

Public Arguments – 6



Tata Institute of Social Sciences
Patna Centre

Migrations and India's Future Development Trajectory

Subir Sinha

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Dedication and Acknowledgment

Many thanks to the History Department of Patna University, and to Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Patna Centre, particularly Mithileshji and Pushpendraji, who organised my lecture (on 8th April 2017). I lost my father 3 days before the lecture. First I thought that I should cancel this lecture, but then I recalled that he had been very happy to hear that I would be lecturing at the Patna University, as he was a student there in the late-1950s, first in the History department for his BA, and then for his MA in Political Science. He would have been the first or second batch of Patna University students to attend classes in Darbhanga House (where postgraduate departments of the university are housed). I would like to dedicate this lecture to my late father, Shri Anjani Kumar Sinha.

Public Arguments



Migrations and India's Future Development Trajectory

SUBIR SINHA¹

This lecture speculates on certain likely medium-term trends and problems in Indian development, and derives from it possible trajectories of migration in India. The trends I shall consider are a) continued agrarian crisis in relation to all crops and livestock; b) climate instability and extreme weather events; c) civil war-like conditions in some parts of rural India; and d) persistence of informal economy though with reduced degree of state support to the sector. I will suggest that in addition to intensifying already existing dynamics of migration, some new issues will arise such as, the inability of informal work to absorb new migrants, the political victimisation of migrants, and inability of 'return to point of origin' in providing a cushion to migrants. I will close with suggesting some political and policy initiatives that might mitigate the condition of the migrants of the future.

Introduction

Migration as a concept encompasses both relocating from choice, and relocating because there is no other choice, since life in the location one is in is difficult to sustain for a number of factors. In today's world, we think of migration because there is no other choice within the broader concept of 'refugees', who are seen to be forced to leave their original habitats because of war, or natural calamity. There are international conventions devoted to their rights and their rehabilitation, and a range of international agencies (such as that of the UN system), that provide them with services. Today the concept of 'refugees' includes those who are seen as having been forced to relocate by exceptional events. Those who are forced to move by everyday events in the countryside—the mundane machinations of capitalist development and of civil wars between sections of society—are called by other names: migrant workers, seasonal migrants, and so on.

While refugees have (however imperfect) an institutional (UN agencies, NGOs, etc.), juridical (international law), and moral (humanitarian) apparatus to attend to their relief and rehabilitation, this second category of those forced to leave the countryside to seek work and life outside of it, are largely left to fend for themselves. But those who have no choice but to leave the village—indeed to flee from it—are central, not accidental, in the history of development worldwide. What is the life-threatening situation they are fleeing

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from, who are they fleeing from? What is forcing them to migrate? In this lecture I describe forced migration in the context of the history of development in India. But I will refer constantly to the experiences in the paradigms of successful development worldwide, as the Indian experience has tried to learn from and copy many aspects of those earlier ones, while also, importantly, maintaining autonomy from them.

The history of development worldwide is, in a very crucial sense, simultaneously, a history of capital, a history of societal transformation, and a history of their inter-relationship. From 1947 when India became independent, in debates about development, when it was said that Indian wanted to become a developed country, what it meant was to become like those countries that were then considered developed: Western Europe, North America, the communist-bloc to some extent. East Asia was not developed at that time: Japan had been destroyed in the Second World War, and the growth indicators of Korea, Taiwan, China and (not yet independent) Singapore were the same as, or worse than, India's at independence. The development trajectory known as 'the East Asian model' had not yet got off the ground.

So, what does it mean for a country to go from 'developing' to 'developed', in the context of our topic? What are the steps involved in going from 'developing' to 'developed' status, and with what implications for forced migration out of villages: that is the key question we look at today. Let us consider the three models often used to talk about this issue: the 'original' model of Europe, the considerably different American model, and the more recent East Asian models: Japan, Singapore, South Korea, etc. Yes, they have things we desire: buildings, infrastructure, bullet trains, higher incomes and standards of living. But I feel that these paths will not be replicated by Indian experience of development. The contexts we face in India and the conditions that were around in the 18th, 19th, or mid-to-late 20th century when these paradigmatic transitions from developing to developed country took place, in particular the story of migration in those early paths and today, are very different.

Rural –Urban Migrations in the Classic Models of Development

In the classic cases of development in Western Europe, especially the 'original English path', labour is squeezed out of the countryside as agriculture becomes more technologically 'efficient' via mechanisation, and they are made surplus. Ways of sustaining their lives via commons are made unavailable to them as the commons become privatised: the so-called enclosures, during the classic phase of 'primitive accumulation'. Primitive accumulation refers to the phase

of transition, from whatever was before capitalism, to capitalism proper. This process took place over a long time—2-3 centuries— in England, coming to an end in the early 19th century.

After Marx's extensive writing on the subject of primitive accumulation, the meaning of the term has been expanded to include the process by which those relations that were outside of capitalism are made internal to it. Using the commons to survive being redundant in agriculture is made illegal through draconian laws: in England this included laws against vagrancy in which those squeezed from villages were not allowed to remain without employment: punishments included whipping, vagrancy and death. Poor laws forced the poor to live in workhouses. So labour forced to migrate from the village was obliged to work under conditions of unfreedom. Apparently, labour was 'freed' from feudal obligations, and 'free' to sell itself to the new emerging class of capitalists, but its 'free choice' in the matter was heavily influenced by law.

This leaves labour made surplus in agriculture no alternative but to migrate to cities in search of employment. They become workers in the new cities. Developed countries are those who are seen to have solved the so called 'agrarian questions', that is a) the absorption of labour made redundant in agriculture into urban industrial work; and b) the absorption of capital from agriculture into industrial use. The common way to see these transitions is as if in making these transitions, European countries did all this entirely within their national borders. We know that was not the case. European colonisation of the rest of the world started in 1492. Throughout the process of agrarian transition, the capacity of an emerging industrial capitalism was not adequate to fully absorb those fleeing the countryside. Nor was excess capital from the countryside adequate to fund European transition to capitalism. So a large transfer of wealth went from the colonies to Europe.

European empires covered the world; the colonies were another migration destination for this population made surplus, particularly the Americas, but also Australia and New Zealand. It is the labour of these migrants that made these places prosperous and economic power houses. The American model depended first on unpaid labour, via slavery, and then cheap labour in the emerging industrial centres in the 19th century when large scale exodus from the villages of Europe took place, and then finally from the migration of black workers, who did not have the means to survive in the south, and where they were subjected to violent racist practices, to the relatively less hostile cities of the north and Midwest to work in cities like Chicago and Detroit.

Colonialism and Migration

It is true that colonialism and empire once produced the conditions for migration of the rural poor from India to other parts of the world. Bihar, Bengal and eastern UP, as well as Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh supplied labour to sugar producing areas of the Caribbean (such as Trinidad, Guyana, and Surinam), and also small island countries elsewhere (Fiji, Mauritius, Seychelles). It is noteworthy that when the need for cheap labour arose in these places, labour recruiting agents went to those places of rural India which had experience of growing sugarcane, and which had a degree of agrarian distress already so that the victims of such distress would be more willing to migrate under much worse terms.

But these were, in overall terms, migrations of very small proportions of the Indian population engaged in agricultural work. Colonialism in India did give rise to a form of capitalism, but it did not create a large-scale industrialisation: there remained very few magnets 'pulling' those distressed by the conditions of agriculture, already facing a crisis from the late-19th century. Limited migrations happened to the presidency towns and those urban centres that saw increased economic activity. Kolkata and Bombay in particular attracted large scale migration, as did the early factory towns, mining towns and the new administrative centres. Still, at the time of independence, only 14% of the Indian population was classified as 'urban'. So clearly, despite the fact that colonialism was justified by colonialists for the 'historical mission' of taking the colonies into modernity, they had not made much headway in that direction. Under colonial conditions, surplus was extracted from Indian agriculture for the development of Britain, and no national development project existed.

The immiseration of the peasantry and the crisis of the countryside was most acutely experienced in recurrent 'famines', culminating in the Bengal famine of 1943, in which between 1.5-2 million people died, mostly the rural poor. It was not so much shortages in food production but the totality of social relations governing the production and distribution of food that led to these famines. Such as, the legacy of the agricultural sector in 1947: large numbers of those living in the villages were living lives close to the margins, in conditions of bonded labour, and the social relations were held in place by a very heavy layer of caste oppressions and exclusions. But still, migration to cities by this precarious population engaged in agriculture remained low until the last 15-20 years.

For today's developing countries, it is not possible to colonise other lands, as it was in the days of the early developers. So the issue of absorbing the

labour squeezed out of the countryside of countries such as India cannot be solved by colonising other lands. They will have to be absorbed largely within the country. In fact, apart from the impossibility of acquiring colonial territory institutionalised now in international law, other crucial differences exist. Though slave-like labour conditions can be seen to exist in many developing countries, including India, trade and employment of slaves is against the law, unlike the American case. Nor is there, in India, the availability of abundant land, as in the Americas and Australia. Genocide and large settler-colonial populations too are missing from these cases. No, India cannot follow these Euro-American models, and the question of why labour will migrate, whether and how they will be 'absorbed' within industry and urban life as in those cases, will not be resolved in India as in these models.

Comparison with East Asian Model on Managing Migrations

Since I mentioned the East Asian model at the beginning, let me return to it for a brief expansion of the point of different conditions, and different experiences of agricultural labour made surplus in that experience, to see what, if any . Taiwan, Japan and South Korea are successful models of agrarian transitions outside the core cases of Western Europe and North America. These models have been popular in India, including with the current Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. This is partly because these countries have made the transition from developing to developed country in very quick time, over a matter of decades: Japan was destroyed in the Second World War and was a developed country by the mid-1970s, and Taiwan and Korea, having started around the same time as independent India. So what have they done for this transition, and can India replicate that? This is worthwhile question to briefly explore because the East Asian models of Japan, Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore, started over the same period as the Indian postcolonial developmental model. How can we see their experience of managing the migration of labour made surplus in agriculture to urban and industrial work?

If the American model featured large countries and land abundance, East Asian countries were small and had land shortage. While the Americas were heterogeneous population of migrant labour from Europe and Africa blessed with not too much diversity. Migrant labour did not have the challenge of having to learn another language. Contrast that with India, where migrant labour that speaks Magahi and goes to Mumbai or Chennai is unable often to understand what those in the city are saying to them, nor can they make themselves understood. In such a setting, it is not possible to make collective cause with others, or to be able to create class solidarity.

East Asian models also went in for mechanisation of agriculture, but managed migration out of agriculture very well. Mechanisation was phased in such a way that those who lost employment to machines were habilitated in agriculture-related non-farm employment, including servicing of machines. Why cannot India do it? Well, in India rapid mechanisation of agriculture was made necessary by persistent food shortages in the 1950s and 1960s, when Indian was heavily dependent on food aid from the world powers, the USA and the USSR. That is why the 'green revolution' was started in the mid-1960s. Though its spread was limited, it set the tone for the model of agricultural development, and locations of the green revolution such as Punjab and Western UP attracted migrant workers from Bihar, as did centres of industry that emerged as places where capital accumulated in agriculture found outlets: Ludhiana, Jalandhar, etc.

Bihari workers have been going to Punjab and Western UP for a long time, when the 1980s saw a civil war between Naxals and landlords represented by the Ranvir Sena, which was at the same time a caste war. Some of you might recall Gautam Ghosh's film Paar, which shows how north Bihari peasants and landless workers were fleeing the civil war to go to Punjab, which was itself in throes of armed militancy associated with the Khalistani movement. Despite 3-4 incidents in which Bihari workers were killed in large numbers by Khalistani militants, Bihari workers continued to go there. Same about migration to Kashmir at the height of militancy there, with sometimes the same consequences.

Those are very small countries, smaller than many Indian states. Second, we face regular stories in which migrant labourers from places like Bihar and UP are assaulted or discriminated against in destination cities like Mumbai or Nasik, or Pune or Bangalore because of xenophobic politics: for example against Chhath puja in Mumbai. Politics regarding cultural and linguistic diversity has prevented their inclusion and the recognition of their rights to the city. Migrant workers are not treated well in these destination cities. In fact, they are often excluded by members of the same class. In Mumbai, again, Koli fishers have joined hands with the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) and the Shiv Sena to attack those migrant workers who have attempted to enter the sector. What I am suggesting is that high degrees of cultural homogeneity in these East Asian contexts removed the attachment of adverse cultural politics to migrant workers. In India, such differences make the migrant worker an inassimilable 'other', someone to be seen with contempt and suspicion. We can see this in the narratives linking migrant workers with criminality in Indian cities.

Further, all the East Asian countries have been dictatorships for crucial periods in their agrarian transition, either military dictatorship or American

occupation or one-party states. This is an important point, because for better or for worse, India became a democracy in 1947. Why does it matter? It matters because transitions are chaotic processes, and democracy is not the best suited form, because the transition, the process by which the migrant workers from the countryside are either absorbed or their potential militancy is contained, requires a lot of force, and trust in the leadership. In the Asian models, workers did not have the right to strike, for example. Wages were fixed by the government and had to be accepted by the workers. It was illegal in South Korea to form a trade union. So these were small, heterogeneous countries, with ethnic and linguistic singularity, these were dictatorships unlike us, and so on. We can see how much these factors are still in play in China, where it is not possible, if you are facing agrarian distress or climate related distress, to exercise your choice and go where you want to. Workers are classified and registered with the state as rural or urban workers, and if migrants from villages aim to cross that line they have to get numerous permissions: their migration will have to be cleared by the local state agencies. This so-called 'hukou' system determines the choices and trajectories of migration from villages to cities.

Pure coercion cannot operate on migrant workers in India as it did in some other locations. Recall that at the time of primitive accumulation in Europe, democracy as a political institutional form, and human rights as a juridical concept, did not exist. In America, though it was a democracy from its independence in 1776, slave owning remained normal well into the late-19th century, and even after emancipation of slaves, race violence was widespread in the regulation of the African-American labour force. We cannot enforce unfree labour; labour in India has far greater rights than at crucial points in the European and East Asian transitions, though of course this is far from an ideal situation. As importantly, in the East Asian model, strong state leadership, where the leader was revered (military rulers, Kings, etc.) were important factors in convincing the population that their pain was short to medium term, and that there would be long term benefits. In contrast, despite major flaws and continuation of caste-based violence in regulating labour, India has a vibrant and even chaotic democracy. This was not lost on India's postcolonial Indian leadership from the outset: Nehru's writings from the mid-1940s to his death note that Indian democracy throws specific challenges to the Indian transition, and make it a necessarily long-drawn affair. No quick transition, no quick resolution of the migrant question is possible in a non-coercive democratic set up.

For well into the late-1980s, Indian growth rate remained low, close to 3-4% per annum, and industrialisation remained low, too, clustered in a handful of cities, many of them 'factory towns'. The employment they provided to rural migrants was limited, and was concentrated in low-skill low-wage work. Even

as late as 2001, less than 30% of Indians lived in cities. So India has among the world's slowest rates of urbanisation. Is this a problem? For whom?

Large Rural Population and rural-Urban Migration as a Problem Today

In the last 10 years, the Planning Commission and its successor, the NITI Aayog, have said repeatedly that, in India, between 60-65% of the population is involved in agriculture, and that, as Finance Minister Arun Jaitley recently said, they would want to reduce this to 26%. This is at a time when agriculture is in crisis. Where will this 30-40% of the working population go after leaving agriculture?

Agriculture is facing a multi-faceted crisis. Productivity is down for most crops, especially those crops that are grown by the bottom half of the rural population. For the same inputs – labour, chemical, water, and capital inputs – less is produced than before. The soil's productivity itself is declining. Also, we live in the time of climate change. Seasons are unpredictable now. The summer comes earlier. The rains are insufficient, or too early, or too late, or too much. I have interviewed taxi drivers in Delhi from Rajasthan and Haryana since 2013 as taxi drivers often come as seasonal migrants to Delhi to supplement incomes from agriculture. Some had spent Rs 10-15000 for sowing cotton between summer and winter agricultural season. Five hours of unseasonal rain completely destroyed their cotton, losing them their entire investment. The point is that those among farmers who are enterprising, those who have taken risks and have taken loans to invest in new inputs or technology to increase their income, are also vulnerable to shocks. Consistently higher summer temperatures can also destroy crops. One of them had migrated to Delhi to drive a taxi to be able to pay off the debt and to compensate for the loss.

Seasonal taxi drivers such as the ones I interviewed were recruited by the taxi stand via an extended network of relationships and village links. They were paid Rs 6000 per month. Limited literacy made it difficult for them to move to app-based taxi companies such as Ola or Uber. Besides, not owning their own car, and very high deposit and rates of renting a car, consign them to super-exploitative work conditions. In one case, the driver intimated that he had worked many hours of overtime, and by his calculation the stand owner owed him Rs 50-6000 over 2 years, but he is refusing to pay this. The stand owner says that his own profit margins are now completely slashed with the arrival of app-based taxi services. If true, this indicates that options for some rural seasonal migrants to find work in the city are shrinking, as sectors of work such as transport are experiencing a paradigm shift.

Since credit is a core issue in farmers' risk taking, and inability to repay the loan is a major factor forcing them to migrate, this takes me to the question of loans. Recall in the recently concluded UP elections, loan write-offs to farmers became a major issue, and Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has now said he would do karz-maafi (loan waiving). Till date, such promises have been little more than electoral rhetoric, and recent reports from UP suggest that the quantum of write-offs is laughably low (9 paisa in one case). But periodic loan-write-offs are not a permanent solution. The point to note is that all agriculture depends on credit, and the ability of rural producers to repay loans is sharply reduced by price volatility. Recall that year before last in Bengal, potato fetched a good price as there were shortages. Last year Bengal farmers switched to potato, taking loans at rates of interest taking into account the previous year's prices. This year, the crop was bumper, as a result potato prices crashed, causing farmers such losses that they were faced with bankruptcy. Some potato farmers in Bengal committed suicide.

Farmer suicides have increased, they are the most horrific measure of the crisis faced by those in agriculture, especially those who have taken risks and made investments to make a living and that has cost them dear. In UP alone the bill for loan write-offs to farmers will cost Rs 39000 crore, and it is just one, though a large state in India. In fact, UP and other states in which governments that came to power promised farmers loan write-offs have dragged their feet, giving out paltry amounts to farmers who are facing the decision to give up agriculture. It is estimated that for each Rs 3 that farmers spent on input, they get a return of Rs 2. This puts great pressure to migrate from the countryside to the city.

There is also the question of support prices. One way in which the prospective migrant can stay in agriculture is via the timely payment of adequate support prices, but that is not happening. The lack of support prices means that farmers are totally exposed to price volatility and have little defence against failure to pay off loans. Farmers in India do not get Minimum Support Price (MSP) but India imports food from other countries at much higher prices. Crop insurance against losses, mooted by successive governments, again has fallen well below its promise.

No developed country had the size of population that India does today when it was a developing country. And to the extent they had a population 'problem', that surplus population migrated to the colonies, especially to the Americas. But in India, agrarian distress is faced by continental size populations.

The informal sector as a destination

Those being squeezed out of agriculture in India are not trained in a way that they can be absorbed within the formal sector: their destination is likely to be the 'informal' sector, or the low-skill low wage employment in transit cities, or in destination cities. Even in the upper levels of the informal sector, for example, in garments or ancillary industries associated with the formal sector, most of those squeezed out by agriculture are not trained to work in these forms of work. Most migrants work in the domestic work sector, in construction, in lower levels of transport such as headload workers, street cleaning, and so on. In all cities of India, there are places you can go to where fresh migrants are waiting at chowks to be picked up for daily wage work. There is 'gatekeeping' in these forms of work: unions that block entry, and middlemen and agencies that keep them out. Also, 'guards' of apartment buildings keep new migrants out, and exercise some control over who can come into the compound for work.

All these forms of work are badly affected by the cash crunch created by demonetisation, in which the Modi government switched off 86% of notes in circulation in an economy which is more than 90% dependent on cash transactions. Given the structure of power in such sectors, news from Jharkhand and elsewhere is not surprising that in some instances payment of wages to new migrant workers is delayed, is less than what was agreed, or not being paid at all. Demonetisation has thus increased the vulnerability of the migrant worker by increasing the power imbalances in the work process. Cash restrictions felt up the chain are ultimately handed down the chain to the workers' detriment.

So to think that urban informal employment is a solution to the crisis being faced by those who are leaving the countryside is not the case at the moment: the informal sector's ability to absorb the new migrants fleeing the agrarian crisis is at a low, and growth in that sector is at its lowest point in more than a decade.

In any case, Indian double digit growth rates of the past decade are partly explained by the explosion of the informal sector, which has been able to provide mass employment with low wage with bad conditions. Though there are many examples of workers' actions against the conditions and terms of work, migrant workers in this sector have been restrained in their responses because the situation back home in agriculture is worse, and because the very nature of migrant work, where the worker migrates seasonally to and to different locations over time, makes it difficult for them to organise collective action. For example, workers might move from one construction site to another

as and where daily wage work is available, interacting with different workers on a very temporary and short term basis.

Since Uttar Pradesh is a state with one of the largest population of those in vulnerable employment and livelihoods in rural areas, it is instructive to see how this might play out. UP has several centres which attract new migrant workers: towns like Muradabad and its brass industry, Ferozabad and its glassware, Kanpur for leather, Bareilly and Mirzapur with their carpet industry and so on. Demonetisation has created complete slump in these towns. We cannot say how long this slump will last. But if the production units are not able to sustain themselves over the period during which these negative trends continue, they will be forced to shut down and it will not be possible to revive them. The case of Kolhapur in Maharashtra, where its leather industry has been shut down, is another example of the point I am making here.

These industries and their capacity to employ people are also negatively affected by cultural and identity politics that have a major impact on the political economy of the leather sector. Gandhi had advocated the development of an extensive set of small scale industries based on the resource inputs from cattle: skins and bones of dead cattle. However, attacks on those working in the skinning or cows, and transport of cows, have created a massive depression in the sector. Dalits have been beaten up and killed for skinning dead cows. Another aspect has to do with cattle meat for export, an industry that is quite large as India is the world's second largest exporter of beef and buffalo meat. With the rise of Hindutva and gaurakshak (so-called cow protectors) violence, Muslims have been assaulted and killed on suspicion of eating or keeping beef. The bans on so-called 'illegal abattoirs' must be seen from this perspective too. The Muzaffarnagar and Saharanpur riots in UP both can be partly explained by the success of Muslim owned abattoirs, and the improvements they made in the lives of their employees, allowing them longer-distance migration to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries. The riots affected the meat sector also.

These are new kinds of civil wars, raging in an economy in which people expect rapid transitions to prosperity personally and at a national level, but when that is not happening they are turning on each other on caste or religious basis.

People are now refusing to work in leather industry. As a result, the Indian cricket ball industry, the largest in the world, has now collapsed in North India. As a result, cow skins are coming to North Indian leather manufacturing centres from South India. Leather is also being imported from much further afield, like Australia. This raises transport costs, thus shaves profit margin, and consequently reduces the ability of firms to employ or to pay agreed wages on time. Transportation also is largely a cash economy in India. Consequently

industries such as leather that were important for migrant workers from the countryside have faced a downturn and their ability to absorb the refugees from the countryside, for example in Meerut and Jalandhar.

So those who are fleeing the villages due to climate change, agrarian crisis, the crisis of debt, and the new crises caused by demonetisation and gaurakshak violence do not have any form of employment waiting for them: the economy's capacity to absorb them has gone down, not up. The government's own growth figures are depressing, and you have to consider that by the government's own calculation the growth rate figures do not include the informal sector, which accounts for more than 70% of employment. Government's faulty and fake statistics also makes planning for employment growth in these sectors difficult.

Recall that the leather industry was prioritised for the PM's Mudra schemes, partly to get caste votes of those working in that sector. Has this happened? The evidence is of a near complete decimation of the Indian leather sector.

In fact, the crisis of the agrarian sector has created an increasing flow of migrants from the countryside, but the corresponding crisis of the informal sector means that they cannot be absorbed. Bad and fake data makes planning for this sector, to remove or reduce its vulnerability, and to improve its employment generating potential much more difficult, if not impossible.

We have touched briefly on the effect of climate change in agriculture. But it is also the case that weather extremes affect the employment potential of migrant workers in transition and destination cities. Both last year and the year before that, the summer has come before time and temperatures have reached new heights, at which they have stayed for several days: 45+ degrees centigrade for a week or more at a stretch. Now many sorts of informal work are not done in covered or cooled locations, they are done in the open: construction, including infrastructure, transport, drying and otherwise processing food, etc. Temperatures close to 50 degrees are near fatal; no one can work in such conditions for any extended periods of time. Government had made it compulsory that employers must provide water and shade. All this raises costs in an industry that works with very slim profit margins. Recall that the entire Indian model is based on squeezing a lot of work with low wage payment. Also, the same places that have extremely high summer temperatures also have low winter temperatures. How the credit crisis and cash crunch in the informal sector has interacted with climate change and with weather extremes is still not fully understood, though it is likely to be very important.

As we know, India has record levels of corruption. Even if you imagine

that someone from the village has reached the point where he or she cannot carry on in agriculture, because their land is no longer very productive, their investments in boosting productivity have not paid off, the credit they took at high rates failed due to weather or other reasons, the government's support prices are not high enough or forthcoming, if they had cattle they cannot look after it, their land is facing distress sale, and NREGA or other programs are not giving them enough to live on, they are 'forced' to migrate.

Sunil Chaturvedi's recent novel 'Kalichaat' (and the film of that name made on it) depicts the trials of a farmer who takes exactly these risks to get water, takes loans to get a tube-well sunk, but he fails. This puts him in a position to get into relations with moneylenders, police and urban employers. While of course a work of fiction, the novel shows what peasants at the margins are going through, what permits would they need? We hear that tying NREGA to Aadhar is already resulting in many of this category of people becoming unable to survive. They are not migrating out of choice, but are fleeing a situation in which they can no longer survive and become a prey for a wide range of social agents.

Conclusion

Is it possible or desirable to limit the outflow of rural people to cities, to make agriculture viable again so that they are not forced to migrate? In my estimation, the ability of Indian agriculture to sustain 60% or more of its population is limited and will decline. Even comprehensive land reforms and re-distribution will not create large enough plot sizes, and the issues connected with declining productivity of soil and the need for greater amounts of input will remain. Nor will issues concerned with climate change go away: at least in the medium term, and likely in the foreseeable future, agriculture will be negatively impacted by climate and weather related factors. So, what can be done to make agriculture less precarious and migration for urban work more rewarding, than is the case right now?

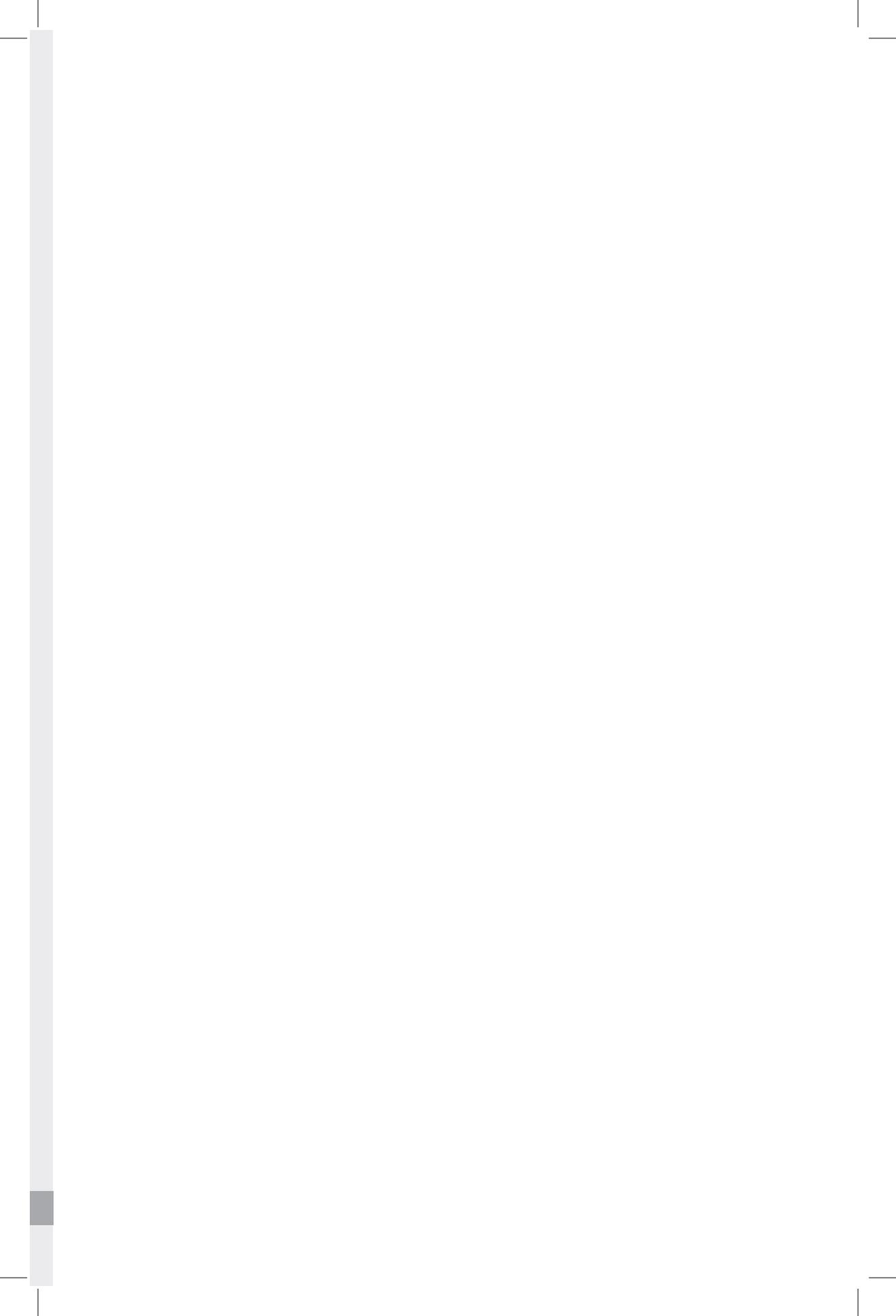
One lesson can be drawn from the Brazilian landless people's movement, Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST). The movement was, from the outset, a coalition of the landless, of left-wing intellectuals, media people, lawyers, and the progressive elements of the Catholic Church. Brazilian law allows for taking back land that is marked for agricultural use if it is not used for such use 7 years in a row. Lawyers identified such land and marked it for occupation. Once occupied, the MST liaised with the Lula government to form cooperatives. If those who acquired land via occupations pooled together their land, they could get machinery on loan from the government, and their products could be sold through the non-market 'solidarity economy' channels. In Brazil, many public institutions such as schools, hospitals and offices buy 20% of their supplies from such cooperatives. There is limited applicability of such examples for India for two reasons: one is that Brazil is still a land-surplus country, and a 'small farm' there is defined at many times larger than a small farm in India. And second, the sort of solidarity networks I describe are a result of long political struggle, of a sort that does not exist in India. Indeed, at the time of this lecture, Lula's Workers' Party has lost power, and it remains to be seen how such security networks will function in the absence of state support.

Second, how to make this fleeing into something less violent, less exploitative? What can government and activists and social organisations do to make it more like a managed migration? All alternatives come with associated costs: there is no win-win situation. Let us consider recent initiatives to make the conditions of migrant workers, especially in the construction sector in southern India. While workers migrating from the rural areas of the South constitute the bulk of the workers in these sectors, many workers from north India, including Bihar, too, make that journey. The new trade union initiatives

in Southern India took special care to make sure that migrant workers coming from elsewhere had some working knowledge of local labour laws, and also links with local trade unions and officials to turn to in case of disputes with their employers.

Migrant workers are better served if provident fund and other labour laws are applicable in such a way that loopholes are closed, especially those loopholes around social security and protections to which they are entitled: employers will not employ 20 people or not employ them for 12 months in order not to pay the provident fund. In many cases, this is purely exploitative. But since many of the employers are themselves at the margins, they exploit workers. What we need are better laws and better protections, but in order to get them we need struggle. And the problem is that the very fact of migration, as I have already alluded, poses problems to mounting an effective struggle.

Technological, institutional, social, and political measures are necessary to ameliorate the conditions of those facing pressures to leave the countryside, but these cannot be solved by using the path already tread by those countries that achieved 'developed' status before India. Low-input agriculture experiments the world over promise to provide support for small holders. Institutional mechanisms such as stable out prices, credit, and insurance, if done without large leakage and electoral cynicism, can also benefit them. Social solidarity economy can provide cushion against market uncertainties, and finally, political alignments with new trade unions and a new generation of left wing parties can provide connections between the needs of migrants and rights of citizenship.





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