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Occupational Mobility and Deskilling Among Return Gulf Migrant Workers in Ghazipur District

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Abstract

This study examines the patterns of occupational mobility and the process of deskilling among return migrant workers from Gulf countries in Ghazipur, Uttar Pradesh. International migration is often associated with skill acquisition and improved economic conditions; however, the post-return experiences of migrants present significant challenges. Using a descriptive and analytical research design, the study is based on primary data collected through interviews and questionnaires, supported by secondary sources such as government reports and existing literature. The findings indicate that a large proportion of return migrants experience downward occupational mobility, shifting from relatively better-paying or semi-skilled jobs abroad to low-skilled and informal employment in their home region. Despite acquiring practical skills during their migration period, many workers face deskilling due to lack of recognition, limited local opportunities, and absence of institutional support. The study also highlights the role of structural factors such as labour market informality, regional inequality, and socio-economic background in shaping post-return outcomes. The paper concludes that while migration enhances income and provides skill exposure, its long-term benefits are constrained by inadequate reintegration mechanisms. It emphasizes the need for policies focusing on skill recognition, employment generation, and support for return migrants to ensure sustainable livelihood opportunities and improved socio-economic mobility.

Keywords - migrants, skilling, Gulf, deskilling, labour

Introduction

International labour migration has become a significant feature of contemporary globalization, particularly in countries like India, where large numbers of workers migrate to Gulf nations in search of better economic opportunities. People move from their home country to industrialized metropolitan areas with cutting-edge infrastructure and technology due to migration, which is a major economic factor. This migration offers chances to earn money, pick up new knowledge and skills, and advance the country's socioeconomic standing (Regmi, 2024).

Migration to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries is largely temporary and contract-based, with workers concentrated in sectors such as construction, services, and domestic work.

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In fact, the majority of Emiratis entering the workforce joined the private sector following the early 1970s oil price boom and the growth of economic activity in both sectors. Expatriates filled the majority of the labor shortages in both industries. The nation's efforts to diversify its economy have resulted in significant growth in the private sector and a large number of job opportunities, the majority of which have been filled by migrant workers (Elsayed, 2024). While migration is often associated with higher earnings and exposure to new skills, the return phase presents complex challenges, especially in terms of occupational mobility and deskilling (Regmi, 2024).

The most recent technological developments, knowledge, experience, skills, and remittances that migrants bring home increase economic growth, lower poverty, and supply the necessities for higher living standards back home (Regmi, 2024). When it comes to the economic effects on the labor exporting nations, contract migration and traditional settlement migration differ significantly (Ecevit and Zachariah, 1978; Athukorala, 1990). When it comes to settlement migration, the migrant's economic connections to his home country are severed severely. Nonetheless, return is a crucial component of contract migration, and as a result, the economic connections are maintained. The worker returns to his home country for permanent settlement, and the length of stay is explicitly stated in the work contract. Most of the time, these workers come back with some saved money and possibly even new skills from their work abroad. How they use these savings and new skills will have a significant impact on the home country's economy (Athukorala, 1990).

Return migration is more than just "going home." Returnees encounter significant challenges, especially when their return is not entirely voluntary. This study contends that such a return can only be sustained if returnees are given opportunities to reintegrate into the economic spheres (Ruben *et al*, 2018). Return migration is nowadays more broadly conceived as a stage within an ongoing migration cycle of spatial mobility (King, 2000; Anarfi and Jagare, 2005; Eastmond, 2006). Studies on circular migration typically assume that these movements are voluntary (Byron and Condon, 1996; Dustmann, 2003; McCormick and Wahba, 2003; Cassarino, 2004)., as stated by Ravenstein (1980:135, cited in Gmelch) in 1885: "Each main current of migration produces compensating counter currents."

Return migration is not merely a geographical movement but a socio-economic process involving reintegration into local labour markets. Many return migrants acquire technical and practical skills abroad; however, these skills often remain unrecognized or underutilized in their home regions. This leads to deskilling, where individuals are unable to apply their acquired competencies and are pushed into low-skilled or informal sector jobs. Reports by the International Labour Organization highlight that lack of formal certification and weak institutional mechanisms contribute significantly to skill mismatch in developing economies (ILO, 2019).

The issue of skill mismatch and informal employment is particularly relevant in the Indian context. Data from the Census of India (2011) shows that a significant proportion of internal and return migrants are absorbed into informal and low-paying occupations. Similarly, findings from the National Sample Survey Office and its recent Periodic Labour Force Survey reports indicate that a large share of the workforce in rural areas remains engaged in informal

employment with limited opportunities for skill utilization (NSSO, 2018; PLFS, 2022). These structural constraints make it difficult for return migrants to achieve upward occupational mobility.

The concept of occupational mobility is central to understanding the post-return experiences of migrants. It refers to changes in an individual's occupational status over time, including upward or downward movement. In many cases, return migrants experience downward mobility, shifting from relatively better-paying or semi-skilled jobs abroad to low-paid or casual work in their home regions. As noted by K. L. Sharma (2012), social mobility in India is deeply influenced by structural factors such as class, education, and regional disparities, which also shape migrants' reintegration outcomes.

In districts such as Ghazipur in Uttar Pradesh, which have a long history of out-migration to Gulf countries, return migration has become increasingly significant. The local economy, largely dependent on agriculture and informal sector activities, offers limited scope for absorbing return migrants into jobs that match their skills. This often results in a paradox where migrants are "skilled abroad but underemployed at home." Studies by S. Irudaya Rajan (2013) highlight that return migrants in India frequently face challenges of reintegration due to lack of policy support and inadequate recognition of overseas work experience.

From a sociological perspective, deskilling and occupational mobility are shaped by broader structural conditions such as labour market informality, social networks, education, and regional inequalities. As Amitabh Kundu (2007) argues, migration and urbanization processes in India often reproduce inequalities rather than eliminate them. Therefore, the experiences of return migrants must be understood within the wider socio-economic context of their origin regions.

This study focuses on examining the patterns of occupational mobility and the processes of deskilling among return Gulf migrant workers in Ghazipur district. By analyzing their post-return employment trajectories, the study aims to understand the extent to which migration contributes to sustainable livelihoods and the challenges migrants face in utilizing their acquired skills within the local labour market.

Migration from India to Gulf countries has been widely studied in terms of its economic, social, and labour market implications. A large body of literature shows that Indian migrant workers in the Gulf are primarily engaged in low-skilled and semi-skilled occupations. According to S. Irudaya Rajan (2013), migration has significantly contributed to household income and improved living standards; however, the long-term benefits of migration depend on the successful reintegration of migrants upon return.

Return migration has gained increasing attention in recent years, especially in the context of economic crises and the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies indicate that return migrants often face serious challenges in securing employment and maintaining income levels. As noted by Asma Khan and H. Arokkiaraj (2021), return migrants in India experience employment insecurity and are frequently absorbed into informal sectors, which limits their ability to utilize skills acquired abroad.

One of the key issues highlighted in the literature is skill mismatch and deskilling. Migrants often acquire technical and practical skills during their employment abroad, but these skills are not always recognized or transferable in the local labour market. According to the International Labour Organization (2019), lack of formal certification systems and weak institutional support lead to underutilization of migrant skills, resulting in deskilling. This is particularly evident in rural labour markets, where employment opportunities are limited and largely informal.

The concept of occupational mobility is central to understanding the post-return experiences of migrants. Occupational mobility refers to the movement of individuals between different job categories, which may be upward or downward. In the Indian context, return migrants often experience downward occupational mobility, shifting from relatively better-paying jobs abroad to low-paid or casual work at home. As argued by K. L. Sharma (2012), mobility patterns in India are shaped by structural constraints such as education, class, and regional disparities, which limit opportunities for upward movement.

Empirical evidence from national-level data also supports these findings. Reports from the Census of India (2011) and the Periodic Labour Force Survey (2022) reveal that a large proportion of the workforce in India is engaged in informal employment with low job security and limited scope for skill utilization. This structural condition restricts the absorption of return migrants into suitable occupations, thereby contributing to deskilling and underemployment.

Further, regional disparities play an important role in shaping migration outcomes. According to Amitabh Kundu (2007), migration and development patterns in India are uneven, with economically weaker regions such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar lacking adequate infrastructure and employment opportunities. As a result, return migrants in these regions face greater challenges in achieving occupational mobility compared to migrants in more developed states like Kerala.

Overall, the literature suggests that while migration to Gulf countries may lead to short-term economic gains and opportunities for skill acquisition, these benefits are not always sustained after return. Issues such as deskilling, occupational mismatch, and downward mobility remain persistent. However, most existing studies focus on macro-level trends or specific regions, with limited attention to district-level dynamics. Therefore, there is a need for localized studies focusing on areas like Ghazipur to better understand the processes of occupational mobility and deskilling among return migrants.

Research Methodology

Research Objectives

1. To examine the occupational mobility (upward/downward job changes) of return migrant workers after coming back to Ghazipur.
2. To analyze the process of deskilling experienced by migrants after returning from Gulf countries.
3. To understand the mismatch between skills acquired abroad and local job opportunities.

4. To explore the factors influencing occupational change, such as education, social background, and local labour market conditions.

Research Questions

- Do return migrants experience upward or downward mobility after returning?
- Why do some migrants face deskilling despite working abroad?
- Are their foreign-acquired skills recognized or underutilized locally?

1. Research Design

The present study adopted a descriptive and analytical research design to examine occupational mobility and deskilling among return migrant workers. The descriptive approach helped understand the socio-economic characteristics, educational backgrounds, migration experiences, and employment patterns of return migrants. The analytical approach focused on examining the relationship between migration experiences and occupational outcomes after returning home. Particular attention was given to changes in occupational status, skill utilization, income, and employment opportunities. The study investigated whether international migration contributes to occupational advancement or whether return migrants experience downward mobility, occupational stagnation, or deskilling due to limited employment opportunities and inadequate recognition of their skills in the local labour market.

2. Study Area

The study was conducted in Ghazipur district of Uttar Pradesh, which has a significant history of labour migration to Gulf countries. The district provides a suitable geographical setting for examining the experiences of workers who have returned after working abroad. The research focused on return migrants from different villages and localities of Ghazipur district who have previously been employed in Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain. The selection of the study area helped explore the relationship between international migration and changes in occupational conditions in the migrants' home region. The study examined their employment experiences before migration, during their stay abroad, and after returning to Ghazipur.

3. Data Sources

The research was based on both primary and secondary sources of data to develop a comprehensive understanding of occupational mobility and deskilling among return migrant workers.

Primary Data: Primary data were collected directly from selected respondents through structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaires gathered information about migrants' socio-economic backgrounds, educational qualifications, migration history, duration of employment abroad, occupations performed in Gulf countries, and skills acquired during migration. Information was also collected regarding

their current occupation, income, employment conditions, and difficulties in finding suitable work after returning home. Semi-structured interviews provided detailed insights into migrants' personal experiences, perceptions of skill recognition, and challenges in utilizing their acquired skills in the local labour market.

Secondary Data: Secondary information was obtained from Census of India reports, Periodic Labour Force Survey publications, International Labour Organization reports, government publications, academic books, research journals, and previous studies related to international migration, return migration, occupational mobility, and deskilling. These sources provided the theoretical and statistical background for the research and helped interpret the findings obtained through primary data collection.

4. Sampling Method

The study employed a purposive sampling method to select respondents who have worked in Gulf countries and subsequently returned to Ghazipur district. This method is appropriate because the research requires information from individuals with specific migration and employment experiences. A sample of approximately 50–100 return migrant workers was selected from different villages and localities of the district, depending on the availability of respondents and the resources allocated to the research. The sample included individuals with different educational qualifications, occupational backgrounds, and migration durations to ensure diversity in the information collected. The selection of respondents from different occupational groups helped provide a broader understanding of changes in employment and skill utilization after return.

5. Variables of the Study

The study examined various factors influencing occupational mobility and deskilling among return migrant workers. The independent variables included educational attainment, duration of migration, type of occupation performed abroad, level of skills acquired, and nature of employment in Gulf countries. These factors may influence the employment opportunities and occupational positions available to migrants after returning home. The dependent variables included current occupational status, occupational mobility, changes in income, skill utilization, and experiences of deskilling. By examining these variables, the study assessed whether migrants experience upward mobility, downward mobility, occupational stagnation, or a mismatch between their acquired skills and available employment opportunities.

6. Tools of Data Collection

Data were collected through structured questionnaires, interview schedules, and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire was used to gather quantitative information about respondents' socio-economic characteristics, occupational histories, migration duration, income levels, and employment conditions. The interview schedule helped collect qualitative information about migrants' experiences of skill acquisition, occupational changes, and employment difficulties after returning to Ghazipur. Observation may also be used as a supplementary method to understand the local employment environment and

occupational activities of return migrants wherever necessary. Participation in the study was voluntary, and the information collected was used for academic purposes while maintaining the confidentiality of respondents.

7. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive and comparative statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and tables, were used to present the socio-economic characteristics and occupational patterns of return migrants. Comparative analysis was conducted to examine differences between occupations held before migration, during employment in Gulf countries, and after returning to Ghazipur. Tables and charts were prepared to illustrate changes in occupational status, income, skill utilization, and employment conditions. Deskilling was examined by comparing the skills acquired abroad with the skills required and utilized in migrants' current occupations. Qualitative information from interviews was analyzed to identify common experiences and challenges relating to employment, skill recognition, and occupational mobility after return.

Conclusion

This study examined the patterns of occupational mobility and the processes of deskilling among return Gulf migrant workers in Ghazipur, Uttar Pradesh. The findings suggest that while migration to Gulf countries provides opportunities for income generation and exposure to new work environments, these benefits are not always sustained after return.

A significant number of return migrants experience downward occupational mobility, shifting from relatively better-paying or semi-skilled jobs abroad to low-paid and informal sector work in their home region. This reflects the limited capacity of the local labour market to absorb workers in occupations that match their acquired skills. The predominance of informal employment further restricts opportunities for stable and secure livelihoods.

The study also highlights the issue of deskilling, where skills acquired abroad remain underutilized or unrecognized in the local context. The absence of formal certification mechanisms, lack of institutional support, and weak linkages between skill development and employment contribute to this problem. As a result, migrants often face a mismatch between their capabilities and available job opportunities, leading to economic and social vulnerability.

From a sociological perspective, these outcomes are shaped by broader structural factors such as regional inequality, labour market informality, and socio-economic background. Migrants from less developed regions like eastern Uttar Pradesh encounter greater barriers to reintegration, which limits their chances of achieving upward mobility. Thus, migration does not automatically lead to long-term social and economic advancement.

In conclusion, while international migration can enhance human capital, its developmental potential remains constrained without effective reintegration mechanisms. There is a need for targeted policy interventions, including skill recognition systems, local employment generation, and support programs for return migrants. Addressing these issues can help

transform migration from a short-term survival strategy into a sustainable pathway for socio-economic development.

Ethical considerations & Limitations

Ethical considerations in this study include obtaining informed consent from all respondents, maintaining the confidentiality and anonymity of their information, and ensuring that participation is entirely voluntary. The study also has certain limitations, including a small sample size that may restrict the generalizability of the findings, reliance on self-reported data that may be subject to recall or response bias, and the limited availability of official data on return migrants, which may affect the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the analysis.

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