



EDITORIAL

Migrant Workers and Labour Market Outcomes: Perspectives from the Field

Introduction

Geographic mobility has been a defining characteristic of the human race since prehistoric times. However, in a rapidly urbanizing post-globalised world, understanding the phenomenon of migration is key for us urban practitioners to imagine our future and form relevant strategies for human survival and development. The 2001 Census pegged 309 million people (out of 1.03 billion people in 2001) as migrants¹ while the National Sample Survey Organisation² estimates that 29 out of every 100 Indians are migrants. Most of these are long-term migrants for both work and family-related causes; however, there are varying estimates for short-term migration in India. The NSSO estimates the number of short-term migrants (those migrating for less than six months) to be 12.58 million. Other bodies of work e.g., Deshingkar (2006)³ and Srivastava (2005)⁴, which are referred to by papers in this issue, posit higher levels of short-term migration.

While conflicting data estimates remain an issue for further examination, there are other serious knowledge gaps at the macro level in our understanding of the process of internal migration in India. They are: role of migration on the urbanization of poverty, differences in the push and pull factors of regional migration, role of remittance as source of income and in reduction of poverty, the nature of urban livelihoods and the ability of migrants to access them, the effectiveness of migration as a livelihood strategy, the implication of rural-urban migration on city population growth, portability of rights and benefits for the migrants especially in minority and disadvantaged groups, and legal and social rights of the migrants at the destination. The set of papers in this

¹ Migration figures from the Census 2011 are still awaited

² National Sample Survey Organisation 2007-08

³ Deshingkar, P., (2006): "Internal migration, poverty and development in Asia", ODI Briefing Paper, No 11. October 2006.

⁴ Srivastava, Ravi. (2005): "India: Internal Migration and its links with Poverty and Development", in Migration, Development and Poverty Reduction in Asia, Geneva: International Organization for Migration.



issue are a modest attempt to provide insights from the field on the issue of migration and labour market outcomes.

Through primary research at various destinations, the papers shed light on the process of migration, experiences of job search and labour market challenges faced by migrant workers. Drawn from different states and cities, the papers provide a micro-level view of the life and decisions of migrants at both the source and the destination. A key message that emerges is the need to relook at the existing policies: rural policies that could serve to create more opportunities in non-farm sector in rural areas and urban policies that can work to accommodate and integrate the migrant workers, who contribute immensely to the growth of the cities they work in.

Drivers and Impacts of Migration

Current approaches to understanding the process of migration often overlook not just the contribution of migrant workers to the urban economy, but also the human perspective; what are the reasons for the decisions to migrate and the conditions of the individuals who decide to migrate? In India, seasonal migration is one of the most common strategies adopted by the rural people and is exacerbated by challenges like lack of irrigation water, extreme climatic conditions that put agricultural work at peril. Based on a comprehensive household survey of Gaisilat Block in Bargarh, Orissa, authors Kanhu Charan Majhi, Abhaya Chandra Tripathi and Jadumani Pradhan have argued that seasonal migration is the only means available for poor families to escape from poverty and subsistence insecurity and find wage employment. Their research found that over half the population of the block—predominantly the young—have migrated, not only to nearby areas and the neighbouring State of Andhra Pradesh, but also States further away like Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. The paper offers insights into the impacts of migration on livelihood. While intra-State migrants work as agricultural labour, inter-State migrants are occupied in a wide variety of livelihoods like brick making, construction, factory work and even in the hotel industry.

In another paper, Yogesh Kumar and Anamika Ajay argue that the decision to migrate is a conscious, self-made decision as part of a “livelihood strategy”. Their paper provides a rich description of seasonal migrants from the tribal district of Chhindwara in Madhya Pradesh to nearby cities especially Bhopal. Provided that workers have experience in agriculture related activities, they



largely migrate to other rural areas to work as agricultural labour, whereas the migration to cities mostly entails construction related work or as apprentices in shops, etc. Kumar and Ajay suggest that policy move beyond tech-based agricultural development programmes to look at aspects of finance, improved market linkages, development of non-farm skills as well as creation of non-farm job opportunities in rural areas. This is important since the current assumptions that guide policy are insensitive to the endemic socio-ecological challenges faced by rural citizens, which force them to migrate.

Labour Markets in Cities

The literature on job search and functioning of labour markets in Indian cities is under researched primarily because the NSSO surveys do not collect such information. Five papers in this issue attempt to fill this gap, primarily illustrating that while the decision to migrate might appear to be a strategic decision on the part of the migrant, the outcomes may not always be as positive as expected.

Based on the sample survey of migrants in Lucknow, which is a city with million plus population and is also prime destination for migrants from nearby districts and states, Probir Bose and Ranjee Rai provide insights on the job search process by migrant workers. While 80 percent of the respondents chosen Lucknow as their first migration destination, about 20 percent had worked elsewhere in cities like Delhi, Kanpur and Surat before seeking work in Lucknow. The desire for higher wages, non-availability of work and dislike for the kind of work engaged in are important factors that drive migration. While relatives, friends and job contractors are the primary channels for finding employment, many respondents had to wait for some period before getting their first job. The continued dependence on daily wage work found through the city's labour *chowks* even after eight and more years of migrating to the city indicates the limitations of the beneficial impacts of rural to urban migration.

Karthikeya Naraparaju's paper improves our understanding of the functioning of daily labour markets or *nakas* where migrant workers also actively seek work. He provides a description of how the daily labour market functions in Navi Mumbai. For these workers, the window for getting the work remains between 8 a.m. and 9 a.m. daily after which the probability of getting employment for that day decreases. On an average, these workers get



employment for 15 days a month with the daily wages varying between Rs. 270 and Rs. 575 depending on the nature of work: painters are paid highest followed by skilled construction workers. The bargaining powers of the workers is also important. One of the key problems faced by the workers is the risk of non-payment of wages. In this regard, Naraparaju points to the absence of any formal agreement and the fact that the workers are not organized.

A similar paper in the context of Hyderabad complements the Navi Mumbai paper. Triveni Goswami Vernal, Bagmi Priyadarshini, Sayed Nayeem and P. Raghavendra too focus on labour market outcomes of migrants who are primarily employed in informal activities. These migrants are generally daily workers searching for jobs in the daily labour markets or *labour addas*. Similar to the case of Navi Mumbai, most migrant labourers come to their respective labour addas in the morning and look for prospective employers. But they do not get work every day. Those who are attached with contractors or other skilled masons are likely to get regular employment. A recurring theme across the papers, which is also evident in Hyderabad, is that job search becomes very difficult without social networks.

Unlike the other studies that focus on job search process, Smita Premchander, V. Prameela, Shammeem Banu, K.G. Meenakshi, Hosalli Manjunath, T. Prema direct attention to the conditions of the migrant construction workers in Bangalore, which along with some other parts of Karnataka has emerged as major construction hub and hence attracted large number of inter-state migrants. They bring to light the web created by the multi-level contracting system prevalent at the construction sites. They describe the recruitment system and their working conditions. They outline what needs to be done to improve their livelihoods. They document differences in wages among female and male workers for the same work, several incidences of cheating and loss of wages, and harassment due to no local identity card.

Based on the study of a slum in Kolkata, Arpita Banerjee offers a gendered perspective on labour markets, contesting the role of women as “tied movers” and making a case for recognizing women migrants as workers and potential workers at the destination. She finds that a significant percentage of women migrants were workers before and after migration, entering the labour market at various points of time post-migration. The paper documents the feminine nature of women’s occupations that focus on home-based and domestic work.



Legal Protection for Migrant Workers

Another vital aspect addressed in the journal is the vulnerabilities and exploitation of migrant labour, especially in the cottonseed and brick kiln industries. In their paper, Ashok Khandelwal, Sudhir Katiyar and Madan Vaishnav look closely at the experiences of child labourers working on cottonseed farms in North Gujarat. They describe the use of child labour by farmers as an outcome of issues of pricing and unmanaged privatization. Apart from the abysmal working and living conditions of these children, the paper looks at the methods of contracting through *Mets*⁵ and the payment of advances that result in a condition of bondage. The paper posits that the complete lack of freedom impacts the psychological condition of these child labourers and perpetuates inter-generational poverty among tribals from southern Rajasthan who form the majority of workers in this industry. Khandelwal et.al also demonstrate the failure of the legal framework in India to protect child labourers in agriculture.

Another paper, from Action Aid, examines in detail the legal framework within which the brick kilns operate and the applicability of various laws that might help protect the workers from such exploitation. Brick kilns are one of the largest employers of migrant workers especially seasonal migrants in India. Workers in this industry are pulled into a vicious cycle wherein they are 'bound' to work at the brick kilns, irrespective of their will or wish.

Both papers suggest that legal solutions are important in addressing the issue of human bondage that still plagues India. Together with my overview of laws related to migrant workers, these two contributions underscore not only the need for updated and improved laws but also their effective implementation.

Book Reviews

I hope you also enjoy our book review section. In this issue, Chetan Vaidya critically reviews the book *Urbanization in India: Challenges, Opportunities and the Way Forward* edited by Isher Judge Ahluwalia, Ravi Kanbur and P.K. Mohanty. The book, through eleven thematic chapters, discusses challenges and solutions related to urban planning, infrastructure and sustainability in

⁵Local term for labour contractors



India. Pragma Sharma reviews *Perspective in Urban Development: Issues in Infrastructure, Planning and Governance*, edited by Ramanath Jha and Jyoti Chandiramani, a book that presents a comprehensive look at urban issues in India as a whole ranging from urban planning to JNNURM; from water; power; transport to citizen-corporate-government partnership; floor space index, green building, urban poverty and urban governance. Mukta Naik reviews Henrik Valeur's book titled *India: the Urban Transition - A Case Study of Development Urbanism* which advocates the implementation of sustainable development strategies to combat multiple issues that India is facing during its urban transition.

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