment, and community volunteer support need to be previsualized. Integrating migrant health needs into rural health planning can improve early detection, treatment, and crisis response.

## 5.6. RECOGNIZING GENDERED DIMENSIONS OF MIGRATION AND CRISIS

The gendered silence observed during data collection reflects broader structural invisibilities faced by women in migrant households. Policy responses must explicitly recognize women's roles in sustaining households during migration and return. Female and adult female literacy, gender-sensitive outreach, targeted relief measures, and inclusion of women's perspectives in planning and implementation processes are necessary to address the differentiated impacts of crises on men and women.

A large part of relief measures should be framed by keeping the concerns of working-class women in mind. Special provisions and direct cash transfers in women's accounts through DBT should be explored. Most of the female returning migrants also have been involved in childcare along with work. Specific incentives related to child health and supplies need to be distributed through migrant counters.

To sum up, these policy implications underscore the need to reposition migration and the informal labor force at the center of rural development planning. Rural regions should not be treated merely as residual spaces that absorb labor during crises but as dynamic sites requiring sustained investment, institutional capacity-building, and policy coordination. Incorporating mobility and vulnerability into rural development frameworks is essential for enhancing resilience in the face of future disruptions and shocks.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The pandemic and the nationwide lockdown precipitated a moment of rupture in India's labor landscape, making visible the structural vulnerabilities that have long characterized the informal labor force and migration. This study examined the return experiences of informal migrant workers to rural Eastern Uttar Pradesh, foregrounding how precarity was produced and intensified at the intersection of labor markets, mobility restrictions, and institutional absence. By focusing on the return phase of migration, the paper shifts attention from migration as opportunity to migration as survival, disruption, and constrained choice. (Pentini and Lorenz, 2020)

These findings demonstrate that reverse migration was not driven primarily by fear of infection but by the sudden collapse of livelihoods, wage denial, and food insecurity in urban destinations. Informal workers, operating without contractual protections or savings buffers, were compelled to undertake hazardous journeys under conditions where hunger outweighed concerns for personal safety. The safety-hunger trade-off that emerged from the narratives underscores the limits of individual agency in contexts of structural exclusion, where workers' choices are shaped by necessity rather than preference.

At the same time, the study highlights the enduring, though fragile, role of rural households and village networks as sites of absorption and survival. Family-based support systems, access to shared food resources, and limited agricultural employment enabled returning migrants to withstand immediate distress in the absence of effective state intervention. However, these informal safety nets cannot be assumed to provide sustainable solutions, particularly in regions already marked by agrarian stress, limited non-farm employment, and weak public infrastructure. The return of large numbers of migrants thus exposes the uneven capacity of rural regions to absorb labor during systemic shocks.

From a rural development perspective, the pandemic revealed critical shortcomings in policy frameworks that treat migration and informal labor as peripheral concerns. The experiences documented in this study suggest that crisis response mechanisms must move beyond ad hoc relief measures and incorporate migrant vulnerability, labor mobility, and rural absorptive capacity into long-term planning. Strengthening rural employment systems, ensuring portability of social protection, safeguarding wages, and reinforcing primary healthcare infrastructure are not merely welfare interventions but essential components of resilient rural development.

The study also points to important silences within migration research and policy, particularly regarding gendered experiences of crisis and return. The limited visibility of women's voices in public spaces reflects deeper social constraints that shape whose suffering is acknowledged and whose remains are obscured. Addressing these silences requires more inclusive research approaches and gender-sensitive policy design.

While the study is limited in scope and scale, its micro-level insights offer valuable perspectives on how informal workers navigate crises in the absence of institutional support. By situating reverse migration within broader processes of informalization and uneven development, the paper contributes to rethinking rural development not as a static

condition but as a dynamic field shaped by mobility, vulnerability, and recurring shocks. Recognizing and addressing these dynamics is essential if future crises are to be met with preparedness rather than precarity, particularly in regions that continue to serve as labor reserves for urban economies (Poornima, 2020).

## **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

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None.

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