

# Migrant Workers as builders of Modern India

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**Abstract:** The exodus of migrant workers from the cities following the announcement of the lockdown threw the spotlight on the vast number of Indians who live outside their home states. In 2011, India had 400 million internal migrants, a full third of its population, according to an estimate cited in a recent UN report, *Social Inclusion of Internal Migrants in India*. This represents mobility for the sake of livelihood, often seasonal. Reports say that 70-80% of migrants are women marriage transfers them from the father's home to the husband's likely to face harsh conditions and exploitation at work. Mobility has its advantages the promise of finding opportunities in a city. Migrants are often given the toughest, most hazardous or socially-looked-down-on jobs: work on construction sites, clearing waste or working as lowly-paid domestic help or security guards. Yet, their contribution to the economy and growth is immense. Estimates of remittances sent back home range from Rs 70,000 Crore to Rs 1,20,000 Crore every year. As India continues down the path of diversification of economic structure and urbanization, the number of migrants will go up. We need policies to create new towns and new paradigms of urban planning, to provide these builders of modern India something better than slums and ghettos to live in. But the first step towards institutional inclusion of migrants is Aadhaar. This paper sheds light on the Migrant Workers plight and their role in the development of the country.

**Keywords:** Mobility, Social Inclusion, Livelihood, Diversification, Development

## Introduction:

Living and working conditions of an average Indian migrant, despite their substantial numbers, often fall well below the standards of decent work and there is little political commitment to improving them. Formal contracts are non-existent and working and living conditions are determined by contractors rather than the welfare state. Few workers are aware of their rights as migrants and workers, never mind as citizens of India. Migrants are the perfect flexible workforce. According to the Census of 2011, there were 139 million interstate migrants (who moved for all manner of reasons ranging from education to marriage, not just employment). The data reconfirm the dominance of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar as well as other Hindi-speaking states as main source states, while Maharashtra, Delhi, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana absorbed half of the migrants.

However, there is still a major gap in that these data simply do not or cannot count circular migrants (who move short-term mainly for employment-related reasons) because of complex subcontracting practices and placement by recruitment agents such as dalals and thekedars, where migrant workers never appear on the books of employers. Data on circular migration of women for work are particularly weak because they are often in less visible forms of work or occupations such as household maids. Even in some districts which record the highest migration rates in the country, the number of interstate female migrants is suspiciously low. Take the case of South Delhi, which, according to the census, has 1.1 million interstate migrants but only around 27,000 female migrants who stated their main reason for migration as work/employment. This is most certainly an underestimate. According to the International Labour Organization, there are between 20 and 90 million domestic workers in India and many are migrants. Women's work is often unrecognized, and even more so if one is a migrant (another reason for the underestimation of women's circular migration is the failure to go beyond the primary reason for movement, which is marriage, and recognize that many work after marriage).

Worst hit by this sudden and surprise announcement is the country's poorest temporary internal migrants, estimated at over a hundred million, and who are engaged in complex circular and seasonal routes of migration. Within days of the lockdown announcement, harrowing accounts began pouring in of migrants dying of starvation, fatigue, and road accidents as they started their long treacherous journeys – of more than 1,000 km on foot – from cities back to their villages. The heavily policed bus terminals within cities and at state boundaries became the sites of violent migrant-police encounters, as police resorted to beating migrants with lathis for having violated the lockdown orders. A pandemic of this scale is usually feared because it exposes the limitations of public health. In India, however, COVID-19 has exposed the condition of the labour force. More than 100 million workers have reportedly lost employment. The nature of data collection does not allow us to know the exact number of migrant workers in this pool. Of the total workforce of India, around 90-92% (about 450 million) is informal, which means they work without social and employment security. Certain states, like Kerala, have effectively mobilized public resources to set up relief camps and community kitchens that provide housing and food for stranded migrants; other states, like Uttar Pradesh, made migrants who had managed to cross state boundaries squat on their haunches and be sprayed with chemical disinfectants.

## Explanation:

In the 1950s, development economists like Arthur Lewis were searching for ways in which newly independent countries could break their economic dependencies on the West and achieve economic growth through state-led industrialisation. Lewis saw labour as a key resource for postcolonial societies, and his economic theories focused on how "cheap labour" from the countryside could be incentivised to migrate and work in urban industries. Post liberalisation India is witnessing such large-scale internal labour migration. These migration routes, often from the east to the west of the country, rely on kinship networks of place and caste. Take, for instance, the Kendrapada district in Orissa – which earns the epithet of being India's plumbing capital, as migrants from this

region dominate the plumbing labour force in large metropolises, including Delhi. Or the large migrant labour force from the drought-prone Mehbubnagar (earlier called Palamuru) district in Telangana, who works on construction sites in Mumbai and other far-flung cities. "Palamuru labour" has now become a familiar stand-in term that attests to the skill and reliability of construction labour. But for many of these migrant journeys, it is not the anticipation of higher wages in the city that drives labour movement. Instead, what we are seeing in lockdown India are journeys of economic coercion where the abject lack of livelihoods in their home villages expels migrants to other parts of the country where work is available. If we map the spatial journeys of long-distance migration within India, the largest wave of internal migration is from the poorest districts of eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. It is agrarian distress in these regions that forces labour to migrate. A conservative estimate of migrants in this informal workforce would be more than 100 million (some estimates suggest up to 140). The growing informalisation, particularly in occupations of urban centres based on migration, reflects the casualisation of labour. The current labour strategies of survival by walking and withdrawing can hardly be understood in terms of 'temporary displacement'.

On May 1, the Central government responded to rising public and political opposition to the migrant crisis by belatedly introducing special Shramik (the Hindi word for labour) trains to take urban migrants back to their villages. It is striking to see their west-to-east routes: all of these trains originate in cities located in the western part of India and their destination is eastern regions. The Shramik trains were introduced with fanfare, but between train cancellations and exorbitant fares, these special trains have done little to bring relief to urban migrants, many of whom continue to embark on long journeys back home on foot. In short, in a twisted reverse Arthur Lewis strategy, the lockdown traps labour within urban enclaves in the western regions, preventing them from going back to their villages in the east.

The migrant crisis is only the most visible and brutal form of more enduring relations of dependency, where individuals in caste-based groups migrate but leave their family members back in their eastern villages. The sudden and surprise lockdown made visible the suspension of migrant lives and livelihoods across this spatial rift. Helping migrants who are in debt and weakened by starvation is vital not only because it is a moral duty, but also because a failure to do so will spell disaster for the country as a whole. We know that when the poor become poorer, there can be serious long-term impacts on economic growth. Studies have shown that one of the main mechanisms through which inequality affects growth and development is by limiting educational opportunities for children from poorer backgrounds, reducing their prospects for social mobility and breaking out of caste-based occupations.

It is unlikely that those migrants who survive this calamity will forget what happened to them during the pandemic and they are unlikely to return to places far away from home unless there are accessible insurance mechanisms in place for circular migrants in the informal economy. Again, this means that the Centre will need to relax its stance on establishing proof of identity and residence as well as registration for schemes. With faraway places being perceived as highly risky, we are more likely to see an increase in intrastate migration and a drop in long-distance interstate migration, a trend that has already been picked up by the census.

#### Conclusion:

In the absence of reliable, nationally representative statistics on circular migrants, the government will need to rely on industry, NGO and academic estimates of migrant numbers and work with them to provide relief efficiently to minimize suffering. The government should adopt a rapid universal benefits approach so that everyone has the right to support for basic needs of food and shelter regardless of their documentation status. The involvement of NGOs is also important to instil a sense of trust and confidence in relief efforts as faith in government welfare programmes is at an all-time low. In the medium-term, there is a need to improve understanding of migrant men, women and children's lived experiences of inclusion/exclusion, and the reasons for their migration which are highly varied. Domestic work is one of the most accessible forms of work for women and girls from poorer backgrounds without formal educational qualifications. It holds the potential to reduce poverty through the remittances they send. But the policy rhetoric about their migration usually portrays them as victims without recognizing their agency and the poverty-reducing impacts of their migration. While there is plenty of rich ethnographic research on such issues, the evidence is not informing policy which fails to differentiate between the vastly different experiences of different groups of migrants. In conclusion, circular migration must be given the recognition that has long been overdue, both in terms of understanding its patterns but also the huge role it plays in the country's development.

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