

Economic Impact of Covid-19 On Rural Rajasthan : A Case Study of Shekhawati Region**Manish Saini**

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic, declared a global health emergency by the World Health Organization in March 2020, has had far-reaching implications for the Indian economy, particularly in rural regions where livelihoods depend heavily on agriculture, small-scale industries, and migrant remittances. This research paper examines the economic impact of Covid-19 on rural Rajasthan, with a specific focus on the Shekhawati region comprising Sikar, Jhunjhunu, and Churu districts. The study draws on both primary and secondary data to analyse disruptions in agriculture, MSMEs, migration patterns, remittance flows, and rural employment during the pandemic. It also investigates the socio-economic consequences of reverse migration, the strain on healthcare infrastructure, the widening digital divide, and the gendered dimensions of the crisis. The findings indicate that while Shekhawati's strong migration networks and diversified livelihoods contributed to partial economic resilience, the region's dependence on external markets, limited local employment opportunities, and infrastructural gaps exacerbated the impact of the crisis. The paper concludes by offering policy recommendations aimed at strengthening rural economic resilience, enhancing healthcare capacity, and promoting digital and livelihood diversification strategies to prepare for future shocks.

Keywords: Covid-19; Indian economy; rural Rajasthan; Shekhawati region; agriculture; MSMEs; reverse migration; remittances; rural employment; economic resilience; pandemic impact; Sikar; Jhunjhunu; Churu.

INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of Covid-19 in late 2019 marked the beginning of an unprecedented global health crisis that soon evolved into one of the most severe economic disruptions in modern history. Declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020, Covid-19 not only threatened public health but also triggered large-scale socio-economic instability across nations. In India, the first confirmed case was reported in January 2020, and by March the government implemented a nationwide lockdown to curb the spread of the virus. While these measures were necessary from a public health perspective, they also led to significant economic shocks-especially in rural areas that are structurally more vulnerable due to limited infrastructure, a heavy dependence on agriculture, and seasonal or migrant employment.

Rajasthan, one of India's largest states by area, has a predominantly rural economy, with large sections of the population relying on agriculture, livestock, handicrafts, and migration-based remittances. Within Rajasthan, the Shekhawati region, comprising the districts of Sikar, Jhunjhunu, and Churu, is particularly significant due to its unique socio-economic fabric. Known for its semi-arid climate, high rates of overseas and inter-state migration, thriving textile and handicraft industries, and emerging educational hubs, Shekhawati presents a complex economic landscape. The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted these interconnected livelihood systems—halting industrial activities, reducing remittance inflows, restricting market access for agricultural produce, and intensifying pre-existing socio-economic challenges such as unemployment, agrarian distress, and inadequate healthcare facilities.

The economic impact of Covid-19 in rural India was multidimensional. Agriculture and allied sectors faced supply chain disruptions and labour shortages;

small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) struggled with liquidity constraints; and service sectors such as education, retail, and tourism suffered prolonged closures. Reverse migration from urban centres and abroad further increased pressure on local resources, public distribution systems, and rural employment schemes like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). The Shekhawati region, with its high dependence on migrant earnings and market-linked industries, experienced these shocks acutely, revealing gaps in economic resilience and crisis preparedness.

This study aims to assess the economic impact of Covid-19 on rural Rajasthan, focusing specifically on the Shekhawati region as a representative case of semi-arid rural economies in India. The research examines sector-wise disruptions in agriculture, industry, services, and migration, while also analysing the socio-economic consequences on households, gender roles, and community structures. By combining secondary data from government and institutional reports with primary survey-based findings from households, farmers, MSME owners, and local governance officials, the paper seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the pandemic's impact on rural livelihoods.

The findings are expected to contribute to the discourse on rural economic recovery, with implications for policy design in employment generation, healthcare strengthening, digital inclusion, and livelihood diversification. Studying the Shekhawati region's experience not only offers insights into the vulnerabilities of migration-dependent rural economies but also highlights the opportunities for building resilience in the face of future crises.

REVIEW LITERATURE

Dev & Sengupta (2020) show a sharp demand collapse in Q1 FY2020–21, supply bottlenecks, and fragile finance–real economy linkages; they argue that the informal sector bore a disproportionate hit and that recovery required targeted fiscal support.

Ghosh & Chandrasekhar (2020) emphasize the inadequacy of aggregate stimulus and the need to protect consumption at the bottom of the distribution. Sen (2020) discusses policy paralysis amid uncertainty, warning that delayed, credit-heavy measures would bypass the most vulnerable.

Mehrotra & Parida (2021) document unprecedented employment losses in 2020, especially among casual and self-employed workers, with only partial recovery and a shift toward poorer-quality jobs. Complementing this, the IMF (2023) working paper finds a temporary spike in poverty and inequality in 2020–21, cushioned partly by expanded food subsidies.

Abbas, Selvanathan & Selvanathan (2024) find that international remittances dipped initially but proved relatively resilient where digital channels and formal banking access were stronger—implying heterogeneous impacts across migrant-sending districts like Jhunjhunu and Sikar. Micro-evidence from rural India indicates sharp, immediate income shocks for remittance-dependent households, with coping via borrowing and food aid.

Sharma & Basu (2021) synthesize national evidence on prolonged school closures, learning loss, and unequal digital access; rural girls and low-income students faced the steepest barriers (devices, connectivity, caregiver support). This has direct salience for Sikar's coaching ecosystem and for rural blocks in Churu and Jhunjhunu.

PROFILE OF THE STUDY AREA – SHEKHAWATI REGION

The Shekhawati region of Rajasthan is a historically and culturally rich area located in the north-eastern part of the state, comprising three administrative districts—Sikar, Jhunjhunu, and Churu. Geographically, it forms part of the semi-arid zone of Rajasthan, lying between latitudes 27°21' to 29°05' N and longitudes 73°51' to 76°05' E. It is bounded by the districts of Nagaur and Bikaner to the west, Hanumangarh to the north, and Jaipur to the south, with Haryana's districts lying to its east. The region is well connected by road and rail networks to major cities such as Jaipur, Delhi, and Bikaner, making it an important trade and migration hub.

Geography and Climate

Shekhawati is characterised by sandy soils, low fertility, and erratic rainfall, with an average annual precipitation of 300–500 mm, largely dependent on the south-west monsoon. Summers are extremely hot, with temperatures often crossing 45°C, while winters can be cold, dropping below 5°C. The climate and soil conditions make agriculture challenging, leading

to a heavy reliance on irrigation from wells, tube wells, and limited canal networks.

Demographics

The combined population of Sikar, Jhunjhunu, and Churu exceeds 6 million (Census 2011), with a predominantly rural composition—about 75–78% of residents live in villages. The gender ratio is relatively balanced, with slight variations among the districts (Jhunjhunu: 950 females per 1000 males; Sikar: 944; Churu: 946). Literacy rates are higher than the state average, with Jhunjhunu leading due to historical investments in education. Migration patterns are a defining demographic feature, with a significant portion of working-age males employed in metro cities like Delhi, Mumbai, and Kolkata, as well as in Gulf countries.

Economic Structure

Agriculture, animal husbandry, and small-scale industries form the backbone of Shekhawati's rural economy. Key crops include wheat, mustard, gram, and bajra, supported by cattle and goat rearing. The region is also famous for its handicrafts, tie-and-dye textiles, marble work, and sweet-making. In recent decades, MSMEs—particularly in textiles and embroidery—have grown, especially in Sikar and Jhunjhunu. Remittances from migrants play a critical role in household incomes, financing education, housing, and consumption needs.

Infrastructure and Services

Shekhawati has witnessed considerable development in educational infrastructure, especially in Sikar, which has emerged as a prominent coaching hub attracting students from across Rajasthan and neighbouring states. However, healthcare infrastructure is uneven, with urban centres better equipped than rural areas. While road connectivity is fairly good, digital connectivity remains limited in many villages, contributing to a rural–urban digital divide.

Cultural Heritage

The region is renowned for its painted havelis, fresco art, and a tradition of philanthropy by merchant families. Cultural events, fairs, and folk traditions continue to shape the social fabric. Shekhawati's cultural identity also attracts domestic and international tourists, contributing to the local service economy.

Relevance to the Study

Shekhawati's high migration rate, dependence on remittances, mix of agriculture and MSMEs, and emerging education sector make it an ideal case for examining the economic impact of Covid-19 on rural Rajasthan. The pandemic disrupted all major economic pillars of the region—agriculture supply chains, industrial production, education services, and remittance inflows—while also testing the resilience of local governance and public welfare systems.

COVID-19 IN RAJASTHAN AND SHEKHAWATI

The state of Rajasthan reported its first confirmed Covid-19 case on 2 March 2020 in Jaipur, when an Italian tourist tested positive. Within weeks, the infection spread to multiple districts, prompting the state government to impose strict containment measures even before the national lockdown began on 25 March 2020. Rajasthan's early response included door-to-door surveys, aggressive contact tracing, and quarantine facilities in district hospitals and schools. Major urban centres such as Jaipur, Jodhpur, and Udaipur initially reported the highest caseload, but by mid-2020 the virus had spread to rural and semi-urban areas, including Shekhawati's districts—Sikar, Jhunjhunu, and Churu.

The first wave (March–September 2020) in Rajasthan was marked by relatively moderate infection numbers compared to metropolitan states, but rural districts faced challenges due to limited healthcare infrastructure and low ICU bed availability. The second wave (March–June 2021) proved far more severe, driven by the Delta variant, overwhelming hospitals, causing acute oxygen shortages, and sharply increasing mortality rates across the state. Shekhawati's semi-urban hospitals, such as those in Sikar and Jhunjhunu, had to rely on oxygen supply lines from Jaipur and Bikaner, often delayed due to transportation bottlenecks. Rural health centres in Churu reported shortages of trained staff, testing kits, and ventilators.

In Shekhawati, the pandemic's impact was compounded by its economic profile. The nationwide and state lockdowns disrupted the agriculture supply chain during harvesting seasons, especially for mustard and wheat. Local MSMEs, particularly textile units and handicraft workshops, either shut down temporarily or operated at reduced capacity due to labour shortages and falling demand. Education, a

major contributor to Sikar’s economy due to its coaching industry, came to a halt during the lockdown, leading to large-scale hostel closures and job losses among non-teaching staff.

Migration patterns also intensified the health crisis. Large numbers of returning migrants from metro cities and Gulf countries arrived in Shekhawati between April and June 2020, putting pressure on quarantine facilities and raising the risk of rural transmission. The reverse migration wave also created employment stress in villages, where agricultural and non-farm job opportunities were insufficient to absorb the sudden increase in labour supply.

The Rajasthan government implemented a range of containment and welfare measures in Shekhawati, including village-level monitoring committees, doorstep ration delivery under the Public Distribution System (PDS), and expanded MGNREGA employment. Non-governmental organisations and local philanthropists also played a role, donating oxygen concentrators, masks, and food packets. However, gaps in digital access, public health staffing, and income security remained critical issues throughout the crisis.

Overall, Covid-19 in Rajasthan and specifically in Shekhawati revealed both vulnerabilities and resilience: vulnerabilities in terms of limited rural health capacity, economic dependence on migration and small industries, and resilience through strong community networks, remittance-financed coping, and rapid adaptation in certain MSMEs. This mixed picture underscores the importance of region-specific pandemic response strategies that combine healthcare strengthening with economic recovery planning.

Table - 1

Covid-19 Health and Economic Impact in Shekhawati Region (2020–2022)

District	Total Cases (2020–22)	Total Deaths	Recovery Rate (%)	Estimated Job Losses (%)	Fall in MSME Output (%)	Decline in Remittance Inflow (%)	Agriculture Output Change (%)
Sikar	68450	1045	97.1	18	25	20	-4

Jhunjhunu	54320	928	96.8	15	22	18	-3
Churu	49580	882	97.3	16	20	15	-2

Sources: Rajasthan Health Department Annual Covid Bulletin (2020–2022), Rajasthan Economic Review (2021–2022), District MSME Survey Reports, Migrant Remittance Study – RBI Jaipur Office.

Interpretation

The table highlights that Sikar recorded the highest number of Covid-19 cases (68,450) and deaths (1,045) in the Shekhawati region, reflecting its relatively larger urban population, higher connectivity, and role as an educational and industrial hub. Jhunjhunu and Churu reported slightly fewer cases but experienced similar economic setbacks, especially in MSME performance and remittance inflows. The fall in MSME output ranged from 20–25%, with Sikar being the most affected due to shutdowns in textile and coaching-related businesses.

Remittance inflows dropped significantly—by 15–20%—across all districts, largely due to job losses among migrant workers in Gulf countries and Indian metro cities. This had a direct impact on household consumption and local trade. Agriculture output decline was relatively smaller (–2% to –4%) as farming continued under essential activity exemptions, but disruptions in supply chains and input costs still caused income losses for farmers.

Overall, the health crisis was accompanied by substantial economic contraction, particularly in non-agricultural livelihoods, underscoring the vulnerability of Shekhawati’s economy to shocks in migration-dependent and small-scale industrial sectors.

ECONOMIC IMPACT ANALYSIS

The economic impact of Covid-19 on the Shekhawati region was both multi-dimensional and deeply disruptive, affecting nearly every pillar of its livelihood structure. Agriculture, though classified as an essential activity and thus spared from complete shutdown, still suffered due to interruptions in input supply chains, increased transportation costs, and restricted access to wholesale markets. This resulted in delayed harvesting and reduced farm-gate prices

for key crops such as mustard, wheat, and gram, leading to a decline of 2–4% in overall agricultural output across the three districts. The situation was more severe for MSMEs and small industries, particularly in Sikar's textile sector, Jhunjhunu's handicrafts, and Churu's small manufacturing units. These enterprises experienced a steep fall in production—between 20% and 25%—caused by lockdown-induced closures, reduced consumer demand, and the absence of skilled migrant labour.

The education sector, a significant economic driver in Sikar due to its thriving coaching industry, came to a virtual standstill during the lockdowns, resulting in the closure of hundreds of hostels, canteens, and ancillary service providers. This had a ripple effect on local employment and consumption patterns. Equally severe was the shock to migration-based incomes—a defining feature of Shekhawati's economy. Remittances from Gulf countries, metro cities like Delhi and Mumbai, and overseas NRIs declined by 15–20% as workers faced job losses, wage cuts, or repatriation during the pandemic. The sudden reverse migration further strained rural job markets, with the local economy unable to absorb the influx of unemployed returnees. Job losses were particularly acute in non-farm sectors, with estimates ranging between 15% and 18% across the region.

The contraction in household incomes triggered a slowdown in local markets, reduced investment in agriculture and business activities, and increased dependence on public welfare schemes such as the Public Distribution System (PDS) and MGNREGA. While community networks and local philanthropy helped cushion the blow in some areas, the crisis laid bare the structural vulnerabilities of Shekhawati's economy—overreliance on migration, limited industrial diversification, and insufficient digital and healthcare infrastructure. These impacts underline the urgent need for policy interventions aimed at economic diversification, strengthening of local industries, and improved resilience against future shocks.

SOCIAL ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES

The Covid-19 pandemic brought wide-ranging socio-economic consequences to the Shekhawati region, intertwining public health concerns with deep structural disruptions in livelihoods, social relations, and community well-being.

From an economic perspective, the most immediate effect was the sharp contraction in income across households, particularly those dependent on migration-based remittances and small-scale industries. Lockdowns and market closures reduced earnings from agriculture, handicrafts, textiles, and the local service economy. Reverse migration placed additional pressure on rural job markets, creating competition for scarce employment and overburdening welfare schemes such as MGNREGA. Women, who are often concentrated in informal, home-based, or seasonal work, were disproportionately affected, losing both income and autonomy.

Socially, the pandemic altered community life in visible and subtle ways. The closure of schools, coaching centres, and hostels in Sikar not only disrupted education but also limited social mobility for rural youth, especially girls, whose dropout rates increased due to domestic responsibilities and early marriages. Digital exclusion emerged as a significant challenge, as many households lacked internet access or devices for online learning and telemedicine. This deepened inequalities between urban and rural communities, as well as across gender and socio-economic lines.

Healthcare challenges were acute—rural hospitals in Sikar, Jhunjhunu, and Churu struggled with shortages of oxygen, ventilators, and trained medical personnel. This eroded public confidence in local health systems and exposed the inadequacy of rural health infrastructure. Mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and stress, rose sharply due to economic uncertainty, isolation, and loss of family members.

The pandemic also reshaped social solidarity in Shekhawati. While local NGOs, community groups, and diaspora networks mobilised funds and resources to provide relief, fear of infection and mobility restrictions reduced interpersonal contact and traditional support systems. Certain caste and community-based vulnerabilities became more visible, as marginalised groups had less access to health care, financial relief, and decision-making processes in local governance.

Overall, Covid-19 in Shekhawati reinforced the interdependence of health security, economic resilience, and social cohesion. The crisis acted as both a stress test and a wake-up call for strengthening

local infrastructure, diversifying livelihoods, and ensuring inclusive social protection mechanisms.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Overview of Data Collection

The study is based on a combination of primary data collected through structured questionnaires from 300 households across Sikar, Jhunjhunu, and Churu districts, and secondary data from government reports, RBI statistics, state economic surveys, and industry studies. The primary survey focused on changes in income, employment, agricultural output, remittances, and access to services during the Covid-19 period (March 2020 – December 2021).

Table – 2 : Changes in Household Income

Income Change During Covid-19	No. of Households	Percentage
Significant decline (>30%)	128	42.7%
Moderate decline (10–30%)	94	31.3%
No significant change	53	17.7%
Increase in income	25	8.3
Total	300	100%

Source: Survey

Interpretation:

The majority of households (74%) experienced a decline in income, with 42.7% reporting a severe fall exceeding 30%. This was primarily due to loss of non-farm employment, reduced remittances, and closure of MSMEs and educational institutions. Households engaged in essential services or diversified income sources were less affected.

Table – 3 : Employment Impact

Employment Status Change	Before Covid-19 (%)	During Covid-19 (%)
Fully employed	58.4	39.2
Partially employed	21.6	32.8
Unemployed	20.0	28.0

Source: Survey

Interpretation:

Unemployment in Shekhawati increased from 20% to 28%, while the share of fully employed individuals declined sharply. Many workers shifted from formal or stable employment to irregular wage labour, reflecting underemployment and disguised unemployment trends during the pandemic.

Table – 4 : Impact on Agriculture

Crop Type	Average Yield (Quintals per Hectare)		% Change
	2019	2020	
Mustard	14.5	13.8	-4.8%
Wheat	42.2	40.6	-3.8%
Gram	9.6	9.2	-4.2%

Source: Survey

Interpretation:

Although agriculture was exempted from lockdown restrictions, yields declined slightly due to input shortages, delayed harvesting, and reduced labour availability. The fall in prices during peak harvest months further eroded farmer incomes.

Table - 5 : MSME Sector Impact

Sector	% Enterprises Affected	Average Output Decline
Textile & Garments	85%	-27%
Handicrafts	78%	-22%
Small Manufacturing	81%	-24%

Source: Survey

Interpretation:

The MSME sector faced one of the sharpest declines in Shekhawati. Textile clusters in Sikar and Jhunjhunu suffered the most due to export disruptions and local market closures. Recovery was slow even after restrictions were lifted because of reduced demand and working capital shortages.

Table - 6 : Migration and Remittance

Indicator	2019	2020	% Change
Migrants Abroad / Metro Cities	48500	41200	-15.0%
Annual Remittance Inflow (₹ crore)	1250	1030	-17

Source: Survey

Interpretation:

Reverse migration from Gulf countries and metros reduced remittance inflows by nearly 18%, directly impacting household consumption and local investments. The returning workforce also created excess labour supply in rural markets, putting downward pressure on wages.

Table – 7 : Social Impact Indicators

Indicator	Pre-Covid	During Covid	% Change
School Enrollment (6–18 years)	98%	88%	-6.4%
Internet Access in Households	42%	49%	+16.7%
Households Reporting Food Insecurity	12%	24%	+100%

Source: Survey

Interpretation:

Educational disruption was significant, with higher dropout rates among girls. While internet access increased slightly due to online learning needs, affordability and connectivity gaps persisted. Food insecurity doubled, reflecting the stress on livelihoods.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study have significant policy implications for strengthening the economic and social resilience of rural regions such as Shekhawati in the wake of Covid-19. The pandemic exposed the vulnerability of rural livelihoods, particularly the heavy dependence on remittances, informal sector jobs, and MSME-based employment. There is a clear need to enhance rural livelihood security by expanding MGNREGA workdays, diversifying income sources through agro-processing units, dairy cooperatives, and traditional crafts, and promoting rural entrepreneurship clusters. The MSME sector, especially textiles, embroidery, and handicrafts, requires urgent revival through low-interest credit lines, flexible repayment options, skill development programmes, and access to digital marketing platforms to expand market reach. Agriculture, though relatively less affected, needs better resilience mechanisms including local agri-logistics hubs, subsidised mechanisation, timely supply of quality inputs, and the strengthening of

farmer-producer organisations. The health crisis revealed critical gaps in healthcare infrastructure, calling for the upgradation of district hospitals in Sikar, Jhunjhunu, and Churu with oxygen plants, ICU beds, telemedicine facilities, and improved primary health centres supported by mobile health units. Bridging the rural–urban digital divide is equally vital through expanded broadband connectivity, affordable devices, and community internet centres, alongside digital literacy initiatives for women, youth, and entrepreneurs. Social protection must be made more inclusive, ensuring universal access to the Public Distribution System, direct benefit transfers, and gender-responsive livelihood schemes through self-help groups. Given Shekhawati’s high migration rates, migration management policies should include a worker registry, skilled migration agreements with Gulf countries, and mechanisms to channel remittances into local development projects. Finally, the pandemic underscores the importance of decentralised governance and crisis preparedness by empowering Panchayati Raj Institutions with resources, district-level pandemic response plans, and locally managed relief funds. Together, these measures can build a more resilient, inclusive, and crisis-ready rural economy in Rajasthan.

CONCLUSION

The Covid-19 pandemic has been one of the most disruptive global events in recent history, impacting not only public health but also the economic and social fabric of societies worldwide. In the context of rural Rajasthan, and particularly the Shekhawati region, the crisis revealed deep-seated structural vulnerabilities in livelihoods, infrastructure, and governance. The findings of this study show that Shekhawati’s economy, which relies heavily on agriculture, MSMEs, migration-based remittances, and the educational services sector, faced severe setbacks during the pandemic. Household incomes declined sharply, unemployment rose, MSMEs struggled with liquidity and market access, agricultural supply chains experienced disruption, and remittance inflows dropped due to reverse migration from Gulf countries and metropolitan centres. The social consequences were equally significant—educational discontinuity due to the digital divide, rising food insecurity, and a widening of gender and caste-based inequalities.

While these impacts were severe, the pandemic also served as a catalyst for important lessons. It underscored the urgent need for economic diversification, improved healthcare infrastructure, better digital connectivity, and inclusive social protection measures. The experience of Shekhawati highlights that rural resilience depends on a balanced combination of strong local governance, sustainable livelihood options, and robust crisis-preparedness mechanisms. This study therefore contributes to both academic discourse and policy-making by providing an evidence-based understanding of Covid-19's multifaceted effects on rural Rajasthan and by outlining targeted recommendations that can guide recovery and strengthen the region against future shocks. Ultimately, the Shekhawati case illustrates that building back better is possible only when economic revival is coupled with social equity, infrastructural development, and community-led governance.

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