

Labour Migration to the Construction Sector in India and its Impact on Rural Poverty

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Abstract

The present article studies the impact of migration to the construction sector on rural poverty in India based on field survey. The survey has been carried out in two phases, the first phase involving the survey of construction workers in National Capital Region and the second phase comparing the well-being of migrant households with non migrant households in selected source villages. The study finds that at destination, workers have poor living and working conditions, lack citizenship rights, entitlements and voice. However, at the cost of hardship, low consumption levels, and possibly a smaller working life span, they manage to save a good portion of their income which they remit or take back home. At origin, migrant households report higher expenditure on consumption, residential housing, and children's education, as well as some other assets. These differences are a result of higher employment and wage incomes among migrants. However, we were not able to control for differences in initial conditions, and life cycle and other issues, which influence both participation in migration, as well as long-term impacts.

Keywords

Labour migration, remittances, working conditions, wages, construction, poverty, well-being

Introduction

In a period stretching over two and half decades, India has witnessed a growth pattern marked by agglomeration in and around pre-existing growth centres, accentuating already existing regional disparities in the country.¹ A concomitant outcome of these growth processes is that construction has emerged as one of the fastest growing industries in the metropolitan cities in India, drawing an ever-increasing pool of labour from rural areas. The contribution of the construction industry to GDP grew on average by

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14.6 per cent annually for the period 2001–2002 to 2012, making it third fastest growing industry, after other industries such as ‘trade, hotel, transport and communications’ and ‘finance, insurance, real estate and business’ (RBI, 2012). The sector has also emerged as one of the largest employer in India outside of agriculture and after trade, hotel and manufacturing, employing approximately 50 million people in 2011–2012 (Soundararajan, 2013). Significant portion of this workforce is seasonal migrant from resource poor regions.

India has one of the largest populations of poor in the world. According to World Bank Poverty Statistics 2012, as many as 32.7 per cent of population in India lives on less than \$1.25 a day (PPP). Much of these poor belong to disadvantaged communities that are largely concentrated in the resource poor regions (Srivastava & Sasikumar, 2005). Most of these regions are mainly located in the rain-fed parts of eastern and central India which continue to have low productivity in agriculture. Seasonal migration has emerged as an important livelihood strategy for much of the rural poor. Many of them migrate to work in the construction sector. According to latest National Sample Survey figures for 2007–2008, construction offers the main occupation for short duration migrants, absorbing 36.2 per cent of total short duration migration, followed by agriculture (20.4 per cent) and manufacturing (15.9 per cent) (Srivastava, 2011a).

Despite large number of workers involved in the construction sector, we have limited information on the impact of such large-scale migration on the well-being of workers in particular and on rural poverty in general. Much of these seasonal/temporary migrants are undercounted in data and are invisible in policy discourse. We identify this as an important gap in the literature.² This study of migrant construction workers adds to the literature by generating evidence from India on the impact of such migration on migrants themselves as well as their families in rural areas. The study is conducted in two phases. The first part of the article focuses on living and working conditions of migrant construction workers at destination in the National Capital Region (NCR) of Delhi, some of whom are later traced back to the source area. The second part entails a comparison of living standards maintained by the migrant worker families in the source area with a comparable control group, with the former including some households of migrant workers interviewed in NCR in the first phase. This article focuses on the source villages, while briefly mentioning some of the results from the survey at destination.

Methodology and Approach

The first phase of the study involves a quantitative household survey of construction workers in the regions in and around NCR. The survey covers workers engaged in three types of construction activities—construction of large residential complexes by organized sector firms; construction of commercial and office complexes by similar firms; and construction of individual residential premises, considered as unorganized sector activity.³ A total of 150 workers are interviewed in Delhi NCR, with 50 workers enumerated in each of three categories of firms.

In the second phase of the study, we traced some of the migrant workers interviewed in NCR to the source area that report maximum such migrants. Two villages that reported maximum migrant workers in the NCR survey are shortlisted for tracer survey. These include V1 from Malda district of West Bengal and V2 from Samastipur district of Bihar.

In both the tracer villages, a census is conducted to identify three categories of labour households—one category from which workers have migrated to the construction sector (Group 1), the second from whom labourers have migrated to sectors other than construction (Group 2) and the third category consisting of non-migrant labour households from which no labourer currently migrated out of the

village (Group 3). Households who do not rely predominantly on casual labour for their subsistence are excluded from the categorization. Thus, households from Groups 1 and 2 constitute treatment samples and households from Group 3 constitute the control sample. In the discussion that follows, we have compared these groups separately, or Groups 1 and 2 combined (where their characteristics are similar) with Group 3.

A total of 80 households are enumerated in the tracer survey, of which 35 sample households have at least one member of the households as migrant to the construction sector, 19 sample households have at least one member of the household as labourer in sectors other than construction, and 26 sample households have no member migrating out of village.

Working Condition of Construction Workers at Destination

Most of the construction workers interviewed in NCR belong to disadvantaged communities that include religious Muslim minority and lower castes such as Scheduled Tribes, and Scheduled Castes (SC) and Other Backward Castes (OBC). Most workers have poor educational background, with only 26 per cent of the sample workers reporting education higher than primary. Most of these workers largely rely on casual work as main source of livelihood even in their native place.

An overwhelming majority of the workers retain strong connections with the native place which they visit at the end of working season or during holidays or when there is not enough work at the destination, confirming their status as circulatory migrants. While some workers are recruited for a specific duration or seasonally, and go back to their places of origin at the end of this period, others stay on, rotating between one site and another, and return occasionally to their places of origin.⁴

The migrant workers access employment in the construction sector in the NCR through a social network comprising contractors, middlemen, relatives and acquaintances depending on type of firm he/she is engaged in. The recruitment of workers in the organized sector tends to be more large scale and is usually organized through a network of labour contractors, and labourers are usually recruited from distant states such as West Bengal, Bihar and Chhattisgarh. The terms and conditions of their employment vary between different migration streams but, in all cases, it is decided at origin. In some cases, the migration is for a fixed period, and the amount of advance payable, the contribution towards transport and food to be borne by the contractor is determined in advance. In other cases, there is more fluidity in the period of migration and the contribution made by the contractor, sometimes prolonging the period of employment to several years as the migrant workers are rotated between tasks and sites. In the small construction sites, recruitment is local and usually made by contractors also responsible for executing the construction-related tasks. These migrant workers usually come to the NCR through social networks and are drawn from neighbouring states (Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan). They have either remained in touch with the contractors or are recruited by them at the labour crossings which function as local labour markets.

Migrants work in poor conditions. Laws regarding the minimum wages are openly violated. Wages for a normal day of 8 hours for unskilled workers are found to be below the legislated minimum in NCR though they are higher than the prevailing wage at origin. Surprisingly, wages are higher for workers in the unorganized sector than in the organized sector, probably because a larger proportion of labourers in the former are locally recruited for shorter periods. Actual working hours per day are, on many occasions, found to be higher than 8 hours—usually about 12 hours, raising workers' remuneration on a per day basis. However, the labourers are paid the same wage rate as the normal hourly rate instead of higher wage rate, legislated for overtime work. There is not much impact in terms of skill acquisition

in the construction sector as there is a grossly inadequate provision for formal training. However, some workers, especially in smaller firms, are able to acquire skills on the job by working closely with skilled workers.

Despite a plethora of labour legislation to protect the interest of the labour, most of the labour laws in India remain unimplemented or poorly implemented, partly attributable to the poor enforcement capacity of the state and the collusion of employers and recruiters. The normal social security provisions, including special act legislated to safeguard the interest of the workers engaged in the sector, such as BOWCA in case of India, are either poorly implemented or non-existent. Knowledge among the workers about their legal labour-related entitlements is very low. Workers are neither unionized nor do they show any strong inclinations towards forming or joining unions or associations; this is mainly due to the fear of losing employment opportunities because employers prefer workers who are not unionized and who cannot bargain for better wages and working conditions.

Living conditions of the migrant workers and their families are extremely poor. Apart from providing wage subsistence requirements of migrants and basic accommodation at the sites, employers rarely take up other responsibility and do not internalize the legitimate costs of hiring labour. Majority of the workers across categories of industries live in accommodation that is either *katcha* or *jhuggi jupri*. Employers rarely provide any transportation facility for the workers living away from the sites and this is a significant expense for the workers. Most workers prefer to live with families and friends or co-workers perhaps as a safeguard against harsh conditions, in which they live, work and travel. Most workers lack government identity papers and do not have any local entitlements to government services and welfare programmes that require proof of identity. Though the workers are provided ID cards at times, the main purpose of such cards is to only help site managers manage the security of the sites and control the passage of individuals through them.

At worksites, there is no crèche facility for children accompanying migrant workers and their families. Worse, as the children accompany their parents to either help them with work or play at the site, they are exposed to various health hazards due to exposure of dust in the work site. As the schooling system at home does not take into account their migrant pattern and migrant status at destination places bar them from accessing facilities such as Anganwadi, ICDS, they remain deprived of education, confining them to the status of future unskilled labour much like their parents. Similar impact of short-term migration on children's education has been noted in the extant literature (Rogaly et al., 2001, 2002; Smita & Panjiar, 2007; Srivastava & Dasgupta, 2010).

Construction workers maintain a very low standard of living at destination. The skilled and unskilled migrant workers report per capita daily consumption expenditure of ₹38 and ₹55, respectively, which put them slightly above official urban poverty line of ₹32 a day announced by the Planning Commission in 2009–2010 but this benchmark has invited sharp criticism for being too low (*The Economic Times*, 2011), leading to the constitution of a new committee to re-examine issues relating to measurement of poverty. This broadly puts in perspective standard of living maintained by migrant labour in the construction sector, particularly those engaged as unskilled workers, who form the bulk of such workforce.

Though migrant workers maintain poor standard of living at destination, they manage to save some of their earnings which they remit to their families at the source area to stabilize and better their conditions of living. Such remittances sent by the migrant workers may even influence the pattern of growth and development in the source areas. As many as 147 workers in a sample of 150 workers maintain that they have sent remittances over the last one year. The skilled workers have sent as much as ₹36,810 as remittances that compares with ₹22,891 on average sent by unskilled workers. The impact of remittances on household economy could be via changes in the pattern of expenditure and investment.

Table 1. Percentage of Workers Reporting How Remittances is Spent across Different Skill Categories

	Skilled Workers	Unskilled Workers	Overall Workers
Purchased or mortgaged land	10.42	8.6	9.22
Purchased other farm or nonfarm productive assets	25	18.28	20.57
Improvement in housing	100	78.49	85.71
Purchased consumer durables	85.11	91.4	89.29
Repayment of debt and credit from money lenders/informal sources	29.79	35.48	33.57
Higher level of consumption especially during the lean season	78.26	88.17	84.89
Higher expenditure on children's education and health	77.78	63.04	67.88
Other	13.04	11.76	12.5

Source: Survey Data (Worker Survey in NCR).

Despite differences in the amount of remittances sent by skilled and unskilled workers, the use of remittances by both groups reflects similar spending and investment pattern (Table 1). Among various uses, purchase of consumer durables, improvement in housing and higher level of consumption during lean season occupy top priority for both groups of workers, suggesting definite improvement in their material condition in the native place. Evidence of other productive farm and non-farm investment, as noted in some other micro studies (Krishnaiah, 1997; Oberai & Singh, 1983; Sharma, 1997) is also found among the migrant workers in our study. While 20 per cent of the migrant workers report similar expenditure in our survey, about 1 in 10 migrants also purchase land.

However, cash income earned during migration period may not always add to the resource base of the migrant household. As many as 33 per cent of the workers report that they also use remittances to settle debt and credit from money lender/informal sources. The evidence of remittances being used in debt settlement has been noted in earlier studies (Mosse, Gupta, Mehta, Shah, Rees, & KRIBP Team, 2002; National Commission for Rural Labour [NCRL], 1991).

To assess the impact of migration, workers are asked to compare living and working conditions in their native place with those in the destination where they are living presently (Table 2). There is a clear dichotomy in the perception of workers regarding living conditions including housing on the one hand, and availability of employment and remuneration, on the other. Most workers perceive their housing conditions and living conditions generally worse in the destination areas. Only 19 per cent workers report their housing conditions as better at destination, and only 32 per cent report their general living condition as better at destination.

On the other hand, most workers report their working conditions, remuneration and availability of employment, and overall assessment as better at the place of destination than their native place. Such contrasts in responses reflect condition of sheer destitution in which they live in their native place and the decline of availability of livelihoods in the source areas. While responses are broadly similar for skilled and unskilled workers, a slightly smaller proportion of skilled workers report conditions at the destination as better. Overall, most workers interviewed attest to some positive impact of migration on the living conditions of workers, perhaps indicating conditions of sheer destitution in their native places. Most workers also agree that the extra income that they earn as migrant labour in the construction sector permit them better access to food and schooling by their children.

Table 2. Percentage of Workers on How they Compare Present Location with Native Place across Different Skill Categories

	Better Here	Same	Worse Here	Difficult to Say	Total
Housing					
Skilled workers	11.76	17.65	64.71	5.88	100
Unskilled workers	23.23	25.25	51.52	0.00	100
Total	19.33	22.67	56	2	100
Other living condition					
Skilled workers	27.45	17.65	49.02	5.88	100
Unskilled workers	34.34	16.16	47.47	2.02	100
Total	32	16.67	48	3.33	100
Working condition					
Skilled workers	98.04	1.96	0.00	0.00	100
Unskilled workers	96.97	3.03	0.00	0.00	100
Total	97.33	2.67	0.00	0.00	100
Amount of employment available					
Skilled workers	98.99	0.00	0.00	1.01	100
Unskilled workers	98.04	0.00	0.00	1.96	100
Total	98.67	0.00	0.00	1.33	100
Remuneration/earning					
Skilled workers	78.43	1.96	5.88	13.73	100
Unskilled workers	87.88	3.03	2.02	7.07	100
Total	84.67	2.67	3.33	9.33	100
Feeling of security					
Skilled workers	15.69	29.41	21.57	33.33	100
Unskilled workers	20.20	41.41	18.18	20.20	100
Total	18.67	37.33	19.33	24.67	100
Freedom from social constraints					
Skilled workers	32	20	4	44	100
Unskilled workers	35.71	36.73	3.06	24.49	100
Total	34.46	31.08	3.38	31.08	100
Overall					
Skilled workers	95.83	2.08	0.00	2.08	100
Unskilled workers	92.63	4.21	1.05	2.11	100
Total	93.71	3.50	0.70	2.10	100

Source: Survey Data (Worker Survey in NCR).

Profile of Sample Households at Source Area

In tracer villages, sample households either belong to socially disadvantaged groups such as lower castes and religious minority, reflecting the predominance of casual labour as livelihood option among such groups. In V1, SC and OBC account for 42.1 and 57.89 per cent of sample households, respectively. In V2, all the sample households belong to Muslim community.

Migrant households report higher percentage of family members in the age group of 15–39 years compared to their non-migrant counterparts in both V1 and V2 (Table 3). The average age of the migrant households is lesser compared to non-migrant households. In V1, the average age of the migrant

Table 3. Distribution of Family Members in Different Age Categories across Migrant Status

Age Profile	Migrant	Non-migrant
	V1	
0–14	33.2 (20.3)	36.2 (22.8)
15–39	44.5 (22.2)	36.9 (12.7)
40–59	17.8 (15.9)	21.7 (22.0)
60–above	4.5 (8.9)	5.3 (7.8)
	V2	
0–14	29.9 (21.5)	32.6 (26.8)
15–39	49.2 (16.8)	38.3 (26.5)
40–59	20.4 (18.0)	28.3 (37.1)
60 and above	0.5 (2.6)	0.8 (3.4)

Source: Survey Data (Tracer Survey).

households is 24.5 years that compares with 26.3 years reported by non-migrant households. In V2, the average age of the migrant households is 24.6 years that contrasts with 26.80 years reported by non-migrant households.

Further, the age profile of principal earners in migrant and non-migrant families shows not only that seasonal migration could be age selective, but also that there could be life cycle issues at play, with the older age profile of earners in non-migrant households (which could include former seasonal migrants). In V1, the average age of the principal earners in migrant and non-migrant households is 34.6 and 40.6 years, respectively, whereas in V2, the average age of the respective groups is 32.1 and 40.3 years. The relatively younger age profile of the migrant workers (who are generally the principal earners in migrant households) in the tracer survey confirms our observation in NCR worker survey that it is mostly young and active members of the households who participate in migration as livelihood strategy.

In both V1 and V2, migrant households report higher share of family members as literate compared to non-migrant households (Table 4). Migrant households in both villages retain better educational endeavour up to middle education level. However, non-migrant households have a higher percentage of population with secondary and higher education. Perhaps migration propensity among migrant households reduces the chances of secondary and higher education due to the mobility of adult males.

Table 4. Percentage Share of Educational Qualification of Household Members Aged 5 years and Above by Migrant Status in Two Villages

	Illiterate	Primary or less	Middle Education	Matriculate and above	Total
V1					
Migrant households	35.08	55.47	8.23	1.22	100
Non-migrant households	39.38	53.54	2.08	5	100
V2					
Migrant households	43.31	43.01	7.15	6.53	100
Non-migrant households	55.94	32.11	2.04	9.91	100

Source: Survey Data (Tracer Survey).

Table 5. Percentage Share of Households Who Report Ownership and Operation of Land Holding across Migrant Status in Two Villages

	Ownership of Landholding	Operation of Landholding
V1		
Migrant	16.67	33.33
Non-migrant	0	37.5
V2		
Migrant	58.33	12.5
Non-migrant	16.67	22.13

Source: Survey Data (Tracer Survey).

The ownership of landholding is more commonly observed among migrant households than their non-migrant counterparts in both our sample villages, indicating either better initial asset base of migrant households or subsequent land purchases made by them (Table 5). Fewer non-migrant households report ownership of land holding compared to migrant households. Though the ownership of landholding is miniscule among sample households across migrant status, migrant households report size of landholding which is larger than those reported by the non-migrant households.

Profile of Migrant Workers

The profile of migrant workers, when disaggregated at village level, shows that while SC and OBC account for 19.44 and 80.56 per cent of migrant workers in V1 respectively, migrant workers in V2 belong to Muslims. Within migrant households, only one out of five members of the households have confirmed their migrant status, perhaps indicating a growing trend towards migrating alone which may be suggestive of higher cost of migration or other barriers to migration noted in some other literature (Kundu, 2009). Such migration trend, as already noted in our worker survey, may also reflect long history of migration, with many workers already establishing bridgeheads at the destination. None of the migrant workers in two tracer villages is female, indicating male selective nature of labour outmigration in the study villages. Overall one-third of the migrant workers are unmarried.

Most of the migrant workers have poor education status, with 65 per cent of them reporting their education status as below primary education. Because of poor education status, only 10.64 per cent of migrant workers report as skilled workers, indicating that most migrant workers are stuck in low-skilled low-wage works. Such predominance of unskilled workers in the migrant workforce is observed in NCR survey. Most of the migrant workers work as daily wage workers.

Impact of Migration

The impact of short-term and seasonal migration on the source area is many dimensional. It depends on a number of factors, and their net impact determines the nature and extent of benefits accruing to migrant households. If migration is an involuntary response to the distress in the source area and workers are locked into debt migration cycle, benefits normally associated with earning differentials may not materialize at all and may even result in conditions of neo-bondage (Srivastava, 2004, 2009b). If such migration is voluntary and is driven by earning differentials in the destination, benefits do occur,

particularly when the initial endowments of migrant households are favourable. The impact on the source area may occur through a number of channels, which include changes in labour market, income, assets and how the remittances earned through migration is spent by migrant households. Some of the less direct ways through which migration impacts the source area include changes in attitudes and awareness, resulting in better perception of education and other qualities of life. Better exposure in the destination make migrant labour more assertive in their demand for better conditions and better wages even in the local labour market. Their attitude towards personalized labour relations also undergoes changes (Srivastava, 1999).

Impact on Education

The overall impact of migration on schooling and education of children is ambiguous. While migration with family seems to limit access to education by migrating children at destination, the effect on education in the source area seems to be positive. In V1, an equal 12.50 per cent of children in the age group of 5–14 years dropped out across migrant status, but in V2, only 6.67 per cent of the children of the migrant households drop out compared to 10 per cent of the children in the similar age group of the non-migrant households reporting dropout status (Table 6).

The percentage of school goers in 5–14 years age group is higher among migrant groups compared to non-migrants in both villages. These changes may have taken place both due to changes in attitudes towards education and higher earnings due to migration. Migration by rural households also affects the choice of schooling in favour of private schools. In V1, both migrant and non-migrant families send their children to public schools, a choice perhaps driven by unavailability of private schools in the area. However, in V2, while as many as 36.67 per cent of migrant households access private schools for their wards, no one from the non-migrant households report such preference. Migrant households spend more on education of their wards compared to their non-migrant neighbours in both villages, reflecting both attitudes and higher spending ability (Table 7).

That migrant households assign importance to education has also been confirmed in the worker survey in NCR where approximately 68 per cent migrant workers report using remittances for education of their children. Such evidence on use of remittances has also been noted in the NSS 64th Round (Srivastava, 2012). As many as 37.4 per cent migrant households spend part of the remittances to meet education and health expenditure of their children.

Impact on Diversification of Livelihood and Asset Portfolio

Apart from education, remittances sent by migrant labour may impact household well-being by adding to the asset base of the migrant labour in their native place and may even influence the pattern of growth

Table 6. Educational Status of Children in the Age Group 5–14 Years by Migrant Status in Two Villages

	Never Attended	Attended but Dropped	Currently Enrolled in School	Total
V1				
Migrant households	6.25	12.50	81.25	100
Non-migrant households	12.50	12.50	75.00	100
V2				
Migrant households	5.56	6.67	87.77	100
Non-migrant households	13.33	10.00	76.67	100

Source: Survey Data (Tracer Survey).

Table 7. Average Expenses on Education Incurred by Households across Different Migrant Profile in Two Villages

Villages/Household Type	Tuition Fees	Uniform Fees	Books/ Stationery	Others Including Transport	Total
V1					
Migrant households	1765.18	0	751.54	43.86	2560.57
Non-migrant households	30.00	0	225.00	0.00	255.00
V2					
Migrant households	3400.00	303.33	1301.67	1423.33	6428.33
Non-migrant households	1012.50	0	670.83	0	1683.33

Source: Survey Data (Tracer Survey).

and development in the source area. The assets purchased by migrant labour may be productive such as farm and transport equipments and livestock, the latter helping the migrant households to diversify their livelihood. However, as evidenced in our worker survey and also noted in the other literature, remittances may be used to purchase purely consumer durables and their impact on the acquisition of productive assets could be relatively less (Srivastava, 2011b).

There is very little difference in the present value of total assets owned by the migrant and non-migrant groups.⁵ Migrant households report average asset value of ₹24,364 that compares with ₹24,651 reported by non-migrant groups. However, the present asset value, when disaggregated at the village level, gives a contrasting picture. In V1, migrant households report average asset value of only ₹16,051 vis-à-vis ₹23,028 reported by the non-migrant households. In V2, migrant households on average report a high asset value of ₹34,755 that compares with ₹25,373 reported by non-migrant households. The disaggregation of assets owned by the sample households and how they finance purchase of such assets show that remittance plays an important role for migrant households in building their asset base (Table 8). In principally rain-fed areas such as our survey villages, ownership of livestock remains a key component of any strategy towards diversification of livelihood. A higher percentage of non-migrant households report ownership of livestock compared to migrant households (Table 8). Non-migrant households also report higher average value of livestock compared to migrant households. In V1, non-migrant households report ownership of livestock valued at ₹18,650 that compares with ₹10,138 reported by migrant households. In V2, non-migrant households report ownership of livestock valued at ₹16,042 that compares with ₹10,688 reported by migrant households. The average value of livestock purchased in the previous year by migrant households is, however, found to be higher than the purchase made by the non-migrant households (Table 8). Migrant households largely rely on remittances to purchase livestock, whereas non-migrant households mostly rely on savings from agriculture and non-agricultural earning to make such purchase.

Migrant households also report higher present value of farm assets and transport equipment purchased over the last year compared to the non-migrant households. Remittances account for much of such purchase by migrant households. Similar use of remittances for productive purposes was also reported in worker survey in NCR region.

Migrant households are also better placed in terms of values of residential properties. They report present value of their residences at ₹128,873 that compares with ₹103,077 reported by non-migrant households, reflecting their relatively better economic position compared to the non-migrant households. Higher percentage of migrant households report spending on repair and reconstruction of households over the last 10 years compared to the non-migrant households. As many as 59.26 per cent of migrant households report spending on reconstruction/repair of house over the last 10 years,

Table 8. Average Value of Purchase of Different Assets over Last Year and Sources of Finance

Migration Status	Average Value of Purchase Last Year	Percentage of Households Reporting Ownership	Savings from Agriculture	Non-agri-earnings	Remittances from Migrants	Credit
Migrant	1837.04	72.13	0	18.18	72.73	9.09
Non-migrant	1673.08	84.62	20	80	0	0
			Livestock			
			Farm equipment			
Migrant	793.52	27.78	28.57	21.34	50.09	0
Non-migrant	321.15	15.38	100	0	0	0
			Transport equipment			
Migrant	6346.3	66.67	11.42	25.9	62.68	0
Non-migrant	1107.69	57.69	40	60	0	0

Source: Tracer Survey.

compared to 53.27 per cent of non-migrant households reporting similar expenditure. Migrant households finance 85 per cent of such expenses through remittances sent by their migrant members.

The growing preference among migrant workers to spend their remittances/savings on consumer durables, as noted in the worker survey, has also been corroborated in the tracer survey. The migrant households report higher present and purchase value of consumer durables compared to the non-migrant households (Table 9). The former finance much of their purchases of consumer durables using remittances, which account for as much as 76 per cent of such purchase.

The qualitative information documented in case studies corroborates findings of quantitative analysis done so far on the impact of migration on rural livelihoods. Information collected from key informants such as *sarpanchs* and village elders and FGDs conducted with migrant households indicate improved access of migrant households to food, medical treatment and education of their children. Though a few migrant households interviewed even report purchase of durable assets such as scooter and motorcycle, earnings through migration are, however, rarely used, or are not enough to enable them to purchase land and other more productive assets which could lift them out of cycle of migration.

Debt Liabilities of Migrant and Non-migrant Labour Households

The cash income earned or remittances sent by migrant workers may not always add to the resource base of migrant households and may simply be used to adjust with earlier debts. The share of indebtedness is, however, noted to be higher among non-migrant households. As many as 26.92 per cent of non-migrant households report indebtedness that compares with only 9.26 per cent of migrant households reporting similar status. Money lenders still remain one of the preferred options of loans for both migrant and non-migrant households, with as many as three-quarters of the indebted households reporting money lenders as their choice for loans.

The use of remittances for settling debts and loans has also been noted in our workers' survey. As many as 33 per cent of migrant workers report remittances being used to settle debts and credit taken from money lenders and other informal sources. Similar evidence has also been noted in the extant literature (Mosse et al., 2002; NCRL, 1991), raising the issue of whether such migration is itself a result of debt at home or debt inter-locking involving employers in the destination areas or their middlemen. Migration triggered by such indebtedness may not add to the welfare of the rural households. Some studies have seen 'safety valve' feature in such migration strategies that serve as a mechanism to preserve a social mode of production or at least reduce the pressure on it (Standing, 1985).

Impact on Labour Market

One of the major channels through which migration impacts the source area is the labour market. The changes in labour market due to migration may occur in more than one ways. While the rural outmigration may help migrant family smooth employment over annual cycle, it may also cause a tightening of labour market, resulting in higher wages and thus benefiting even non-migrant labour households. However, such benefits may not occur if migrant households are replaced by female and even child labour. Apart from tightening of the labour market, migration may bring other qualitative changes in the functioning of the local labour market, including better wages and employment conditions. There are a number of well-documented studies of how migrant labour, after being exposed to urban markets, refuse to accept poorer working conditions even at the source areas.

At destination, migrant workers earn wages that fail to meet legislated minimum wages, but they are higher than wages received by non-migrant workers for both skilled and unskilled work at the source area, indicating that higher wages in the destinations works as a motivation for households to migrate to urban areas in expectation of higher earnings. Skilled migrant workers in V1 and V2 report daily wage of ₹400 and ₹475, respectively, that compares with ₹249 and ₹150 reported by skilled non-migrant

Table 9. Average Present and Purchase Value of Consumer Durables Reported by the Sample Households over the Last 10 years and How Such Purchase is Financed from Different Sources by Sample Households

Migrant Status	The Average Present Value of Consumer Durables	The Average Purchase Value of Consumer Durables	Percentage Share of Different Sources of Finance for Purchase of Consumer Durables		
			Savings from Agriculture	Non-agri-earnings	Remittances
Migrant	10,267	10,431	8.64	15.57	75.58
Non-migrant	4,949	6,841	11.56	88.44	0

Source: Survey Data (Tracer Survey).

workers in the respective villages. An unskilled male migrant worker reports daily wage of ₹236 and ₹221 in V1 and V2, respectively, which compare with ₹151 and ₹130 reported by an unskilled non-migrant male worker in the respective villages. Male members also avail higher number of days of employment in the destination compared to the source areas. At destination, skilled and unskilled migrant workers from V1 avail 90 days and 239 days of employment, respectively. In contrast, at source area, skilled and unskilled migrant workers from V1 avail 171 days and 113 days of employment, respectively. In V2, skilled and unskilled workers report 265 days and 221 days of employment at destination. In contrast, at source area, skilled and unskilled workers from V2 report 240 and 153 days of employment, respectively. The number of persons per family engaged as wage workers is also higher among migrant households compared to non-migrant households in V1 and V2, perhaps indicating higher employment opportunities in the destination compared to the source area. In V1, migrant households report, on average, three persons per family engaged as wage labour compared to 2.10 persons per family reported by non-migrant households. In V2, migrant households report that number of persons per family engaged as wage labour is 3.44 that compares with 2.46 reported by non-migrant households. Not surprisingly, migrant households report higher total wage income compared to the non-migrant households (Table 10).

While no female workers reports as migrant worker, rural labour market in the source area is marked by significant participation of female workers as wage labour. The presence of women as casual labour is observed across all castes and religions. In V1, 29.63 and 24.29 per cent women from SC and OBC report participation in local workforce. In V2, as many as 32.85 per cent of female workers among Muslim households report as wage workers. This only indicates an increasing trend of migration as livelihood strategy adopted by male members, while women members of these households take on a more proactive role in rural labour market, perhaps also pointing towards feminization of agriculture.

Impact on Consumption Expenditure

Literature on migration shows that consumption is one of the prime objects for which remittances are utilized (Deshingkar & Shaheen, 2009; Srivastava, 2011b). Evidence from NSSO 64th round indicates that expenditure on consumption and other basic necessities occupy high importance in the agenda of migrant households. The data collected from migrant households covered under NSSO 64th round suggest that as many as 75 per cent of migrant households use remittance to purchase food and 45.1 per cent of households purchase other essential consumption items (Srivastava, 2012).

Table 10. Total Wage Income and Remittances Reported by Migrant and Non-migrant Households

	Number of Households	Over All Households		Over Reporting Households	
		Total Wage	Total Remittance	Total Wage	Total Remittance
V1 Migrant households	8	60,638	42,199	72,765	50,639
Non-migrant households	30	38,900		38,900	
All households	38	56,061		64,555	
V2 Migrant households	18	82,402	69,738	89,893	76,077
Non-migrant households	24	44,881		50,491	
All households	42	66,322		73,303	

Source: Survey Data (Tracer Survey).

The data on current expenditure on food and non-food items are collected from both migrant and non-migrant households to assess income poverty among both categories of households. The blocks on consumption expenditure used in the tracer survey are longer than the abbreviated schedule used by the NSSO but are less detailed than the detailed consumption expenditure schedule used by that organization. The estimate of expenditure so obtained would, therefore, be a slight underestimate compared to the detailed schedule.

Though no direct data are available on whether and how much of remittances are used by migrant households to purchase food and other essential consumption items, per capita expenses reported by both migrant and non-migrant households on food, fuel and non-food consumption items suggest that migrant households spend more than their non-migrant counterparts (Table 11). The data on consumption of food and non-food even when disaggregated at the sub-migration stream at village level indicate an interesting pattern. Migrant worker households from construction sector report higher expenditure, followed by other migrant, with non-migrant households reporting the least expenditure on these headings. It seems that higher wages and remittances earned by migrant workers in the construction sector translate into higher expenditure on food and other essential consumption items. It should be recalled that the use of remittances for consumption purposes has also been noted in worker survey in NCR. As many as 85 per cent of workers in our first phase of survey report remittances being spent on consumption on food and non-food items.

However, the expenditure on health and education, when disaggregated at village level, gives a mixed picture. The migrant households from V2 reports higher spending on both schooling and medical expenses compared to their non-migrant counterparts. In V1, the migrant households spends more on

Table 11. Monthly Per Capita Expenditure (in rupees) of Different Items Consumed by Households of Different Migrant Status in Two Villages

	V1	V2
1) Food Expenses		
Construction migrant worker households	1074.13	1355.65
Other migrant worker households	803.06	1155.41
Non-migrant worker households	582.33	869.63
2) Non-food Expenses		
Construction migrant worker households	322.26	1005.04
Other migrant worker households	279.48	661.46
Non-migrant worker households	160.36	356.11
2a) Of Which: Education Expenses		
Construction migrant worker households	42.08	58.49
Other migrant worker households	36.16	160.33
Non-migrant worker households	8.07	29.32
2b) Of Which: Health Expenses		
Construction migrant worker households	27.07	79.06
Other migrant worker households	9.77	67.97
Non-migrant worker households	29.86	52.09
3) Overall Monthly Expenses		
Construction migrant worker households	1396.39	2360.69
Other migrant worker household	1082.54	1816.87
Non-migrant worker household	742.69	1225.74

Source: Survey Data (Tracer Survey).

education, but less on health compared to the non-migrant counterparts in the village.⁶ This indicates that though migrant households spend some part of income that accrues through remittances to enhance consumption of essentials, leading to better quality of life at the native place, this may not always lead to better outcomes on all social indicators.⁷

Impact on Working Life Span of Migrant Workers

One aspect that often gets overlooked in most migration studies is the impact of migration on working life span of seasonal migrant workers. As already noted in the worker survey in NCR, most of these workers are unskilled and work in poor working conditions, marked by inadequate breaks/holidays and safety equipments and high exposure to health hazards such as dust particles. They also live in poor living conditions. This brings in question whether higher earnings reported by migrant workers at destination represent a transient increase or the extent to which these can be sustained over time once workers go back to the source areas. Overlooking such aspects of migration may also have the danger of overestimating the impact of migration. Ideally one needs a panel data of age profile of migrant households, compared to non-migrant households, to be able to objectively assess the impact of migration on such issues. In our tracer survey, we have data on detailed age profile of family members of both migrant and non-migrant households. We carefully identify active household member of each of the sample households in the source area and compare their ages across migrant status. The average age of economically most active members of non-migrant households is 40.39 years that compares with 33.50 years reported by the migrant households. The average age of migrant households, when disaggregated at different migration status, shows that the average age of the most active members of construction migrant households and other migrant households are 32.71 and 34.94 years, respectively, which is not surprising, given that working in construction industries is physically highly demanding. While we cannot make any definitive conclusion on life expectancy with the present survey data set, we can make a tentative conclusion that the active working life of migrant workers is probably shorter than of non-migrants, due to physically and otherwise demanding nature of work in the construction industry and other industries to which seasonal migrants migrate. We have little knowledge of how the physical hardship in the period of migration affects the life of the migrant worker after he/she ceases to migrate. This constitutes an interesting research agenda for future.

Perception among Rural Households on Change in Socio-economic Status

To assess the impact of migration on the quality of life, sample households—both migrant and non-migrant households—are asked a few questions on their subjective evaluation of socio-economic position, health, sanitation and hygiene status vis-à-vis both their neighbours, as well as their own status 5 and 10 years ago. In terms of their overall socio-economic status, households of all sample categories perceive improvements in socio-economic position over last 10 years (Table 12). However, on closer look, the responses by migrant and non-migrants reflect disparate levels of improvement in their relative well-being across time. Not only are there higher percentage of households among the migrant households who think that they are in the lower and high middle class, but also the rate of change in the perception of change from low class to middle class over the last 10 years is much higher among them, perhaps indicating positive impact of migration on their quality of life.

Our questions on the subjective evaluation of the sample households also includes how they perceive changes in their family's and community's status on three separate major dimensions, viz., (a) health,

Table 12. Percentage Share of How Households Rate their Socio-economic Position Compared to their Neighbours

Migrant Status	Low Class	Lower Middle Class	High Middle Class	Wealthy	Total
Now					
Migrant worker household	16.00	52.00	30.00	2.00	100
Non-migrant worker household	57.69	34.62	7.69	0	100
5 years ago					
Migrant worker household	26.00	66.00	8.00	0	100
Non-migrant worker household	80.77	19.23	0	0	100
10 years ago					
Migrant worker household	60.00	40.00	0	0	100
Non-migrant worker household	88.46	11.54	0	0	100

Source: Survey Data (Tracer Survey).

sanitation and hygiene; (b) education of children; (c) food adequacy, at present, in comparison to 5 and 10 years ago.

The responses by the sample households again give impression of not only migrant households being better placed compared to non-migrants, but also that they also have witnessed faster change in their status compared to the non-migrant households.

Table 13 reports how the sample households perceive their status on health and sanitation. Migrant households, however, did perceive their status to be better off even 10 years ago. Only 43.75 per cent of migrant households perceived their health and sanitation status to be poor 10 years ago compared to 84.6 per cent of non-migrant households having similar opinion about their health status. Non-migrant households have, by and large, extricated themselves from the poor status in which they found themselves 10 years ago.

But more than two-thirds among the migrant households now see their health status to be good or very good compared to a negligible percentage 10 years ago, whereas less than a quarter of non-migrants households see their current health and sanitation status as being good.

Table 13. Percentage Share of How Households Perceive their Health, Sanitation and Hygiene Compared to their Past

Migrant Status	Poor	Somewhat Better	Good	Very Good	Total
Now					
Migrant worker households	0.00	31.25	62.50	6.25	100
Non-migrant worker households	3.85	73.08	23.08	0	100
5 years ago					
Migrant worker households	14.58	56.25	29.17	0	100
Non-migrant worker households	61.54	38.46	0	0	100
10 years ago					
Migrant worker households	43.75	54.17	2.08	0	100
Non-migrant worker households	84.62	15.38	0	0	100

Source: Survey Data (Tracer Survey).

Table 14. Percentage Share of How Households Assess the Infrastructure, Sanitation and Hygiene of their Community

Migrant Status	Poor	Somewhat Better	Good	Very Good	Total
Now					
Migrant worker households	2.08	56.25	41.67	0.00	100
Non-migrant worker households	0.00	34.62	65.38	0	100
5 years ago					
Migrant worker households	14.58	62.50	22.92	0	100
Non-migrant worker households	7.69	61.54	30.77	0	100
10 years ago					
Migrant worker households	77.08	20.83	2.08	0	100
Non-migrant worker households	53.85	46.15	0	0	100

Source: Survey Data (Tracer Survey).

Strangely enough, the perceptions of the migrant households on their status on parameters such as health and hygiene are not reflected in how they think about their community on similar indicators, perhaps underscoring higher inequality among those who are left behind (Table 14). This is in sharp contrast with how non-migrants feel about infrastructure, sanitation and hygiene of their community. Their perceptions of the community status on these indicators are better than migrants both now and past. However, these perceptions are subjective and may also get shaped by different exposure at work place. This is particularly true for the migrant households, most of whom come to metropolitan cities, where the perceptions of hygiene, sanitation and infrastructure are different from those in the source areas.

The questions on household's perceptions of food adequacy also confirm what the data on per capita consumption expenditure have already revealed. Though both the migrant and non-migrant households have witnessed improvement in the adequacy of food, the percentage of respondents who think that their food consumption is adequate or plenty is much higher among migrant labour households than the non-migrant ones. Going by their perceptions, migrant labour households have also witnessed faster changes in their status on food adequacy compared to their non-migrant counterparts (Table 15).

Table 15. Percentage Share of How Households Think of their Family Food Consumption Adequacy

Migrant Status	Extremely Inadequate	Slightly Inadequate	Adequate	Plenty	Total
Now					
Migrant worker households	0.00	2.08	27.08	70.83	100
Non-migrant worker households	0.00	0.00	76.92	23.08	100
5 years ago					
Migrant worker households	0	4.17	79.17	16.66	100
Non-migrant worker households	0	26.92	61.54	11.54	100
10 years ago					
Migrant worker households	6.25	27.08	66.67	0	100
Non-migrant worker households	15.38	53.85	31	0	100

Source: Survey Data (Tracer Survey).

Interestingly, on most indicators, such as socio-economic position, access to health, sanitation and hygiene and adequacy of food, migrant households have better perception of their lives even 10 years ago. This observation lends credence to the point noted by Mosse et al. (2002) and testified by some other studies, that migrants are not only differentially placed at the entry point, their differential status also leads to different trajectories, that makes it difficult to draw a definitive conclusion about whether and how much of improvement is to be attributed to migration.

Conclusion

In a period stretching over two and half decades, India has witnessed a growth pattern marked by agglomeration in and around pre-existing growth centres, accentuating already existing regional disparities in the country. A concomitant outcome of this growth processes is that construction has emerged as one of the fastest growing industries in India, drawing an ever-increasing pool of labour from rural areas.

This article examines the impact of this labour migration on the workers and their families and notes its contradictory nature, pointing to the many dilemmas associated with conceptualizing its impact on poverty in the broader sense.

In destinations, workers have poor living and working conditions, lack citizenship rights, entitlements and voice. Their wages are lower than the legal minimum. However, at the cost of hardship, low consumption levels, and possibly a smaller working life span, they manage to save a good portion of their income which they remit or take back home. At origin, it is clear that migrants are able to secure employment for longer duration as well as receive higher wages than non-migrants. Their remittances are used to boost consumption, the condition of residential housing, expenditure on children's education and selective investment in other assets. Although it is not possible to control for differences in initial conditions, higher wage incomes among migrants, compared to non-migrants, indicate that migrant labourers have more income to deploy in order to improve living conditions of family members.

Most migrant workers are recruited for a specific duration or seasonally and go back to their places of origin at the end of this period; others stay on, rotating between one site and another, and return occasionally to their places of origin. Given their profile of low education and skills, and large uncertainties that they face in the potential job market, most workers tend to rely on middlemen (contractors or sub-contractors) for recruitment. Collusion between employers and middlemen creates the conditions that result in the sidestepping of basic labour standards relating to workers.

Acquisition of skills can lead to higher earnings and higher credit worthiness, as evidenced by availability of higher advances (Srivastava & Sutradhar, 2016). The details of per capita consumption expenditure in Delhi show that skilled workers maintain a better standard of living compared to the unskilled workers, indicating that the acquisition of skill can provide a major route out of poverty. However, migrant construction workers have little or no access to acquisition of skills through formal training. The more detailed report on this study (Srivastava & Sutradhar, 2016) shows that while men do benefit from learning skills on the job which can lead to higher incomes over time, this opportunity is not open to women at all and they continue with unskilled tasks at the lowest level for their entire careers in construction work. Few migrant workers have proof of identity, depriving them of access to entitlements at the destination. Workers maintain a very low standard of living, and they are able to save and remit and use their remittances to improve their conditions of housing in the native areas, purchase some durables, repay loans and spend on their children's education and health. The detailed report cited above further shows an overwhelming majority of workers complain about low wages, long working hours and strenuous work. On the whole, there are significant costs that are borne by poorer labour migrants and their accompanying family members.

Neither the state nor the employers appear willing to bear and subsidize part of the costs through appropriate policies and investment in necessary infrastructure. However, the government appears unwilling or not capable enough to formulate appropriate labour and social policies and enforce them in the interest of the migrant workers. Membership in labour unions or any such collective action organization is conspicuous by its absence in all construction sites. Construction workers, given their migrant status, have little, if any, voice to influence policies in their favour.

While the labour regime has been characterized by increasing flexibility, the migration of vast masses of footloose labour to the construction sector tends to be highly organized and segmented, resulting in lower wages, often fixed at origin than those generally prevailing in the destination. This facilitates certain kind of growth and accumulation but through a low or dirt road to capitalism (Srivastava, 2011b). Surprisingly, because of the pattern of recruitment organized through intermediaries, it is the labourers in the formal sector who receive lower wages compared to their counterparts in the informal sector.

Regarding the impact on the source area, while migrant workers are able to secure higher volume of employment at the destination, examination of local labour market at the source area does not give any convincing evidence of general tightening of labour market. Significant participation of women in the local labour market in the source area points towards feminization of workforce in agriculture.

At source, there is evidence of higher income among migrant households resulting in improved consumption and higher spending on schooling of children, expenditure on housing and some investment on the purchase of productive assets. These changes are likely to have contributed to the changes in household consumption expenditure and decline in levels of income poverty observed at the macro level. However, these gains are subject to the availability of employment in the construction industry, and life cycle issues. We have noted that construction labourers are young, and workers in migrant households tend to be significantly younger than workers in non-migrant households. The accrual of long-term gains would depend upon the continued growth of non-farm employment and productive investment of current savings. A number of households in the tracer villages report spending part of their remittances on meeting debt obligations, indicating that remittances sent by the migrant households may not always add to the resource base of the migrant households. Further, very few migrant households report using remittances to purchase land which could have raised the productive potential of the migrant households on a more sustained basis.

Subjective self-assessment shows that migrant households perceived themselves to be somewhat better off than non-migrant households before they started migrating. Subjective assessments also show that migrants feel that migration has led to marked improvements in their standard of living. The survey also provides some evidence of the impact of attitudinal changes on the migrant's perception relating to children's education, hygiene, sanitation and community infrastructure, as well as political voice and participation in the source villages. However, in the absence of objective assessments of wealth status before and after migration, we suggest the results of this ex-post cross-sectional analysis are interpreted with caution.

Notes

1. This article is based on a study carried out for a research programme on Moving Out of Poverty of the University of Sussex sponsored by the DFID (UK), housed in the India in the Institute for Human Development, New Delhi. We are grateful to DFID, RMRRU and IHD for their support to the study and to Priya Deshingkar and other commentators of the draft study report for their various suggestions. We are also grateful to Prakash Kumar, Subodh Kumar and Tirthankar Bhattacharya who assisted in the fieldwork.
2. In a narrow sense, poverty is defined as low and insufficient income, or more specifically as low and insufficient consumption expenditure, which is often compared to a threshold level of 'minimum' expenditure ('poverty line') considered adequate to buy a minimum necessary bundle of goods and services. In this article, however,

- we have examined poverty and well-being in a broader sense, using a number of indicators, including the worker's working conditions and associational rights, including impact of migration on children's education, factors that could influence the migrant's future flow of income as well as current consumption. These outcomes may not always move in the same direction, pointing to the contradictory outcomes of labour migration and the many dilemmas associated with conceptualizing its impact on poverty in the broader sense (see Srivastava & Sutradhar, 2016, for a more detailed discussion).
3. The terms 'organized' and 'unorganized' sector in India are used to differentiate between firms and establishments on the basis of size, registration and social security entitlements. In the manufacturing sector, organized sector firms are those that employ 10 or more workers with power, or 20 or more workers without power and are registered under the Factories Act, 1948. In the case of other establishments, the definition varies from sector to sector, but usually establishments employing 20 or more workers are deemed to be in the organized sector (see NCEUS, 2008; National Statistical Commission, 2012). NCEUS (2008) suggests that the terms 'organized' and 'unorganized' can be considered as 'formal' and 'informal' with some distinctions.
 4. In this study, workers who oscillate between destination and source at the end of each work-period (less than a year, but usually more than a few weeks), are considered to be seasonal migrants. Workers who oscillate between destination and source at the end of an irregular and undefined period, usually more than a year, and who may also move from one job to another, or from one destination to another, during their period of emigration, are considered to be circular migrants.
 5. Total assets include livestock, farming and irrigation equipments, transport equipments and consumer durables possessed by rural households.
 6. The monthly per capita expenditure on education estimated from the details of expenses on education incurred by the households on children of age group of 5–14 years roughly gives the similar picture. In V1, the per capita monthly expenses on education incurred by construction migrant worker households, other migrant worker households and non-migrant worker households are ₹49.85, ₹36.16 and ₹4.27, respectively. Similarly, the expenses reported by the construction migrant worker households, other migrant worker households and other non migrant worker households in V2 are ₹80.12, ₹208.67 and ₹29.32, respectively. Thus both villages confirm the trend of migrant households spending higher on education than their non-migrant counterparts.
 7. Using NSS data, Deshingkar and Sandi (2011) report that migrants report higher average spending on food and health, but lower (average) spending on housing and education. They also note that the marginal spending effects of higher total consumption are negative for both food expenditure and education expenditure. The former can be understood in terms of the Engel's effect. They, thus single out food and health expenditure as the two main components of expenditure on which migrants spend more, on average. However, these conclusions pertain to migrants documented by the NSS, who are permanent or semi-permanent migrants and who face different choices and constraints on spending.

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