

A Study of Living Conditions of Migrant Bihari Labourers in Delhi

Migration may be considered as one of the pathologies of modern society. Over the past two to three decades migration has ceased to be an indicator of industrial development. There is hardly any difference between migration and displacement. In both instances people are pushed out of their homes on account of difficult living conditions created by programmes for economic development.

Bihari labourers are one of the largest migrant groups in Delhi. In order to understand their living conditions, and the impact of the implementation of the Inter State Migrants Act 1979, a survey of 200 migrant Bihari labourer families was conducted in eight settlements selected from different parts of Delhi.



The study shows that people in the settlements do not know of the existence of the Inter State Migrants Act 1979. Neither is there any agency nor organization that takes the responsibility of following the migrants and collection of information about them. This is because the number of people coming into Delhi is so large that it is not possible to keep track of them. Data on contractors is also not easily accessible.

From the standpoint of data on the living conditions of migrant workers, the Act needs to focus on a population census of the settlements. Like the register for birth and death these could be a register of people coming in and going out of these settlements. Most importantly, why should there be a record of poor migrants and not of migrants from the middle and upper classes. This is perhaps, more important, because the poor people contribute labour whenever and wherever there is an opportunity. There is little knowledge of what migrants from middle and upper classes do.



Indeed the history of urbanization of Delhi is none other than the history of migration itself. It seems impossible to keep a head count of the number of people coming and going out. A more practical and perhaps also feasible procedure is to keep track of old and new settlements. Data should be collected of population along three criteria, namely – gender and age, education, occupation & home, and links over time with place of origin and with other places migrated to.

When cheap labour itself becomes a kind of capital, the direction of its movement is to be determined amongst other things by the conditions for its reproduction and replacement. 'Migration' from this perspective is no different from the movement of human capital, which today is described as human resources.' In other words, the question of 'human resource development', the question of human rights' and the destructive character of capital during early industrialization together point out that there is a threshold which when transferred, transforms migration into a disabling phenomena. Truly, this is not in the interest of capital reproduction.

The study shows that though the Bihari Migrant Labourers are employed in a large variety of jobs which require specific skills, yet they are condemned to live in pathetic conditions. Even after working and living in Delhi for 10 years or more, a large number of them are deprived of even simple civic amenities such as safe drinking water. 90% of them are forced to use extremely contaminated and unhygienic water from hand pumps and public taps. Further, hygienic toilets facilities are not available and only 0.5% have a private toilet facility. Other civic facilities such as electricity are also not available. 34.5% of them do not have even (illegal) electricity connection.

The availability of healthcare and schooling facilities is worse. In the absence of easy accessibility to even primary health care facilities, the migrant labourers often fall victim to quacks during times of illness leading to severe damage to their health as well as to drain on their meager income. As the data shows, around two-third of the migrant labourers are now living with their spouses and children but they are not able to send their children to school because of a severe lack of government primary schools in their localities. This is bound to perpetuate their existing educational backwardness and consequently their poverty.

Further woes are added to their problems due to lack of simple and transparent process of acquiring ration cards. A large number of migrant labourers are unable to get ration cards and so they have to purchase rations at market prices. Opening of Bank Accounts is even more difficult for them. They face lots of problems in absence of Bank Accounts. Acquiring of such facilities should be made easier for them.

A very irresponsible or even hostile attitude prevalent among the middle classes is that Bihari Migrant Labourers 'willingly' live under degrading conditions in order to save as much money as possible and



they invest this money in buying land in their native places. Our data clearly refutes this perception. As the data shows, around two-third of the migrant labourers send remittances to provide for simple daily consumption needs of their family members.

The economic depravity and abysmally low levels of income/ earnings of the migrant labourers can very well be gauged from the fact that even after working in Delhi for more than 10 years, only a meagre 2% of them are able to enjoy the 'luxury' of a simple electric fan. Evidently, the Inter-State Migrants Act 1979 is a white elephant, unable to protect the interests of these labourers. A glance at the diversity of occupations that these labourers perform and the skills required for those occupations shows that clubbing all these labourers together under the general category of 'unorganized sector' workers, as the officialdom does, which also means 'unskilled' workers, is unjustifiable and it harms the interests of these migrant labourers.

Finally, we need to reflect on the relation between capital and migration. People move in the direction capital moves. However, the question is why capital not moves in the direction people move. The history of early industrialization only gives evidence for the first proposition. Wherever there is a possibility for the establishment of industry, people will move in that direction. However, the history of late industrialization shows that this is a self destructive correlation. For, there comes a point in history when the reproduction of capital destroys the resource base for production. Why is it that a missile launching station needs to be built only where there is most fertile agricultural land? If this question is important, then it is not self-evident that people move in the direction capital moves. What direction must capital move in? Today question of conservation and restoration of national resources is an important criterion determining the direction of capital.

