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Q4(a)

What are the sociological reasons and implication of "reverse migration" during the recent pandemic in India ?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · Sociology GS 2 · 20 marks · Rural and Agrarian transformation in India

Rural and Agrarian transformation in India: Programmes of rural development, Community Development Programme, cooperatives, poverty alleviation schemes; Green revolution and social change; Changing modes of production in Indian agriculture; Problems of rural labour, bondage, migration.

Core demand of the question

- What are the sociological reasons and implication of "reverse migration" during the recent pandemic in India?
- Link informal labour, village, and the state

Revision summary

COVID reverse migration returned circular workers when informal city jobs vanished.

Reasons were no contracts, sudden state closure, and a ready village kinship fallback.

Dalit and land-poor streams were over-represented.

Implications are the failure of urban citizenship and the village as shock absorber.

Caste-kinship reclaimed labour when the market stopped.

Introduction

Reverse migration in the COVID-19 lockdown was the sudden return of circular workers from cities to villages. It revealed that India's growth had stored labour in the city without storing rights there.

Body

Sociological reasons

- Informal work in construction, services, and workshops has no contract, no landlord patience, and no urban welfare that travels with the worker.
- **Circular migration already tied livelihood to both poles:** city cash and village kinship. The lockdown snapped the city pole first.
- **Caste and region organise who migrates:** land-poor Dalit and OBC households from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and similar tracts filled the walking columns.
- The state's sudden closure of trains and work treated migrants as a health risk, not as citizens, which **Ambedkar's** warning about social democracy would recognise as a deficit of fraternity.

Why the village received them

- Metcalfe's little republic did not feed them; family and jati did, a Karve kinship net under stress.

- Agriculture as fallback, even after Green Revolution commercialisation, still absorbs surplus labour in a crisis.
- Srinivas's village as a system of patrons and factions became a shelter of last resort, not a republic of equals.

Implications

- It exposed the myth of an urban break with rural caste-kinship. City work had been a camp, not a settlement of rights.
- Informalisation was shown as a labour regime, in Desai's political-economy sense, not as entrepreneurial choice.
- Policy talk of Atmanirbhar villages cannot replace portable social security, because the next shock will send people walking again.
- Gendered care and unpaid work in origin households rose; women's burden was the silent implication.
- Politically, the migrant became visible, then faded as a census of suffering without a matching census of rights.

Longer sociological lesson

- Differentiation of work from village hierarchy was incomplete. When the market stopped, hierarchy and kinship reclaimed the worker.

Flow diagram

Informal urban labour -> Lockdown
Lockdown -> Reverse migration
Village kinship caste -> Reverse migration
Reverse migration -> Rights deficit exposed

Conclusion

Reverse migration happened because informal urban labour and village kinship were already one system. Its implication is that Indian modernity still parks insecurity in the countryside. Without portable rights, the village remains a shock absorber, not a little republic.

Facts & figures

Circular migration

Pre-existing two-pole livelihood that made reverse flow possible and massive.

Lockdown 2020

Sudden stop of transport and work that turned migrants into walkers.

Informal sector

Employment without portable social security, the structural reason for flight.

Village fallback

Kinship and farm absorbed returnees; it was care under strain, not autarky.

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