

# Right to Return: Supporting returned migrant workers in their native villages

*This article is part of our Rural Reset series, where we evaluate forward-looking, long-term solutions to the issues and challenges facing the people of rural India. Check out our [LinkedIn page](#) every Wednesday to find proposals for innovative solutions in the areas of education, gender and livelihoods.*

At the start of the nationwide lockdown back in March, India saw the reversal of a multi-year trend of jobs and workers moving to cities in search of opportunity. Seemingly overnight, jobs and wages in urban areas dried up completely. And what followed was millions of migrant workers who once crossed state lines and moved many miles from their native villages making that long trek back to their homes and families. The relaxation of nationwide restrictions has led some employers to hire back their low-wage employees. However, many workers remain stranded in their native villages in search of ways to make a living.





This mass exodus from India's urban areas need not be a death

sentence. India's rapid urbanization over the last decade has certainly led to the growth of industries and opportunities. But the benefits of urbanization have come at the expense of the millions of rural villages and towns that remain home to the large majority of Indian families. This year's migrant worker crisis provides us with an opportunity to invest in these workers by investing in their native villages. By creating opportunities in the communities where people already live, we can economically empower millions and transform rural India into an economic powerhouse for the entire country. We must start by leveraging the existing talents of rural populations and supporting local ventures with skills and capital.

## **Expanding public works programs in rural communities**

Back in June the Indian government announced the creation of the [Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyan \(GKRA\)](#) program to carry out 50,000 crore of public works using returned migrant labor. These workers will be paid to work on projects from ministries ranging from Road Transport & Highways to New & Renewable Energy. Public works programs have the dual benefit of providing employment while improving wellbeing through new and expanded infrastructure, an area in which rural communities are severely lacking. While the GKRA program is a great start, non-governmental actors also have the ability to harness the power of a public works model to provide employment to returned migrant workers.

Much has been [written](#) on the ways that a lack of digital infrastructure in rural communities is exacerbating societal inequalities. Internet service providers (ISPs) and other digital enablers have the ability, through a public works based model, to hire migrant workers to expand broadband internet connectivity and other digital infrastructure to more

remote rural areas. While migrant workers benefit in the short term from the employment opportunity, the ISPs are able to expand their reach and customer base in the long-term. This is just one example of the power that private sector actors have to address the migrant worker crisis. Other private sector actors should follow in the government's lead and look for ways to enhance their business prospects while giving livelihood opportunities to returned workers.

## **Making entrepreneurship accessible to everyone**

For years, leaders in rural communities have been starting and operating their own entrepreneurial ventures. However, the barriers to the creation of a successful rural enterprise are numerous and lead many budding entrepreneurs to abandon their ventures or never start in the first place. To encourage sustainable entrepreneurship in returned migrant worker communities, they require the proper resources and business knowledge. Providing capital, skilling and advertising platforms to these fledgling entrepreneurs would help them get their ventures off the ground and provide one mechanism for migrant workers to support themselves financially.







# Making traditionally urban jobs rurally located

The pandemic has shown that with the proper infrastructure, many jobs that are traditionally held by those in rural areas can be performed all over the country. With this in mind, many employers now find themselves with flexibility as to where they choose to recruit from and locate their offices. As it stands, [65-75% of new corporate job entrants](#) each year are not job-ready or employable. While this statistic signals a larger issue with the Indian higher education and vocational training system, it also presents an opportunity to businesses. As employers must expand their job training programs to build the necessary skills in new hires they also have a chance to tap into, and train, non-traditional pools of talent. This opens the door to building a new workforce of rural employees.

For the last ten years at IndiVillage, we have been harnessing the power of impact sourcing to provide well-paying technology jobs to workers in rural communities. Although many of our employees have completed a diploma or degree from a local university, our robust training and onboarding operation enables us to hire a diverse workforce and develop their skills and capabilities over time. Businesses, particularly those within the tech industry, could follow this model by hiring and training returned migrant workers to start new, non-urban offices. This would provide the dual-benefit of businesses gaining access to new, lower-cost talent and workers gaining new skills and the ability to make a living. Embracing the new, remote-base working model gives businesses and workers the power to transform themselves completely.

## Conclusion:

We are currently faced with a once-in-a-generation chance to



shift the paradigm of work in India by re-orienting it around where people actually live. By choosing to support returned migrant workers in their native villages, we indicate as a country that our priorities lie not only with urban dwellers but people all over this vast nation. We now have the power to build thriving rural communities and open the doors of opportunity to all, regardless of where they live. Investing in the returned migrant workers is just the first step.