THE MIGRANT CRISIS AND THE WAY FORWARD

Based on First-hand Experiences

Divya Varma, Amrita Sharma and Rajiv Khandelwal*

Migration in the Times of COVID-19

The devastation faced by migrant workers in the aftermath of the lockdown will remain etched in public memory for a long time. Losing their employment overnight as a consequence of the hastily announced lockdown, lakhs of workers were brought to the brink of starvation in a matter of days. While a large number of them were asked to vacate their homes by their landlords, lakhs of them travelled on foot for days in a bid to get back to the relative safety of their homes. This included several families with infants, pregnant women and people with disabilities, thus turning this exodus into a full-blown humanitarian crisis.

When trains were finally declared after almost two months of the first lockdown announcement, their operations were marked by incredible apathy and lack of coordination between sending and receiving states. This led to mass deprivation of food and water for passengers undertaking long-distance journeys, resulting in the deaths of several migrant workers. Migrant workers, who were unfortunate enough to be still stranded in cities, were almost entirely out of the purview of the relief operations of urban local bodies. Trapped in congested living spaces, with very little access to water, sanitation and basic public health facilities, frequently in the periphery of the city, they were exceedingly vulnerable to infections and diseases. At the same time, those who braved the arduous journeys to reach their villages were also victims of wide-spread stigmatisation and harassment, as they were believed to be potential carriers of the disease.

In an economy paralysed by a massive liquidity crisis, where major labour-intensive industries are still struggling to get back on their feet, the biggest brunt is being borne by the workers who have raked up huge sums of money in wage arrears. Struggling to maintain even a basic level of consumption in their households, the lockdown has pushed a vast majority of such migrant families into severe indebtedness, acute poverty and malnutrition.

It is important to remember that many of these issues were not simply induced by the lockdown. In fact, they were pre-existing, structural issues that were merely aggravated by these unprecedented circumstances. This article attempts to examine in greater detail, the wide range of issues faced by India's internal labour migrants and the systemic factors that drive these vulnerabilities. It then proceeds to describe how Aajeevika Bureau, a pioneering public service initiative, has been working with communities dependent on labour and migration for over a decade now. The article also offers recommendations for reimagining our social contract with this vulnerable community of workers.

Prominent Migration Corridors

Economic Survey 2017 estimates that the magnitude of inter-state migration in India was close to nine million annually between 2011 and 2016, while Census 2011 pegs the total number of internal migrants in the country (accounting for inter-state and intra-state movement) at a staggering 139 million. Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are the biggest source states, followed closely by Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Jammu and Kashmir and West Bengal; while the major destination states are Delhi, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala. This also reflects a

** Rajiv Khandelwal is Co-founder and Executive Director at Aajeevika Bureau. Amrita Sharma leads the Centre for Migration and Labour Solutions (CMLS), a specialised knowledge institution within Aajeevika and Divya Varma leads its policy and partnerships work.*

movement from low Human Development Index states to the prominent economic centres in the country.

While some migration corridors such as UP-Mumbai, UP-Delhi and Odisha-Gujarat have been historic migration streams, West Bengal-Kerala and North East-Bangalore have gained prominence on India's migration map more recently.

South Rajasthan - Heavy Migration and High Distress

In the last three decades south Rajasthan has emerged as a major labour exporting hub in western India. The rapidly shifting livelihood scenario of the region has shaped the heavy out-migration reality facing its people. South Rajasthan comprises five districts- Udaipur, Dungarpur, Banswara, Rajsamand and Pratapgarh, all of which have a significant proportion of tribal population. In fact, the Scheduled Tribes account for 13.4% of the total population of Rajasthan. The five districts of south Rajasthan account for almost half (49.71%) of the total ST population of the state. Further, 55.47% of the population in these five districts comprise Scheduled Tribes (Primary Census Abstract, 2011).

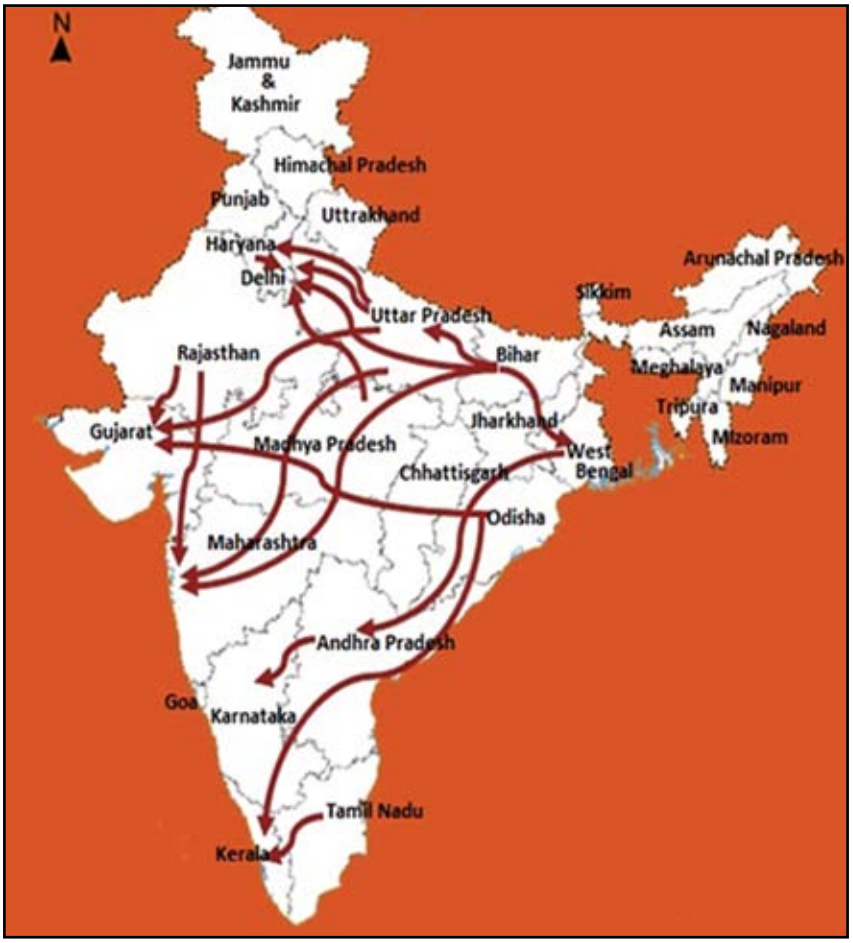


PHOTO CREDIT: [Adapted from IIPS, Mumbai- 2009]

The region receives low and erratic rainfall and the hilly terrain makes agriculture a high risk and uncertain livelihood option. Less than 27% of the total land is sown and most households are able to sow only a single crop in a year. Forest resources have dwindled over time and do not account for much in the household economy except in very isolated regions. Mining is widespread and other than construction activity and now MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) there is little by way of the non-farm sector enterprise. Labour is thus the most abundant resource in the region, driving the local economy. Primary surveys and studies conducted by Aajeevika to assess the incidence of migration across various blocks of south Rajasthan show that 57% of all rural households have at least one migrant worker.[1] The estimated total number of migrant workers from the region is over 800,000 and of this number, an overwhelming 80% comprises inter-state migrants.[2]

While southern Rajasthan witnesses slow growth and stagnant employment opportunities, the adjoining states of Gujarat and Maharashtra have emerged as major labour markets, given the high growth in their industrial and service sectors. These have become attractive destinations

for migrant workers from across the country, particularly so from south Rajasthan, given the proximity of the region and the ease of access.

Circular migration has become an essential livelihood strategy for rural poor in south Rajasthan. Even for households with some access to land and water resources, cash incomes earned from migration often become the means of sustenance above threshold level, paying for food, health expenses, social expenditures and education. In fact, in many communities, the poorest households often are those who are unable to send out a working member away to earn a living.

Moving Far and Wide

Wage labour as a means of livelihood is not new for tribal households, given their meagre private assets. However, their engagement in the labour market long remained confined to close-by regions within a district, and mostly on government sponsored employment programmes. Long distance migration has picked up considerably as distant labour markets grew and developed an informal recruitment mechanism penetrating deeper into the remote tribal populated areas of Rajasthan. Improved road networks and private transportation became the enabler for large scale labour movement from rural to urban and industrial areas.

Construction work and mining activity engage the largest number of tribal migrant workers from this region. In fact, the mining and quarrying enterprises have thrived on the availability of cheap tribal labour. Other employers of labour from south Rajasthan include brick-kilns, hotels and restaurants, domestic work, head-loading, factory work, textile markets, and farming. Brick kilns across Gujarat particularly engage tribal workers from Rajasthan who migrate with their family. The terms of employment in this sector are notably retrogressive – cash advances against pledged labour are common, frequently leading to bondage like conditions. The hotel and restaurant establishments across towns, cities and highways of the nearby states of Gujarat and Maharashtra, are sites of individual male migration but involve a significant proportion of hidden child labour. Among the rest, it is commonly preferred by the rural youth for better employment conditions and low risk, but payments are quite low with no social security benefits. In the industrial areas, factories and commodity markets of Gujarat, migrant labour is engaged in head loading or pushing carts. This is a physically punishing form of wage labour but employment is steady and the wages are relatively better, compared to other sectors. Small manufacturing and processing units are the other major, diverse clusters which provide employment. The textile market of Surat attracts thousands of young migrants, but few find long-term employment. A large number of tribal families seasonally migrate to farms in north Gujarat to work as share tenants, usually for a paltry share of the harvest.

Migration in India- a Life of Hardship

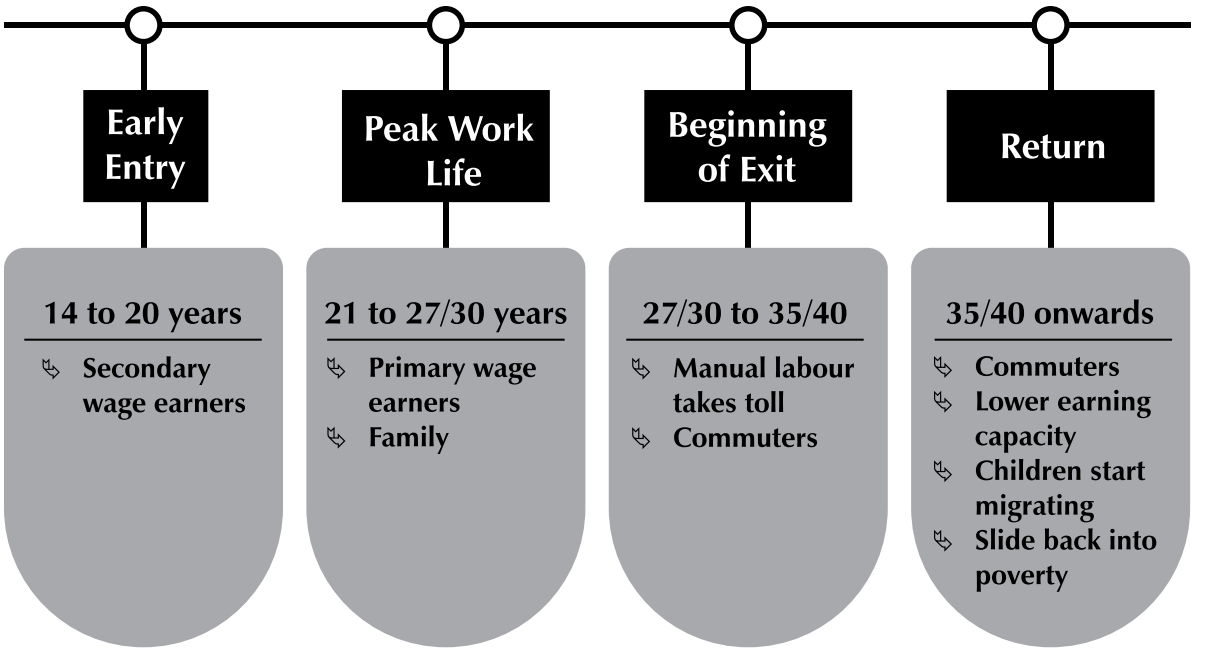
Low quality schooling in villages and a general consciousness that earning has to begin quickly drive young people out in the world of work quite early on. Most of the migrant youth end up in the lowermost, unorganised segment of the economy where work arrangements can be highly exploitative, offering survival wages, controlled by multiple layers of middlemen and ridden with abuse of workers' rights. The informal nature of work contracts, often verbal, also makes it difficult for labour to seek legal recourse or counsel in case of workplace accidents and wage-related disputes. In case of accidents or non-payment or withholding of wages, there are few platforms for workers to reach out to. There are several cases where workers enter the labour market, only to leave incapacitated, at a relatively young age. The gap in the labour markets, however, is readily filled by a younger pool of labour, only too eager to replace the older lot at cheaper wages. The economic life cycle of workers

is short, starting at 14-15 and ending at 35-40 years of age. Often the attempt to escape poverty at home does not lead to an improvement in the well-being of the family and the next generation is found embroiled in the same vortex (refer Figure 1).

and sanitation facilities. A recent research report by Aajeevika Bureau --- *Unlocking the Urban: Reimagining Migrant Lives in Cities Post COVID-19 (2020)* chronicles these living conditions in great detail. For instance, migrants living in worksites

one time daily for each family member) to use pay-and-use toilets. Lack of proper sanitation facilities poses a big burden on women workers, who have to relieve themselves in the open in wee hours of the morning, compounding difficulties during

Figure 1: Economic Life Cycle of a Migrant



In cities, workers are compelled to live in very poor conditions, in open spaces such as pavements, railway tracks, under flyovers; within the precarious confines of their worksites such as construction sites and small manufacturing units; in congested rental rooms in informal slum settlements. Excluded systematically from public provisioning in cities, migrants struggle to access even basic amenities such as water

in Ahmedabad reported that they are able to access only an average of 50 litres of water per capita per day while a minimum of 100 litres per capita per day is recommended for a healthy life. Similarly, about 83% migrants surveyed in Surat accessed shared toilets, with no upper limit on the number of people sharing; sometimes shelling out more than 1/10th of their monthly incomes --- (₹15-₹25

menstruation or pregnancy, sometimes even facing harassment from local caretakers for defecating in the open.[3]

Migrant workers are also completely left out of the ambit of the Public Distribution System (PDS) since they do not have ration cards that are valid at the destinations. Our study suggests that migrants thus end up spending up to 50% of their incomes on food and fuel. This

> ***Struggling to maintain a basic level of consumption in their households, the lockdown has pushed a vast majority of migrant families into severe indebtedness, acute poverty and malnutrition.***

exclusion extends to the health front as well. Therefore, despite having high disease burdens as a result of precarious work and living conditions, more than 90% of the migrants interviewed in the study reported that they preferred private clinics, including quacks or chemist shops. Migrant settlements, on account of being unenumerated or unrecognised as legitimate settlements, are also not serviced regularly by ASHA or ANM workers, thus posing a serious threat to nutrition and early child care for migrant children.[4]

Poor and congested living conditions, exorbitantly priced food, high levels of health risk and a near absence of urban public provisioning converge to create a complex web of distress around the life of a migrant worker. Though it does diffuse in certain aspects of migrants' urban life, a strong caste and social reality still overrides mobility, choices and opportunities available to migrant workers from disadvantaged backgrounds.

There is a visible segmentation in the job markets along caste lines, delimiting chances of occupational diversification and upward mobility for certain groups, including the workers from the tribal communities.

Back home, in the villages, the households of migrant workers are affected by fluctuations in incomes and increased insecurity. Women, in absence of their husbands, find it difficult to access institutional health services (Mohan *et al.*, 2014). They also face challenges in accessing their entitlements, such as work under the MGNREGA, which is often the only local wage labour option available to them. In a study covering two blocks in Udaipur and Dungarpur, a large number of women (37.5%) from migrant households reported that they never got work under MGNREGA, much lower than the incidence in non-migrant households.[5] Women from migrant households face greater exclusion and find it particularly difficult to access state welfare systems and its benefits.

Governance Exclusion

High mobility and long periods of absence from the native villages bring with it a whole set of added vulnerabilities for migrant workers. There are limited spaces for them to engage with local governance processes and voice their concerns. Migrants are often unable to participate in the electoral process not only in the villages which they have left behind but also in the cities where they live and work for most part of the year. Not being a vote bank of significance, they remain at the margins of consciousness among political representatives. In India, the right to vote is tied to domicile and is not portable. The current electoral infrastructure and rules within the country do not allow postal ballots for this group. Another study done by Aajeevika Bureau[6] revealed that 49% of workers had missed casting their votes due to migration more than once. There are instances of workers returning during elections for casting votes, but those are largely limited to elections at the Panchayat level. The engagement of the migrant families with Panchayat institutions is quite low. In the same study (Sharma *et al.*, 2011), the researchers found that neither the worker nor any of his family members ever approached a Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) representative from 57% of migrant families, for access to a government scheme or resolution of any civic problem.[7]

The situation was worse at the destination, where almost the entire sample of workers surveyed (98%) had never interacted with any official in a political party or local administrative bodies. A stark absence of local documentation compounded this exclusion. Over 95% of workers surveyed

did not have a ration card that was valid in the city, while over 80% of migrants did not have a Voter ID card. Over 90% did not have an electricity bill. All these documents are generally furnished to establish domicile, in the absence of which they get completely excluded from the scope of public provisioning in cities.[8] Urban governance frameworks of the country do not have an imagination of the issues faced by migrant workers and urban local bodies (ULB) do not consider them a legitimate presence in the cities. Their settlements are not recognised, nor are they part of the official enumeration of settlements by ULBs. This means that even basic urban infrastructure such as water and sanitation networks laid by the city do not reach migrant settlements. Devoid of voting rights in the city, migrants do not have any leverage with the local political actors, due to which they are absolutely outside all frameworks of decision making of urban governance institutions.[9]

Owing to this political apathy there is no credible documentation of seasonal labour movement at any level of the government in India. While on one hand, Panchayats have no records of the number of people migrating and their whereabouts, on the other hand, destination states or cities do not have any institutional mechanisms for enumerating migrant populations. The National Sample Survey (NSS) and Census are both deficient in defining and capturing seasonal labour migration suitably. This deficiency has serious costs as the large scale and growing circulation of footloose labour, largely comprising the more vulnerable groups from disadvantaged backgrounds, remains unaccounted for in our national policy frames. There is limited and poor understanding of labour recruitment channels, payment systems, terms of employment and problems faced by workers in transit and at work. The deficiencies of our statistical systems translate into policies with a perceptible sedentary bias. There is an emphasis on checking migration through employment generation programmes such as MGNREGA. There are few welfare schemes that allow portability of entitlements. The ones that do, such as the recent Ayushman Bharat and One Nation One Ration Card are ridden with significant design and implementation related challenges. The labour institutions *viz*. the labour departments and the labour courts, the custodians of labour interests, are increasingly incapacitated with limited local presence and ever-scarce resources.

Finding Voice, Visibility and Dignity for Seasonal Migrant Workers

Aajeevika Bureau was established in 2005 as a specialised organisation, offering livelihood and support services to migrant workers. It recognised the growing centrality of migration in rural livelihoods and the myriad problems that went unattended in all forums of local and national governance. Aajeevika works in pockets of high out-migration in southern Rajasthan and its major city destinations with the mandate of reducing hardships for vulnerable migrant groups, and enabling conditions that help them to leverage migration as a positive opportunity. The walk-in resource centres, namely *Shramik Sahayata evam Sandarbha Kendra*s, run by the organisation, offer a wide range of services (pre-departure registration, counseling, skill training, job placement etc.) to workers. They are located at both the ends of the migration corridor – the source, wherefrom workers migrate and at the destination, where they go out to work. This is partly in response to the reality that migrants are not a sedentary population but also in recognition that there is a strong rural–urban continuum in their lives and livelihoods. There has been a consistent effort to

> ***"It is imperative that the vulnerabilities and unique needs of the migrant community get recognised and accounted for in India's social policies."***

create sustainable community processes, comprising volunteer cadres, women leadership groups, workers' collectives and unions, community based advisory groups and engagement with the local governance structures, both in the villages and in the cities. It is within the framework of these community processes that the initiative is located and has become more impactful.

Thoughts on the Way Forward

The plight of migrants as a consequence of the nation-wide lockdown has resulted in immense public and policy attention to the issue. This needs to be leveraged to push for a systematic institutional response towards labour migration. It must be embedded in the intersection of 'informality' and 'mobility' since the vulnerabilities faced by migrants are driven by a combination of both these phenomena. The following are some of the broader approaches that can go a long way in fostering the inclusion of labour migrants in India's social policies:

- Enumeration of migrants and their movement at all levels of administration through self-registration so that there is a definitive account of the magnitude of this phenomenon.
- Recognition of the living spaces and settlements of migrants in cities so that they are purposefully embedded into the ambit of public provisioning and urban governance.
- Universalising social rights and public provisioning, irrespective of permanent domicile in cities, tenure security of settlements or employment status in the city so that migrants have dignified access to basic needs such as food, fuel, water and health.
- Legal liabilities on employers and landlords for the provision of decent living arrangements for migrants in cities.
- Approaches towards formalising work arrangements of labour migrants so as to ensure fair conditions, dignity and safety of work.

It is imperative that the vulnerabilities and unique needs of the migrant community get recognised and accounted for in India's social policies. It calls for a radical re-imagination of the notions of citizenship and universal access to social rights, so that the contribution of migrant workers in powering our economy is rewarded with hope, dignity and equity.

(Endnotes)

1. Aajeevika Bureau, 'Their Own Country: A Profile of Labour Migration from Rajasthan' (Udaipur: Rajasthan: Aajeevika Bureau, 2014).
2. *Id.*
3. Aajeevika Bureau, "Unlocking the Urban: Reimagining Migrant Lives in Cities Post COVID- 19"
4. *Id.*
5. Ali Z., Sharma A., Sivaramakrishnan D. (2013), Impact of Male Migration on Women Left Behind: A Study based in South Rajasthan", Paper presented at Aajeevika Knowledge Sharing Workshop September 2012
6. Sharma A., S. Poonia , M. Babar, V. Singh, P. Singh and L. K. Jha (2011), 'Political Inclusion of Migrant Workers: Perceptions, Realities and Challenges', Paper presented at Political Inclusion Workshop and their Access to Basic Services, Lucknow 10–11 March 2011.
7. *Id.*
8. Aajeevika Bureau, "Unlocking the Urban: Reimagining Migrant Lives in Cities Post COVID- 19"
9. *Id.*

> Nothing can stop the power of a committed and determined people to make a difference in our society. Why? Because human beings are the most dynamic link to the divine on this planet.
>
> *John Lewis*