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Q7(b)

What is 'reverse migration' ? Discuss its features, causes and consequences in India

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · 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 is reverse migration? Discuss its features, causes and consequences in India
- Use the COVID-19 return as a major case without making it the only case

Revision summary

Reverse migration is return from destination work sites to native places.

In India it is the visible face of circular, footloose labour.

COVID-19 2020 made the corridors public; seasonal return was already normal.

Causes are urban insecurity and rural household ties.

Consequences are distress, temporary rural labour surplus and later re-migration.

Introduction

Reverse migration is the return of workers from destination cities, industrial belts, or other countries back to their native villages and towns. In India it is usually the other side of circular labour, made visible when the destination economy shuts or the household is needed at origin.

Body

Features

- It is often sudden in crisis, as in the 2020 lockdown walks and special trains, and slower when a construction season ends.
- Households, not only single men, may move; women and children appear on the road when the city job vanishes.
- **It follows existing corridors:** Bihar-Punjab, Odisha-Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh-Mumbai, and Gulf return to Kerala and elsewhere.
- **Jan Breman's footloose labour is the structural type:** the worker was never fully urban, so reverse movement is built into the class.

Causes

- **Immediate:** lockdowns, factory closure, unpaid wages, collapsed housing, and fear of epidemic without urban welfare.
- **Structural:** no portable rations then, weak rental rights, and contractor systems that dump labour when demand falls.

- **Positive pulls also exist:** harvest, marriage, local elections, new rural schemes, or a small plot that still needs hands.
- A. R. Desai's agrarian structure explains why origin villages can still absorb bodies even when they cannot absorb decent work.

Consequences

- **Short run:** distress on highways, overcrowded villages, health risk, and a shock to urban sectors that ran on migrants.
- Rural labour supply rose in some districts; wages and farm tasks shifted, then many re-migrated when cities reopened.
- Households remitted less, which hit local consumption and debt cycles.
- **Policy learning:** portable ration experiments, some state transport, and talk of local livelihoods; implementation remained uneven.
- **Yogendra Singh's modernizing village met a pre-modern welfare hole:** phones could call home, the state could not feed the worker in the city.

What it teaches about class

- India's urban growth still rests on a rural safety net that is unpaid care and a small plot.
- Reverse migration is not urbanisation reversed forever; it is a pulse in a circular system.
- Caste and region still decide who can wait in the city and who must walk.

Flow diagram

City job contractor housing -> Shock lockdown layoff
 Shock lockdown layoff -> Reverse migration
 Village plot kin -> Reverse migration
 Reverse migration -> Distress then re-migration

Conclusion

Reverse migration in India is the return pulse of **circular labour**, spectacular in 2020 and ordinary every lean season. Its features are corridor movement and household distress; its causes are urban insecurity plus rural ties; its consequences are shared pain and a still-weak portable welfare state.

Facts & figures

COVID-19 2020

Nationwide lockdown that triggered a mass reverse movement of migrant workers.

Circular labour

Breman's pattern of sojourning workers who were never fully urban.

Corridors

Established streams such as eastern India to western industrial and farm belts.

Portable welfare gap

Ration and housing rights that did not travel with the worker at the moment of shock.

Re-migration

Return to cities after the first wave of reverse movement, showing a pulse not a permanent reversal.

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