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Pandemic and the Northern State: Understanding COVID-19's impact on economic migration and local political economies in Rajasthan.

Jitender Swami



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Abstract

The COVID-19 economic crisis is the most severe economic shock that the Indian economy has faced in the last 30 years. Its severity can be attributed to both the pandemic as well as the failure of the government to address the public health crisis in an effective manner. The Indian government announced a nationwide lockdown in the month of March as a response to the pandemic which resulted in a reverse migration crisis causing the economic migrants to return to their villages from the urban production houses. They had to move back as their means of survival were completely lost due to restrictions on work and halted economic activity. This movement back to villages had critical implications for both the migrant workers and the economy. This paper aims at examining these implications of the reverse migration crisis on local political economies with special reference to migrant labourers in Rajasthan. For a detailed understanding of economic activity, employment patterns and condition of migrant lives during the lockdown, this research imparts a region-wise analysis of local political economies in terms of agriculture, industry, and service sector in the state. This paper also examines how the state policies and guidelines during the nationwide lockdown happened to be ineffective and unfavourable for the poor and lacked focus on migrant laborers. This research is based on secondary data collected from local newspaper reports (from 25th March to 1st June), newspaper articles, surveys, and government websites.

Keywords: COVID-19, Labour, Migration, Livelihoods, Lockdown, Economic crisis

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Introduction

The corona virus pandemic followed by the nationwide lockdown in India has affected the economic activity to the extent that GDP for the first quarter of the financial year 2020-21 had contracted by 23%¹. The impact has been higher on poorer states as interstate and intrastate migration is extensive in these states and Rajasthan is one of them. Rajasthan is among the four BIMARU (Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh)² states in India that are categorised for their backwardness and low development. Also, it stands at 29th rank among 37 states and union territories in the Human development index (HDI) with an HDI of 0.628³. In Rajasthan's local political economies, there has been a shift in livelihood strategies for survival due to changing economic structures in last few decades. The contribution of agriculture to the state's GDP has declined from 38.61% (1996-97) to almost 26% (2019-20) in the last three decades⁴. However, as much as 62.5% of the population is still dependent on agriculture. It is not that the absolute agriculture production has decreased but the share of secondary and tertiary sectors in economy of Rajasthan has seen relatively much higher growth over time, and the economy has transferred from agricultural to a wage-labour market economy (Khandelwal and Shankar, 2014). This shift to wage-labour economy, sometimes creates an understanding that migration as a livelihood strategy results from the growing manufacturing and service sector. However, migration in Rajasthan is more a result of push factors than pull factors. The increasing dependence on limited resources in rural areas has led to the loss of income opportunities in rural areas, and lack of livelihood opportunities has pushed the working population to opt for migration as a livelihood strategy. As many as

1 See <https://indianexpress.com/article/business/economy/economy-slowdown-gdp-contraction-minus-23-9-per-cent-6578116/>

2 'BIMARU' is a term used in Hindi which literally means sick and unhealthy.

3 (Subnational HDI - Global Data Lab, n.d.)

4 (*Economic Review 2020-21*, n.d.), (*Economic Review 1999-2000*, n.d.)

80% of migrant laborers in Rajasthan migrate due to lack of employment opportunities in villages. Besides poverty and lack of employment opportunities, social and political distress is another reason for socially marginalized communities to migrate out to obtain a new social identity in addition to a new livelihood source; therefore, migration in Rajasthan has been a mixed response to economic, social, and political vulnerabilities in rural areas (Sharma, Ali and Poonia, 2014). Many factors like high dependency ratio, lack of robust infrastructure, social inequalities, and inadequate policy implementation make Rajasthan's local political economies highly sensitive in an economic sense and highly exploitative in a political sense, especially during a crisis. Deep-rooted caste and gender discrimination make certain social groups more vulnerable to a crisis than others. This paper employs a sector-wise analysis to highlight the importance, vulnerability, challenges, and opportunities in local political economies of Rajasthan with reference to migrant laborers and reverse migration crisis in Rajasthan.

Migration and employment patterns in Rajasthan

Rajasthan's migration pattern has mostly been rural to urban, with more than 85% of migrants moving from rural to urban. There are various reasons to migrate, but most commonly, it is economic, an estimated 4.7 million out of a total of 5.8 million migrants of Rajasthan migrate in search of employment and more than 60% of total Rajasthani migrants opt for intra-state migration, and the rest 40% for an interstate (Sharma, Ali and Poonia, 2014). Though Rajasthan is primarily a supplier of migrant workers⁵, it is also a destination for economic migrants from other states Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and West Bengal. Nonetheless, the lockdown has removed employment sources in urban areas, thus

5 Planning commission employment (vision2020) positions Rajasthan among the top 3 suppliers of migrant laborers in India.

disincentivizing further migration and leading to a reverse migration crisis; nearly 13 lakh migrants have returned to Rajasthan during crisis⁶. Now, coming to the workforce participation rate in Rajasthan, about 48.2% of rural males, 21.5% of rural females, 49.5% of urban males, and 9.8% of urban females participate in the workforce (PLFS 2017-18). These figures suggest a gender gap in workforce participation rate. When we further disaggregate the data, it is seen that, gender further impacts workforce distribution in different types of work especially in the case of rural workforce.

Table 1: Workforce in Rajasthan by type of works (in %)

	Self employed	Casual work	Salaried/regular wage
Rural Male	64.6	19.8	15.6
Rural Female	84.8	11.3	4.0
Urban Male	45.4	10.9	43.7
Urban female	44.1	12.8	43.0

Source: PLFS 2017-18

Workforce distributed in different types of works is mentioned in Table 1. In aggregate, the workforce distribution indicates that self-employment constitutes the highest share of Rajasthan's workforce and as much as 85% of rural women are self-employed. Poorer states like Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and Jharkhand have higher self-employment rates than others; 65.3% of the workforce in Rajasthan is self-employed, which is second highest in the country after 66.2% in Chhattisgarh. Self-employment has not been very profitable especially for women and it also does not generate any further employment⁷. The coming sections will discuss how the pandemic had more severe implications for the self-employed and casual workers in the informal sector.

Agriculture

Agriculture in Rajasthan is a highly speculative and less productive sector due to its high dependence on

6 See <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/over-13-lakh-migrants-have-returned-to-rajasthan-official/article31755082.ece>

7 More than 65% of self-employed woman in India can only earn below 3000 rupees a month and only 4% of self-employed in India generate employment for others – (Jan Shaha2020).

the monsoon and the high dependence on this sector is in turn, also responsible for poverty prevalence in rural Rajasthan. 62.5% of the total population of Rajasthan is dependent on Agriculture and its allied activities and it accounts for 25.56% of the state's GDP. The state has 10 Argo-climatic zones, and produces a variety of crops, it is the largest producer of Mustard, Guar, carom-seeds, Coriander, Fenugreek, Henna, Wool and second largest of Gram, Cumin seeds, Vegetables, and Milk⁸. Traditionally, Rabi crops in Rajasthan are harvested between March ending and April beginning; however, due to the pandemic, the rabi harvesting period fell under the nationwide lockdown triggering several impacts on this sector. Lakhs of migrant workers from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and southern parts of Rajasthan fulfil the supply of laborers for harvesting. But the lockdown restrictions on mobility and transportation reduced the supply of migrant laborers and *combine machines* (also used as an alternative to manual harvesting) in the state which hindered the crucial timely harvesting⁹. Taking advantage of the scarcity of substitute harvest services (migrant laborers), the *combine* operators who had already moved in before restrictions also hiked their service prices. Earlier for rabi seasons, the charges for *combine machines* were between INR 1200-1400 per acre, however, this time it rose to INR 2000-3000 per acre¹⁰. To leave lands empty for pre-monsoon rains to make the land irrigational for Kharif cultivation, crops are harvested in the region by the first week of April, which means timely harvesting is critical for next season also. Nevertheless, due to lockdown, the lack of harvesting services made this season stretch until May, which exposed both Rabi harvest and Kharif cultivation to weather threats¹¹. Also, the available labour in rural brick-kilns could not be used as an alternative due to skill mismatch. Considering that in brick kilns of northern Rajasthan, only laborers from Haryana and Punjab can simultaneously engage in agricultural activities due to their exposure and experience in identical harvesting techniques at their hometown (Only labourers who arrive specially for harvesting work from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal have expertise in the agriculture.).

The market for crops is another problem that farmers had to face as the lockdown influenced the operation of Agriculture market yards. For instance, in beginning of May, which is generally the peak of harvested crop supply in market yards, many yards of Sri Ganganagar

8 See <https://www.rajas.in/index.php/rajasthan/economy/agriculture/>.

9 (2020, April 12). कोरोना और लॉकडाउन में दब रही किसानों की आवाज, फसल तैयार, काटे कोन (Voice of farmers is being suppressed in Corona and lockdown, Crops ready, no one to harvest). *Rajasthan Patrika*.

10 (2020, April 25). धान मंडियों में इन दिनों काम की भरमार, काम करने वाले नगण्य (Plenty of work in Agriculture market yards these days, negligible workers). *Rajasthan Patrika*.

11 (2020, April 30). श्रमिक और थ्रेसर मलि नहीं रहे, मौसम ने बढ़ाई चिंता (Workers and threshers are not available, weather has raised concerns). *Rajasthan Patrika*.

were seen empty during this period. Only 95 out of 289 designations were filled in 13 Mandi Samitis of the district¹². Moreover, the government procurement for crops also started in late April, that also only for wheat and no other crops. Consequently, the small and marginal farmers who managed to harvest their crops regardless of lack of harvesting services, could not find a market to sell their crops. By Mid-May, the state did start government procurement of all crops under Minimum Support Price (MSP), but MSP has also been exclusionary for many small farmers, the pre-existing exclusion from such a scheme can have grave effects on farmers. To sell under MSP, a farmer must have a minimum of 25 quintals of produce; this means that only produce of 25 quintals or above is considered for government procurement. This is problematic because a marginal farmer cultivating his small landholding cannot grow 25 quintals produce of a single crop especially under the advisory of multi cropping (most of the farmers choose to grow multi crops). As a result of this exclusion, most small and marginal farmers sell their crops to private bidders in market yards on much lower prices than MSP¹³. In normal conditions, as farmers do not harvest their crops simultaneously, the harvesting goes on from March to April, the harvested crops start reaching the market from March onward and the supply keeps on until May. Nevertheless, as the yards were shut and as private bidders opened buying in late May, the market was suddenly flooded with crops, leading to a plummet in prices. The sudden excess supply combined with the lack of storage facilities and workers in market yards exposed the grains in Mandi to pre-monsoon rains, and tonnes of produce washed away in the rain. The overall consequences for this sector are immense as 62.02% of land holdings in Rajasthan are with small and marginal farmers (*Economic Review 2020-21*). The high cost of harvesting, low prices for crops, and crop loss have led to funding deficiency for upcoming cultivation. Consequently, most of the small and marginal farmers will have to either borrow money or choose not to cultivate for next season¹⁴.

Food processing

Namkeen in the snacks market has highest market share, and Rajasthan's Bikaner originated manufacturers are the largest producers of *namkeen* and savouries in India¹⁵. Despite the global presence of large scale production houses, this sector is heavily dominated by

the unorganized sector. Though most raw materials are processed outside the state; Rajasthan's food processing industry provides significant employment, income, and food supply in the state. Economy of Food processing is very crucial for livelihoods as it is dominated by self-employed unorganized individuals, particularly women. In the last five years, nearly 10000 youth and women have received training for food processing work in Kota to be self-reliable. The Bikaner region of Rajasthan is home to the leading FMCG and namkeen manufacturers of the country, including *Haldiram, Bikanerwala* (both now have manufacturing facilities out of the state), and *Bikaji* (2 manufacturing facilities, both in Bikaner)¹⁶.

Approximately 10000 units of micro food processing industries and 75 large-medium scale industries were operational in Rajasthan before the lockdown. The industry in Bikaner produced around 2 lakh Kilograms of food products daily and consumed 2 lakh Kilograms of milk a day as raw material generating a massive demand for milk, grains, oil, and species. Due to restrictions, these small units, as well as big plants, became non-operational thus leading to severe consequences. Previously, the industry had a turnover of INR 120 crore as 400 to 500 units were operational in Bikaner, but it has suffered a loss of around INR 50 crore during the lockdown¹⁷. Lockdown has also threatened the employment of 1.25 lakh people dependent on the Namkeen, Papad, and sweet manufacturing industry in Bikaner. As businesses went shut, most industrial laborers had to return home. However, in this sector, as claimed by owners, most of the units in Bikaner retained their workers in factory premises and made food arrangements for them¹⁸. This is because the industry prefers to retain laborers for the long term, and even new hirings are made based on old references of similar works. As the regional food is world-famous and remarkable for its taste, the taste's fragility is something that must be taken care of. Temporary workers cannot maintain the uniqueness of taste; for that, workers must be specialized and experienced. This characteristic of the industry makes permanent and experienced workers crucial to this industry. Which possibly decreases labourer's vulnerability during a crisis. As a result, there has been minimum reverse migration from Bikaner's food-processing industrial town¹⁹.

¹⁶ See <https://www.nextbigbrand.in/bikaji-taking-bikaner-and-its-bhujia-to-the-world/>

¹⁷ (2020, May 15). सभावनाएं अपार, सहयोग की दरकार (Immense possibilities, seeking cooperation).

Rajasthan Patrika.

¹⁸ See <https://www.outlookindia.com/newscroll/bikaner-snack-manufacturers-take-care-of-workforce-amid-lockdown/1801691>.

¹⁹ See <https://www.outlookindia.com/newscroll/bikaner-snack-manufacturers-take-care-of-workforce-amid-lockdown/1801691>

¹² (2020, April 25). धान मंडियों में इन दलों काम की भरमार, काम करने वाले नगण्य (Plenty of work in Agriculture market yards these days, negligible workers). *Rajasthan Patrika*.

¹³ See <https://thewire.in/rights/rajasthan-msp-wheat-procurement>.

¹⁴ According to RCRC survey 2020 75% of their respondents in Rajasthan did not have funds for Kharif.

¹⁵ See <https://www.researchandmarkets.com/reports/4450797/india-snacks-market-forecast-by-snacks>.

Animal husbandry and livestock

Rajasthan has around 11.83% of the country's livestock, which is highest percentage in the country. The state also accounts for 12.93% of the country's milk production and 32.89% of wool production in the country. The animal husbandry sector contributes 8.7% to states' GDP and had a turnover of nearly 3000 crore rupees annually, which is more than one-third of the Agri sectors' GDP (IBEF, 2018). The disturbance in supply and demand chains due to lockdown, harshly affected the people who make a living out of it. The effects have been severe especially in districts where significant population depends on animal husbandry. One of these districts is Bikaner, Bikaner has a total livestock of 9,06,075²⁰ and 70% of the total population in Bikaner is dependent on Animal husbandry and milk production.

As Hotels, Dhabas, and the food processing and manufacturing industry came to a halt and saw shutdowns, the market demand for milk dropped, price for milk at dairy and milk collectors fell to 15 - 16 rupees per litre, from about 31- 32 rupees before lockdown. Also, due to restrictions, most of the people were unable to sell milk even at these low prices. Low prices for milk in no way lowered the economic costs of keeping animal husbandry. As the dairies (also distributors of cattle feed) went non-operational; it instead increased the prices for cattle feed, significantly raising the costs of animal husbandry. The consequence was visible as many people engaged in animal husbandry in Rajasthan even considered selling their livestock during the lockdown. Among the people who sold livestock during the lockdown, most of them did so because they needed money for survival and remaining because they could not manage to incur costs of feed and fodder (RCRC survey 2020). Though milk was being collected at half prices by dairies in the market, raw dairy products like milk, curd, butter, cheese, etc. saw a price hike due to closed processing plants and lack of transportation and supply chains. Bikaner, Sri Ganganagar, Hanumangarh, Jaipur, and other districts, where a notable percentage of the population depends on animal husbandry, had suffered significant income losses. Individuals, who were self-employed in agriculture and animal husbandry may not have lost employment due to nature of their work. Nonetheless, they have suffered serious damage to their incomes and survival means.

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)

20 See http://animalhusbandry.rajasthan.gov.in/livestock_census.aspx.

The flagship rural employment program of the Indian state has attracted earnest attention during the last six months of policy discussion on the COVID-19 economic crisis. It has always been at the centre of policy discourse on rural unemployment, considering the positive impacts it has had. Studies have shown that MGNREGA significantly increases the female workforce participation rate (Ravi and Engler, 2009), and it also significantly increases expenditure on consumable and non-consumable goods in rural households (Liu and Deininger 2011). However, these studies were conducted in a span of 4 to 5 years and provide evidence of slow and steady improvements, and it is not feasible to perceive it as an immediate impact of the scheme such that it can be termed effective in a migration crisis. During the lockdown, India's unemployment rate increased from 8.4% in mid-March to 24% in May; This rate soon fell to 11.6% by the 2nd week of June as soon as relaxations in lockdown were announced²¹.

The decrease in the unemployment rate was not a sign of the economy going back to normal as it decreased due to an enormous increase in MGNREGA engagement. A total of 3.5 million new applications were received for MGNREGA within fifty days between April 1st to May 20th, which is the highest since the scheme's launch. Whereas only 1.5 million new applications were received for the whole fiscal year of 2019-20²². This enormous MGNREGA engagement points to the scale of the country's unemployment crisis due to the Pandemic. In Rajasthan, during the Pre-COVID-19 period, more than 10 lakh workers used to attend the MGNREGA work daily in the first fiscal quarter, but in April 2020, just 2.96 lakh workers were reported to be working, and out of 10716 Gram Panchayats, only 6282 Gram Panchayats received workers²³. This low attendance was due to three primary reasons. First, it was the peak harvesting season of Rabi crops; second, most of the labour was in-transit due to the reverse migration crisis; and third, the public group works under MGNREGA other than category B were restricted under the lockdown guidelines. Interestingly, within three months, as relaxations were announced, the number of workers engaging in MGNREGA in Rajasthan increased from 2.96 lakh in April beginning to 112.89 lakh as of 18-06-2020²⁴. Furthermore, state-wise, this was the second highest MGNREGA engagement in the

21 See <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/indicators/unemployment-rate-in-india-at-24-for-the-week-ended-may-17-cmie/articleshow/75821968.cms>

22 See <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/3-5-million-new-enrolments-under-mgnrega-as-distressed-workers-return-to-villages/story-aDJHYZ0vz1SeLlelhVT7l.html>

23 (2020, April 21). मजदूरों का मनरेगा से सोशल डिस्टेंस (Social distance of laborers from MGNREGA). *Rajasthan Patrika*.

24 See https://nrega.nic.in/netnrega/mgnrega_new/Nrega_StateReport.aspx?typeN=1

country after Uttar Pradesh²⁵.

The timing of 100 days of employment under this program is generally such that it perfectly absorbs agricultural laborers and farmers who become seasonally unemployed during April, May, and June. This time, the state witnessed three different types of unemployed laborers; the first, the seasonally unemployed laborers; second, laborers who lost employment domestically due to lockdown; and the third, unemployed laborers who migrated back from other states. All three groups of unemployed people generated the estimated surplus in MGNREGA. In normal conditions, seasonally unemployed laborers have chances of doing work in other works like construction. Due to the lockdown, 92% of existing construction workers already lost employment for several days²⁶ and generated a huge surplus in the first group of laborers. This higher engagement of laborers in MGNREGA created a delusion of the economy getting back normal.

Many state governments, including Rajasthan, assumed that MGNREGA was absorbing the unemployed migrants, but this was not the case. Several reasons and significant evidence indicate that MGNREGA did not help much to counter the crisis and reduce the impact on migrant lives. Firstly, though the state governments captured data in a disaggregated manner²⁷, it mistakenly established a strong link between increasing MGNREGA engagement and migrants returning home; in reality, however, the unusual engagement was primarily shredded by the attendance of laborers who lost employment domestically. RCRC household survey shows that in Rajasthan, only 3.7% of migrants who returned home actually registered for MGNREGA, while 65% of them had no work, and near 24% started working in agriculture. This false reliance prevented other policy measures that could have been taken; instead, the state governments continued promising employment under MGNREGA works²⁸. Secondly, The MGNREGA has always been regarded as an unproductive economic activity because, most of the projects assigned under MGNREGA, in practice, only constitute natural resource management projects like digging wells, maintaining ponds, constructing, and cleaning water bodies, road infrastructure projects, and construction of other public goods²⁹. These projects do not have direct forward linkages and only

contribute to social overhead capital (SOC) creation, which only benefits the economy in the long run. In many instances, workers are even assigned to improve rural landlords' private properties, neither benefitting the economy nor the laborers. Thirdly, the low wage rate under MGNREGA is another concern for migrants. According to Jan Sahah Survey (2020) most casual workers typically earn between 200-400 rupees and sometimes above that (which is above the MGNREGA wage rate). Meanwhile, MGNREGA average wage in Rajasthan for the year 2020-21 is just 172 rupees a day³⁰ despite the promise of 220 rupees.

The primary idea behind a public safety net program like MGNREGA was to provide wages that can compete with rural labor market prices. Even though MGNREGA succeeded in pushing agricultural wage in the early years of its launch, it no longer competes in these markets and has failed to reduce rural to urban migration (Khanna, 2010). Furthermore, Wage-labour employment contributes almost 53% of rural household expenditure, and MGNREGA only accounts for just 4% of this expenditure (CMF 2011), suggesting that household expenditure goes way above minimum wages in MGNREGA. Despite being paid such low wages, lakhs of people opting for MGNREGA works shows their inability to find a job that can pay them more than 172 rupees a day and not an 'economy' getting on track. MGNREGA, for sure, has benefited the state in generating instant employment in an economic crisis but has not been very fruitful for migrant workers during COVID-19.

Tourism

One of the most significant sectors, tourism accounts for 15% of Rajasthan's economy. Hotels in Rajasthan employ 13% of total rural to urban intra-state migrants. The months of April, May, June, and July were the least visited months for tourists even before lockdown³¹, which means the economy dependent on tourism in these months can barely manage the fixed costs. The hospitality industry usually faces a significant decrease in revenues in these months. Due to lockdown, the industry was entirely shut in April and May and could not even manage fixed costs. Consequently, as much as 80% of workers and staff employed in hotels lost their jobs by June, and the remaining 20% faced acute salary cuts, this has been more severe in global brand hotels as compared to domestic ones³². Also, as media houses brought to the state's attention that Migrants arriving

25 See <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/with-57-lakh-workers-up-pips-rajasthan-as-top-nregs-employer/articleshow/76396154.cms>

26 See <https://idronline.org/covid-19-voices-from-the-margins/>

27 See <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/covid-19-rajasthan-labour-dept-captures-data-of-45-98-lakh-workers/story-Z3eO2LovFV9d5Q6Suf1H0L.html>

28 See <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/patna/all-returned-workers-will-be-provided-employment-in-bihar-says-nitish-kumar/articleshow/75924967.cms>

29 MNREGA works field manual.

30 See <https://nrega.nic.in/Netnrega/stHome.aspx>

31 Annual progress report 2018-19, Department of tourism, Rajasthan

32 See <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/jaipur/job-losses-in-hotels-rise-up-to-80-employees-face-over-50-pay-cut/articleshow/76414720.cms>.

from foreign countries should be quarantined in hotels and that they must pay for it, it was the only panacea of this period for hotel business³³. These hotels being quarantine centres under Vande Bharat Mission, showed less severity in layoffs and salary cuts. However, this quarantine business for hotels was not a way of making a profit but it helped retain some staff; still, the fixed costs overpowered the profit margins. Also, it becomes hard for tourism as a luxurious consumption to find its place in a crisis as people have changed preferences during an economic shock. For instance, in the lockdown, people diverted their expenditure to special foods like rice, pulse, flour and vegetables from other foods like biscuit, bread and chips.

Industries

Table 2 below presents an overall picture of the impact of the nationwide lockdown and reverse migration crisis on Rajasthan's industrial sector.

Table 2: Industrial labour force in Rajasthan before and after lockdown

Industries by size	Operation before lockdown		Operation in lockdown (as on 2nd May 2020)	
	Units	labour	Units	labour
Largescale industries	390	17 lakhs	190	7 lakhs
MSMEs	4.5 Lakh	32 lakhs	7000	1.10 lakh

Source: *Rajasthan Patrika*³⁴

During the lockdown, some industrial units were operational, some were partially operational, and some were entirely non-operational. The labour also was in different conditions; some of the migrants were working during lockdown, some of them were made to stay without work, some walked their way home back, some of them were stuck in-between, and some of them were already home for the festival of Holi. This section will discuss these conditions in a disaggregated manner in some of Rajasthan's major industries and will also discuss the magnitude of their importance for Rajasthan's economy and laborers.

Brick-kiln is one of the industries that were partially

33 (2020, May 11). खबर का असर: मलिंगी होटल इंडस्ट्री को संजीवनी, तय की जा रही नईव्यवस्था (Impact of news: Hotel industry will get lifesaving, new system is being decided). *Rajasthan Patrika*.

34 (2020, May 3). कैसे शुरू हो कल-कारखाने: कहीं श्रमिकों का पलायन तो कहीं सरकारी तंत्र बना बाधा. (How to restart the factories: either the migration of labourers or the government system became a hindrance). *Rajasthan Patrika*.

operational in Rajasthan even during lockdown because most of them are situated in rural areas, and the migrant laborers reside with their families in the factory premises or near factory premises in temporary homes built by them. As this industry generally employs entire migrant families, Brick-Kiln is also one of many industries where child labour and bonded labour is a severe issue (In Rajasthan, there are estimated 3 lakh bonded labour across the state in brick-kilns)³⁵. Even when the state has been strict about child labour and the child labour prohibited age is 18 years, which is beyond the national law of 14 years³⁶, child labour in many industries, including mining, Brick-kiln, and agriculture, is severely prevalent in Rajasthan (Sharma 2014). The workforce in brick-kilns includes migrants from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Punjab, Haryana, and intra-state migrants from Rajasthan and they arrive in November and stay till May. The working and living conditions in this industry are, in addition to the long working hours, deplorable. Advance wages often tie families to a kiln for an entire season, lower the wage rates, and force them to work for long hours (Sharma, Ali and Poonia, 2014).

The months that fell under lockdown are crucial months of Brick-Kiln. There are 1714 brick-kilns across the state, of which 844 belong to three districts, which are Ganganagar, Hanumangarh, and Jaipur³⁷. Out of 1714, the state allowed as many as 1500 Brick-kilns to operate in mid-April after one month of lockdown³⁸. The work could not be restarted like pre-lockdown because the working conditions depended on COVID-19 safety guidelines. There were chances that under the new guidelines, the workers may get better working and living conditions, and the increased surveillance can significantly reduce bonded and child labour issues, but any policy negligence could also make the situation worse and the later was indeed what happened. The brick-kiln work had to be restarted as May-June is the only month when these units stay operational, because all units go shut during the monsoon. Generally, these migrants leave for home once in a year, at the end of May, because, after that, most of these units go shut, but when to leave, also depends on their previous earnings. When the units have been closed for a month, the savings were to be spent for living expenditure creating a need to work till June, which is a month of extreme summer heat.

The conditions are also precarious in mining industries

35 See <https://centreforchildprotection.org/old/baseline-Rajasthan-Report-FINAL-EXT-feb-2017-1.pdf>.

36 See <https://labour.rajasthan.gov.in/ActsAndRules.aspx>.

37 See <https://energy.rajasthan.gov.in/content/dam/raj/energy/common/Annx-%203.pdf>.

38 See <https://www.constructionweekonline.in/business/13122-rajasthan-govt-permits-brick-kilns-to-operate>.

workers have long working hours and hazardous working conditions, the industry produces mineral worth 40000 crores and generates revenue of INR 4000crores for the state (IBEF 2018). Rajasthan is the only state that produces high-quality lime and supplies it to various industries across the nation. The lime is used as a natural ingredient in Sugar, Pharmaceuticals, water sanitization, bleaching powder, and hypochlorite. The shutting down of the production of minerals had significantly affected other industries that are forwardly linked with minerals and mining. The industry supplies raw material for many other industries, including fertilizers and petroleum, which are industries of national importance. More than 2.3 million people are directly and indirectly employed in the mining industry, near 37% of them are women; children also form a significant part of the mining workforce (MLPC, 2013). The restrictions under lockdown had shut most of the operating leases across the state and scrapped the associated employment of near 2 lakh individuals.

Rajasthan's Marble industry also forms a significant part of the economy as Rajasthan has substantial reserves of dimensional stones such as marble, granite, sandstone, and slate, with tremendous potential for exports and forward linkages with the construction industry. The Ajmer based Kishangarh Marble Mandi is the biggest in Asia and employs near 50000 laborers. The yard had a trade worth of INR 12000 crores every day, which was reduced during the lockdown to just INR 18-20 crores. In 200 marble-granite units of Chittorgarh district, more than 8000 individuals are employed. In Rajsamand district, there are 1800 marble mines, which are also linked to other cutters, gang saw, and transportation businesses; this marble business also employed nearly 50 to 60 thousand laborers. But due to lockdown the marble sector here has suffered a loss of almost INR 175 crore and as these businesses were shut, more than 1 lakh have lost employment³⁹. The Kishangarh mandi association did organize the accommodation and door to door food for more than 10000 migrants from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal and another 15000 laborers from these states were already on leave, who left for their home to celebrate the festival of Holi⁴⁰. Nevertheless, the picture from the labourer's perspective looked completely different; laborers brought it to attention of the media that the food being delivered to them is charged from their salary that the owners have not paid since April. Furthermore, the food and ration made available to the laborers are very

expensive. Many of the laborers only managed to eat just one meal a day. These precarious conditions were an apparent reason for laborers' desperation to go home. Apart from that, the textile industry was also negatively affected on a large scale.

The textile industry of Rajasthan has a turnover of INR 42,000 crore and is a source of employment for many individuals (IBEF 2018). Most of the textile industries are based in Bhilwara, Pali, and Barmer. Bhilwara's industry has a turnover of 20000 crores and employs nearly 80000 individuals; it is the largest manufacturer of suiting fabrics and yarn. There are approximately 1000 textile units in Barmer with a turnover of 15000 rupees and gave employment to 35000 laborers before lockdown, and Pali has a turnover of INR 7000 crore⁴¹. The Sanganer printing and sewing industry cluster is very popular in India, and even exports manufactured garments. There are approximately 960 small scale firms operating in this area and it employs nearly 14600 people directly and indirectly and is one of the area's largest income sources. The industry is labour-intensive; more than 80% of this industry's work is done manually. When the lockdown was imposed, the factories got closed, and the associated labour also lost employment. Most of the labour working here come from UP, Bihar, and from across the Nepal border. Due to sudden lockdown, most laborers have been stuck and are staying in the factory itself. The food is being arranged by the owners with safety measures⁴². While the Sanganer print industry firms already suffer from Financial and logistic challenges (Tambi, 2013), and most migrants in similar industries live in precarious living conditions, it is not clear to what extent these units can provide standard living conditions and necessities during a crisis.

In addition to these industries, Rajasthan is also the largest cement producer in India; the state has 21 major cement production plants with a production capacity of 50 million tonnes per annum. It has 17% of the total cement grade limestone reserves of the country (IBEF 2018). The lockdown sacrificed the most crucial season of the cement industries. The companies were even ready to work with a 10% production capacity in lockdown but could not work due to restrictions. The first quarter of the financial year from April to June is considered most important for cement production. After that, due to monsoon, the industry faces a demand shortage. The average annual demand for cement is 21.5 million tonnes; the first six months record sales of

³⁹ See <https://theprint.in/india/its-marble-industry-has-come-to-a-halt-rajsthans-kishangarh-looks-like-ghost-town-now/418246/>.

⁴⁰ (2020, April 1). दस हजार मजदूर बने परिवार का हिस्सा, पहुंचा रहे मदद (Ten thousand laborers became part of the family, delivering help). *Rajasthan Patrika*.

⁴¹ (2020, May 15). संभावनाएं अपार, सहयोग की दरकार (Possibilities immense, cooperation needed). *Rajasthan Patrika*.

⁴² (2020, April 14). लॉकडाउन हुए मजदूर (Workers in lockdown). *Rajasthan Patrika*.

9 million tons of which 5.5 million tons are sold in the first quarter⁴³. It is expected that the demand for cement roofing will increase in rural areas due to reverse migration because projects will be picked up faster as there will be no labour scarcity in the construction business in rural areas. Moreover, due to expectations of good monsoon, cement manufacturers expect good crop production and increase in Agri income, leading to increased cement and construction demand⁴⁴. Nevertheless, the rainfall in Rajasthan has been normal this year⁴⁵, and most people migrate because they do not have land or employment in their hometown or the family business, and agriculture cannot be sufficiently profitable for the family. Thus, the profitability and Agri-income will be shared by more members if they do not migrate back. meaning their real income will decrease, which may reduce the demand for cement and construction.

Implications for migrant labourers

Small Sector Industries (SSIs) employ most of the labour in the state; these industries and their associated laborers have been most vulnerable during the pandemic. The problem with small scale industries is that they face financial and logistic troubles, making them more vulnerable during an economic crisis⁴⁶. As a result, most of the labour working in these industries like brick-kiln, mining, textile, etc. is precarious both in terms of their working conditions and living conditions. For example, in Rajasthan's mining units, most of the workers work without helmets and masks (cost-cutting by owners), they live in cubicles made of a sheet that is no taller than 5 feet; also, there are no proper sanitation or safe drinking water facilities in spaces where migrants live (Sharma, 2014). These conditions depict the reality that most of the industrial labour live in. As the lockdown was imposed and these industries went shut, the condition for these units became bad to worse. Amid this situation of lockdown, we see owners making claims of organizing accommodation for laborers, however, these claims lack reliability, because these industries which could not manage to or did not intend to provide satisfactory living and working conditions for workers under normal circumstances, therefore it is highly unlikely that these conditions can be satisfactory

43 (2020, April 15). सीमेंट उद्योग खो रहा सबसे कीमती सीजन, अब राहत की आस (Cement industry is losing the most precious season, now there is hope for relief). *Rajasthan Patrika*.

44 See <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/markets/stocks/news/reverse-migration-likely-to-be-a-boon-for-cement-roofing-companies/articleshow/76386727.cms?from=mdr>.

45 See <https://www.hindustantimes.com/jaipur/parts-of-rajasthan-receive-light-to-moderate-rainfall/story-z6QF9nc2LxE7XmJ7UtXKJ.html>

46 See <https://www.businessinsider.in/business/startups/news/a-new-survey-shows-startups-msme-firms-are-running-out-of-cash/articleshow/76398244.cms>.

during a crisis. Example given below reflects upon the actual condition of life in factory premises during the lockdown.

“I have never seen such bad days. I have been surviving on one meal a day,” said 19-year-old Bajrangi Kumar, who has been working here since last year. Clad in a thin, torn vest with a towel wrapped around his waist, Kumar said he was not afraid of the virus and just wanted to go back home, especially since they were not being paid any wages. *The Print*⁴⁷

These words of a labourer from Kishangarh Marble Mandi, the largest marble association in Asia, which trades in thousand crores rupees, speaks of the precarity of migrant lives during the lockdown. The workers staying on-premises were not being paid wages, not even the wages that they earned in March; in addition to that, the money laborers saved was used to feed them by most of the associations and factory owners (Yadavar, 2020). The scale of such an impact is severe and monumental as more than 80% of the industrial units in Rajasthan fall under the category of small-scale industries. It is not logical to blame it all on industries because it costs around INR 6000 per month per worker to keep them on-premises and it is not economically feasible for already loss-making units running out of business. However, the government could have subsidised the living facilities for migrants, which clearly was not the case. Even with the best management of resources, if it is impossible for industries to accommodate labour then govt should have stepped in to subsidize help, but instead, the government took many such policy measures that made conditions more vulnerable. First, while making relaxations, the centre issued guidelines that only industries which can keep their workers on-premises can start operating without considering that it might lead to employers forcing their laborers to stay in the factory even when it is logistically not plausible for the SSIs to keep them on-premises. Government also did not consider that this might lead to exploitation of bonded and in-debt labour who are already forced to work for more than maximum hours and are not allowed to go home. The state government also escaped its responsibility by refusing to pay wages to laborers for the moratorium period under ESI and advised the owners to pay by themselves. Similarly, Railways also refused to pay compensation to families of 16 migrants

47 See <https://theprint.in/india/its-marble-industry-has-come-to-a-halt-rajasthans-kishangarh-looks-like-ghost-town-now/418246/>

who were killed in a train accident in Maharashtra with an excuse that the nature of accident did not fall under the category for compensation⁴⁸.

Furthermore, the state government in April legalised it to ask workers to work for 12 hours a day so that more production could take place with less quantity of labour⁴⁹. This is very problematic because long working hours is already a severe problem in many labour-intensive industries and many laborers are illegally forced into longer working hours, this guideline further in a way legitimised the exploitation, thus undoing many positive changes in this regard. These harsh and ignorant policies thus, played out to eliminate the remaining possibilities of this sector getting back on track soon. Apart from the guidelines the timing of governments response was also counterproductive. When the lockdown was in the lifting phase and industries could start operating again, the govt at its own expense, started organizing transportation facilities for workers to go home, this could have been one earlier. The fixed charge for industries also were not scrapped by the government, even though most of industries were not operating during months of lockdown, its impact on financial condition of industries was hazardous because commercial electricity rates in Rajasthan are highest in the country⁵⁰. When the already troubled industry gets further troubled by the government policies, the ultimate sufferer is the labour working in that industry.

Conclusion

The paper attempted to highlight the impact COVID-19 led reverse migration crisis had on various local political economies and how policy measures and guidelines were ineffective during this period. The crisis's impact is disproportionate because conditions in industries of informal labour are very dubious compared to the organized sector. Lower caste populations occupy a large majority in informal works like mining and brick-kiln, domestic work, and agricultural labour in Rajasthan, while the upper caste population either has sufficient land or most of them work in the organized sector⁵¹. The upward mobility was already restricted for these laborers due to the fragile and exploitative local political economies; in addition to that, state and central government's response to the pandemic as turned their social mobility rather downward. Even in a

48 See <https://theprint.in/india/why-railways-is-unlikely-to-pay-compensation-for-16-migrants-killed-in-a-rangabad/418231/>

49 See <https://thewire.in/labour/factory-workers-12-hour-shifts>

50 See <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/jaipur/rajsthans-commercial-electricity-rates-high-est-in-the-country/articleshow/69997025.cms>

51 98% of the workers in the mining industry of Rajasthan belong to Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST), 80% of the workers in brick-kilns of Rajasthan belongs to the SC population (Sharma, 2014)

health crisis, returning home back was a strong decision that migrants had to make, knowing that there are no livelihood sources waiting at home. The decision had to be taken due to their precarious conditions, it was not the fear of the virus, but it was the fear of vulnerability that led to decision which subsequently led to the crisis. While policymakers attempted to create employment for returning migrants, it was neither sufficient nor effective due to false reliance on MGNREGA and migrants were also not keen on working under MGNREGA⁵².

All these migrants driven out to their home have no survival means in a rural economy like Rajasthan, as their migration is primarily a response to lack of livelihood opportunities at their home. After extreme negligence, now when industrial activity has come to a halt and needs to be restarted soon, industries have begun offering to pay better wages to attract migrants back⁵³. Whereas workers would not have returned home in the first place if these industries and the government have provided satisfactory living conditions and minimum wages during and before crisis. When these migrants return, they deserve to not be further disappointed with dubious exploitation and fear of vulnerability. For the same, this research has attempted to provide insights into what happened to local political economies and migrant lives during the lockdown and suggest critical problems that need to be addressed. First, the displaced labour could not work during the crisis due to the problem of skill mismatch, which is inherent to the larger problem of the migration crisis. Rapid skill training programs by the government or employers for locally available labour can be beneficial in such a crisis. For example, in Jaipur, during the lockdown, the owner of the Aggarwal corrugating industries called the labourers who lost employment in their respective fields (primarily loading and unloading) from nearby villages and gave them training about packaging works⁵⁴. Previously, they were not skilled in these works, but now they were contributing to the industry and their livelihoods. A similar initiative can undoubtedly help restore labour demand and supply equilibriums in a crisis to some extent. Second, it is the exclusion and vulnerability of migrant lives from laws against exploitation that make migrant labour preferable to the locally available labour therefore, much inclusive, and effective anti-exploitation laws are needed in these local political economies to restore more stable and less exploitative

52 See <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/india/up-cm-yogi-adityanaths-promise-of-1-crore-jobs-far-fetched-migrant-workers-not-keen-to-work-in-state>

53 See <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/rajasthan-industries-offer-better-wages-conditions-to-lure-migrants-back/story-QLkqjBkj5guXogDvwnXORJ.html>

54 (2020, May 13). अनलॉडिंग श्रमकों को दी पैकेजिंग में दी दक्षता(Training/Efficiency in packaging work given to unloading workers). *Rajasthan Patrika*.

labour markets. Third, lack of residential facilities during lockdown was the primary factor leading to the crisis and making industrial labour vulnerable; the reverse migration crisis highlights that not only for economic migrants, but the lack of shelter homes is a massive problem for urban poor as well (Imaan, 2020). Fourth, the government should avoid imposing any additional financial hardships during a crisis and should rather announce sufficient relief measures for industries⁵⁵ because, as pointed out in earlier sections, the ultimate sufferers of industrial-economic hardship are the migrant labourers. The government can suggest laws to ensure that industries provide better living conditions to workers, and when it is out of their logistic scope, the government should step in to make suitable interventions. The idea here is not to just give shelter but to give shelter that significantly reduces their vulnerability in such a crisis. The COVID-19 migration crisis, while creating more vulnerabilities, has also highlighted the existing vulnerabilities, especially in poorer states like Rajasthan. Overall, there is a need for the state to step in with timely, practical, and inclusive policies for the poor and vulnerable so that the livelihood opportunities become more desirable, certain, and sustainable.

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