

## How Bihar can address the economic concerns of the returning migrants

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With agriculture and arts & crafts being the largest income generators in the rural areas, the State government must go all out to provide a further boost to both

these sector

Noted economist Jean Dreze recently stated that Bihar will be the worst-hit State due to the massive reverse migration triggered by the coronavirus pandemic. I could not agree with him more on this. According to a latest study by the Institute of Population Sciences, 50 per cent of Bihar households are exposed to migration. With the breadwinners of the family becoming unemployed, and seemingly in the absence of any concrete plan of the Bihar government to tackle this challenge, the State is staring at a social and economic doom.

Bihar is beholding an emotional *gaon wapsi* (home-coming) of migrant workers from across the country. But the bigger question is: What follows next? As part of a skill-profiling exercise by the State government, 98 per cent of the workers have expressed their determination not to return back even after the pandemic subsidies. Only time will tell if the State could really stand up to this challenge.

It is important that the government comes up with a comprehensive plan to mitigate the impact of reverse migration among rural population in India are agriculture and production of arts and crafts. Bihar has natural advantage in both these sectors, and therefore they should be given major attention in the government's plan.

### Food processing

Bihar is blessed with fertile soil, water, and favourable climatic conditions for cultivating a large variety of commodities such as rice, wheat, maize, fruits and vegetables. Bihar is the third highest producer of vegetables and the sixth highest producer of fruits in the country. The State accounts for 90 per cent of the world production of *makhana* and 40 per cent of the national production of litchi. Despite these natural advantages, the level of food processing that has enormous potential to generate large-scale employment in the State is very low. In general, the value addition of fruits and vegetables through processing in India is less than 10 per cent as against 88 per cent in a developed country like the UK.

In Bihar, the situation is also not encouraging. For example, approximately 80 per cent of litchi produced in the State is transported out of the State in fresh form. The remaining 20 per cent of the produce is consumed domestically with negligibly low processing and value addition. With other commodities also the situation is more or less the same. It is high time that agribusiness and food processing are aggressively promoted as the main sector for industrial development in the State. While doing so, the government should aim for making the people self-reliant by acting as a facilitator instead of a provider.

In order to tackle some of the major challenges in this sector, it is recommended that the government facilitates the adoption of modern agribusiness practices; provide support for the formation of cooperative societies at various levels in the supply chain, and encourage the formation of self-help groups. Consumers should be convinced through marketing campaigns to prefer the local goods in order to create a sustainable market with consistent demand for the products.

### Arts and crafts

The coronavirus lockdown has already taught us the role of locally produced items in our lives. The second largest source of income generation (after agriculture) is the production of arts and crafts. Bihar has a glorious past with rich art and cultural heritage. Bihar is home to some of India's finest art and crafts such as Madhubani painting, *tikuli* art, bamboo and cane crafts, wood carvings, *sikki* craft, stone carvings, Bhagalpuri silk and embroidery, etc. which are appreciated all over the world. India has a meagre 1.2 per cent share in the world handicraft market, and there is a tremendous scope for a State like Bihar to contribute to the development of this sector. Some challenges that are preventing the State from harnessing the economic potential of this sector include the unorganised nature of the sector, non-availability of credit from institutional sources, fragmented value chain, difficulty in catering to new markets, and lack of brand building exercise and market promotion.

Bihar can learn from the success stories of the Chanderi handloom cluster of Madhya Pradesh, the UMBVS of Rajasthan, and Co-optex of Tamil Nadu among many others. Being a caste and class-ridden State, it is also important that any such plan of the government receives the whole-hearted support from the people of Bihar.

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