

## Understanding Reverse Migration in India: Implications and Emerging Challenges in Odisha.

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### ABSTRACT

Reverse migration impacts the demographic, socio-cultural and political structure of the society as migration in India is not unidirectional. There is a desire of return migration among the first generation. During the lockdown there was a trend of urban-to-rural migrants returning home, facing challenges including the gendered characteristics of return migrants having a different implications on the society including power dynamics, obstructing traditional roles, social insecurity and stigmatization thereby altering household gender dynamics and constraining women's empowerment. The lack of prevalence of proper socio-legal protection measures adds to their vulnerability where Odisha is not an exception. In Odisha, networks (kinship, caste, community ties) may constrain or facilitate reverse migration. Giving it a sociological dimension, it can cover segmented assimilation of gendered perspective on capability framework of women and impact of enhanced social capital affecting reverse migration. There are few implications of the return migrants on the local space in Odisha for instance, the cultural adjustment of the returnees on one side to the challenges of the local migrants to accept the returnees and expecting them to merge with the local socio-cultural demands. The present study in this context, utilizes descriptive & explanatory research designs, with a sample size of 100 out of which 50 were migrant laborers belonging to the unorganized sectors whereas 50 were engaged in jobs & services in the cities belonging to the organized sectors and conducted in Bargarh district which lies in the Western border of Odisha. The study is conducted on a purposive sample of migrants who

returned during the national lockdown to their home state of Odisha. The focus is on the push & pull factors responsible for reverse migration in western Odisha in Bargarh district and also to study the changed lifestyle of the reverse migrants. Few findings of the study show the reasons of return migration is mostly found to be harassment at work place for the respondents followed by unable to cope with urban lifestyle and family concerns and only 4 out of the respondents have been benefited by several govt. schemes in the migrated place compared to others. Women returnees are able to cope up with the society after their reverse migration whereas men are facing difficulties to cope up with the social life. The study highlights the employment avenues, education,

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health facilities, utilization governmental schemes and the challenges of the return migrants.

**Keywords :** Return migration, push and pull factor, social capital, women migrants.

## **INTRODUCTION :**

The socio-cultural vulnerability of reverse migration has often been neglected in India. Due to unemployment, poor living conditions, and health reasons, people often return to their place of origin, a process known as reverse migration. It became a visible phenomenon during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rural-to-urban migration is an important component of the urbanisation process, helping to explain people's movement within a particular area in response to changes in economic, political, and cultural factors (Singh, 1998). Income remittances contribute to absolute income (Stark and Taylor, 1991), providing an optimistic livelihood strategy (Rajan & Zachariah, 2022), and also reflect a desire for occupational status and social distance (Fan & Stark, 2011). The Research and Information System for Developing Countries reports that approximately 65 million interstate migrant workers are in India. Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha are the major origin states, whereas Delhi, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu are the most important destination states preferred by migrant workers (Kamal, 2018). Job loss, fear of the coronavirus spreading, and lack of access to basic services were important drivers of reverse migration across the country (Mineketan Behera, 2020). The factors that largely contribute to reverse internal migration are regional discrimination, marriage, large family size, death of parents, the need to look after elderly parents, expensive education, recession, higher cost of living, cultural conflict and social rejection at times (in the new places), among others (Mohapatra and Jha, 2019). This COVID-19-triggered reverse migration which is the second-largest mass migration where there was a displacement of 14 million people (Inamdar & Thusoo, 2020).

The legal framework for migrants is inadequate. Internal migration causes stress for those moving from villages to cities, as they lose familiarity, language (including dialects), attitudes, values, social structures, and support networks, leading to cultural bereavement. This often results in conflicts with the multicultural environment in cities (Bhugra et al, 2014) and exposes regional discrimination at local elections, where politicians

tend to favour "locals" over outsiders (Bhavnani & Lacina, 2019). Increasing intolerance, economic disparities between countries, and climate change threats have worsened the situation. Returning migrant laborers have faced caste-based discrimination at quarantine centers (Asma Khan & H. Arokkiaraj, 2021), with low-income migrant workers suffering the most in this difficult context (Pandey, 2021).

Pant and Yadav (2025) found that the main reasons for reverse migration were government-implemented lockdowns, large job losses, shortages of food and health supplies, housing problems, fear of COVID-19 infection, and sudden homesickness generated by COVID-19. There were also challenges for government institutions, NGOs, and social groups in the state to facilitate efficient health services, housing, and food, and to create livelihood opportunities in villages that have experienced significant reverse migration.

A study conducted by Allard et al. (2022) shows that women fare worse, driven by both lower rates of remigration and lower rates of labour market re-entry, both within and outside home villages. Some women leave the labour force entirely, but most unemployed women report having sought or being available for work. In short, pandemic-induced labour market displacement has far-reaching, long-term consequences for migrant workers, especially women. Moreover, Filiz Kunuroglu (2016) again describes that the attitudes of majority members upon return have been noted as an important factor in the re-adaptation period leading remigrants to be able to 'feel at home' or 'not feeling belonged to the home country' after return and the differences in urban and rural cost of life lead the poor in urban areas to be financially burdened. The lower cost of living in rural areas is a motivating factor, as it encourages individuals to seek a better quality of life, such as better housing or more children (Kanai, 2016). Some returns migrations are even forced migration. On the contrary, Chakraborty and Mandal (2017) suggest that return migrants bring back accumulated human, social and financial capital, which can enable them to start their own businesses upon return, and benefit their village of origin. High savings brought back migration to positively influence the choice of becoming an entrepreneur after return. There are some losses of social networks for the people who migrate, but this loss of social networks for return migrants is compensated by the accumulation of human and physical capital.

## TRENDS OF RETURN MIGRATION IN ODISHA

More than 5.43 lakh migrants have returned to Odisha to date during the COVID-19 pandemic, where it is observed that 1.75 million people migrated from Odisha to other states in 2023 due to distress. The sudden influx of return migrants demanded the attention of the local government owing to the immediate challenges of food, shelter, public health, securing livelihoods, sanitation, and social security in the unorganised sector. It became a burden for the local government to create income-generating opportunities through various schemes. The situation is worse in economically disadvantaged states, including Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha, which recorded heightened registrations under various governmental employment initiatives (Chauhan, 2020). A study on migrant workers, titled "Perception of returnee migrants on COVID-19 and its impact on social and migratory status," was carried out by the Centre of Excellence Regional Development and Tribal Studies at Sambalpur University. It revealed that 71% of return migrants from four districts in Western Odisha stated they would not migrate again if they had stable employment opportunities in Odisha. Another study by Parida (2015) on MGNREGS, rural employment, and distress migration in Odisha examined 400 households in Mayurbhanj and Jajpur districts. It found that while MGNREGS provided jobs, especially for landless and socially backward (SC/ST) households, there was a lack of inter-industry linkages within rural regions through this programme. Such linkages could create economic multipliers, offering sustainable rural employment and income to marginalized groups. Similarly, Swain & Padhi (2020) investigated economic activities for returning migrant workers, indicating that returnees in Odisha could be integrated into local economies through skill mapping and leveraging existing skills. This research helped policymakers in Odisha shift focus from transfer payments toward creating capital assets

Hence, migration & reverse migration has a great impacts on the socio-economic & political structure of the nation, it also results in the demographic change within the country. Both migration & reverse migration results in the fluctuations in the lifestyles of the migrated people. Both happen due to economic differences among the states & lack of proper policies for employment opportunities in several states of the country. Odisha is a state which is always known for its poverty & economic unrest. Especially the Western part

of the state is far away from the mainstream of development resulting in extreme poverty. Most of the people are willing to go outside in search of works as not much employment opportunities are available.

in this region. Lakhs of people are migrating to other states to work a labor force in different construction sites & factories. The era of COVID pandemic saw a large flow of human capital from other states to this region where Bargarh was a crucial district. The state government of Odisha identified 11 districts as migration prone during that period in which Bargarh ranks second. Hence Bargarh becomes a prominent area for the dwelling of the reverse migrants. Here reverse migrants belonging to 6 blocks of the district have been studied. The study becomes significant in this context.

## METHODOLOGY

Taking descriptive & explanatory research designs, the study is conducted in Bargarh district which lies in the Western border of Odisha adjacent to Chhattisgarh is one of the prominent districts of the state with maximum return migrants. Bargarh district consists of 2 Sub-Divisions i.e. Bargarh & Padampur which are further divided into 6 Blocks each. Here the areas taken for the concerned study are 3 Blocks from Bargarh sub-division namely Bargarh, Barpali & Bhatli and 3 Blocks from Padampur sub-division namely Rajborasambar, Paikmal & Jharbandh. No matter this district has a great significance in the culture & tradition of Western Odisha, people are moving to other places due to lack of good opportunities. The objective of the study is to focus on the the push & pull factors responsible for reverse migration in western Odisha in Bargarh district and secondly, to study the changed lifestyle of the reverse migrants. The total sample size for the study was 100, of which 50 were migrant labourers in the unorganised sector, and 50 were employed in jobs and services in the organised sector. Out of the 50 migrant labourers, the sample consists of 25 males and 25 females. The remainder is further divided into segments. Out of the remaining 50 respondents, 30 were engaged in government services, of which 15 men and 15 women were studied. Out of the rest 20 respondents; 10 (5 men & 5 women) used to work in the corporate sector whereas 10 (5 men & 5 women) used to work in other private organizations. The study utilizes purposive sampling as those people who have experienced reverse migration during the lockdown were only taken as respondents. The sample includes laborers from low skill and semi-skilled categories.

**RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The data were collected from 100 respondents who had migrated from various parts of the country to the Bargarh district, where they originally belong, and had returned for several reasons. Many of them have come back under certain circumstance while many of them have returned back by their own choice. Some of them are compelled to go back while some of them find better opportunity if they come back to their native places. Every migrant has a different reason & a different story behind his/ her reverse migrant. Both the men & women are taken into consideration while conducting the study where the women have separate reasons for coming back. Most of them have migrated just to stay with their husbands and have come back to again cooperate in the household works. All the reasons of migrations & reverse migrations are thoroughly studied in this paper and are analyzed based on the information gathered from them. The socio-economic distribution of respondent’s shows that majority of respondents belong to the middle age group. All are Hindus and 22 people out of the 100 respondents taken into consideration for the study belong to the general category. Also 29 from the OBC category, 33 SCs & 16 STs have been studied in this paper. As both men & women contribute in the economy of the nation and both of them have great importance in migration, 50 men & 50 women have been studied in this so that the gender perspective can be studied. Time spent in the migrated place of the respondents shows 10 reverse migrants amongst my respondents have spent less than 5 years at their migrated place; 8 have spent 5-10 years, 12 have stayed there for nearly 11-15 years; 8 have lived for 16-20 years, 18 people for 20-25 years, 16 respondents for 25-30 years and 28 people have spent more than 30 years after they had migrated to another place. The duration of time spend after migration reveals 63 respondents out of 100 taken, have stayed less than 5 years in their respective native villages after their reverse migration whereas 31 have been living for 5-10 years & 6migrants have been staying for 11-15 years after coming back from the migrated place.

In relation to period of duration spent in migrated place, 28 percent of respondents have spent more than 30 year followed by 18 percent for more than 20 years. However minimum is 10 years. With regard to duration of time spent after reverse migration, 63 respondents out of 100 taken, have stayed less than 5 years in their respective native villages after their reverse migration whereas 31 have been living for 5-10 years & six

migrants have been staying for 11-15 years after coming back from the migrated place. The people who have migrated are seen to have many reasons where majority are found to have unemployment as reason followed by transfer in job, better employment opportunity and health and education facilities. Saheb , 2025 has studied on how communities are rebuild in the context of employment sustainability. However, the reasons of return migration is mostly found to be harassment at work place for the respondents followed by unable to cope with urban lifestyle and family concerns. The respondents in their migrated place had occupation of laborer followed by Government and private job. After reverse migration they were again found to enroll in laborer occupation followed by one fourth of the respondents engaged in agriculture, business and enterprises. Recent studies also discusses the challenges of the post COVID economy reintegration and redirection of human capital of labouramong reverse migrants (Khan and Arokkiaraj, 2021)

*Challenges and implications in Odisha:* With regard to the satisfaction level among the reverse migrants with their life after they have come back to their villages. Out of the 100 reverse migrants 18 are highly satisfied after they have come back whereas 14 are somehow satisfied with the changes coming in their lives and 38 people do not have a clear cut opinion so far as the satisfaction level is concerned. There are various challenges that are faced by the respondent at the migrated place which includes sanitation problem and poverty with slum life in most of the cases followed by insecurity (42%) and discrimination (36%). However, challenges faced by the respondents in reverse migration were mostly change in lifestyle, lack of urban facilities followed by lack of healthcare and education.

**Table 1. Shows the distribution of respondents on the opinion of challenges after reverse migration.**

Indicators of challenges	High	Average	Low	Total
Unemployment	16	10	06	32
Lack of Urban facilities	08	36	18	62
Poverty	22	07	13	42
Lack of Healthcare & Education	22	27	09	58
Change in Lifestyle	42	24	18	84
Others	04	05	03	12

Source: Field survey

Studies conducted by(Khan and Arokkiaraj, 2021) reveals similar results of migrants experiencing stigmatization, hostility and discrimination which relates to social security and social mobility challenges. The reverse migration has brought some benefits with it. Out of the 100 respondents, 28 told that they got better employment opportunities while 29 saw growth in their annual income after reverse migration. In a study by Saheb (2025) shows how reverse migration can revitalize rural communities by generating long-term employment opportunities where rural communities can harness the potential of returning migrants in post pandemic. It has led to the growth of local industry and encouraged entrepreneurship. Also 87 people are happy to be capable of living in their own culture & enjoying their original lifestyle. But on the contrary, only 4 people say that they have got better educational & health care facilities after coming back to their native places as their villages are adjacent to the towns and the places where they used to live before were distant from the urban bodies. Also 8 people are experiencing better lifestyle after coming back to their native places. Moreover, 92 reverse migrants are happy to be living with their own family. Besides all these, 12 people have got different other benefits & advantages after coming back from the big cities.

**Table 2. Shows the distribution of respondents on the opinion of benefits after reverse migration.**

Indicators of advantages	No. of respondents	Percentage
Better Employment	28	28
Increase in Income	29	29
Living in own culture & lifestyle	87	86
Better Education & health facilities	04	04
Better lifestyle	08	08
Able to live with own family	92	92
Others	12	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

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The occupations of almost all the reverse migrants have changed after they have come back from the big cities. Also the retired personnel are getting less income as they are no more receiving their complete salary and are getting pensions only which are again half of the salary they used to get during their service tenure. Many of the returnees are also found to be unemployed as they have lost their jobs during the lockdown and are struggling a lot right now. These people contribute to the lowering of the income. Out of the 100 respondents it is seen the annual income of 29 respondents have increased whereas the same of 71

respondents have been lessened. On the other hand many people have found better employment opportunities where they are earning more than before. However, only 4 out of the respondents have been benefited by several govt. schemes in the migrated place whereas the rest haven't been benefited. This shows how the migrants have been neglected at the migrated place and how they are facing problems. On the other hand, 81 out of my 100 respondents have been benefited by several government schemes after they have come back to their respective native places. Only 19 respondents have not got any government benefits. The coping strategy in reverse migration depicts 62 people are able to cope up with the society after their reverse migration while 34 are facing difficulties to cope up with the social life they are experiencing in the villages. But gradually they are trying to adapt the rural lifestyle as they have been habituated with the urban lifestyle for many years.

## CONCLUSION

The study highlights the factors that prompt rural residents to migrate to urban areas and subsequently return to their villages. Many people are moving to cities in search of employment, better education and healthcare facilities, an upgraded lifestyle, and other reasons. However, several factors compel them to return to their origins. A significant change in their socioeconomic and cultural lives is evident after they return to their homes. This leads to a number of troubles faced by them while living with their near & dear ones. Also, reverse migration could destroy India's tribal communities, largely concentrated in ten states and in the North-Eastern region. Several steps can be taken by the government and private bodies to address the issue and provide a permanent solution. On the other hand we can also find the people who reverse back intentionally are definitely happier than before. Because they have either got better opportunity or they have grown their own startups & have been service providers instead of service holders. Although the study has incorporated a gender dimension into the analysis of return-migration experiences, future research could include a caste or class analysis of these experiences.

The paper suggests few solutions and recommendations to mitigate the challenges of reverse migration in Odisha. As the entire life style is changing with different place, language, constant traveling, food habits & the social life of different places, all these happen due to concentration of corporate & industries in the big cities and non-availability of good employment

opportunities in rural areas. This can be overcome if employment opportunities can be diversified and become available in the rural areas and small towns. Also people need to change their mindset of running behind whatever job they get and should try to look for other employment opportunities. The governments should also inspire people and provide adequate facilities to them to become entrepreneurs and contribute towards the growth of the economy. When people lose their jobs in a large numbers like it happened in 2020, the governments should be keen on providing alternatives to those people who suffered the most, because such incidents make poor people even poorer and leads to the distance between the rich & the poor affecting the smooth progress of the nation. Such efforts are taken by the Government of Odisha where it has launched the OIMS portal so entrepreneurs can apply online for incentives under policies for IT/Electronics, data centres, BPO, semiconductor manufacturing etc, PM Vishwakarma scheme for traditional artisans, Swayam Scheme (Odisha Swayam Yojana) for setting up micro / small enterprises suited to local skills and Odisha Startup Growth Fund (OSGF) etc. Hence steps should be taken from all the stakeholders like the government, private partners, NGOs, Corporate giants & finally the people to overcome this issue.

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