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## Rural Labour Migration in India: Magnitude and Characteristics

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### Abstract

Labour migration is an important feature in the development process in India. Macro level surveys shows that there has been an increase in magnitude of labour migration over the years. It is more prevalent among the males for employment related reasons and occurs prominently from certain backward regions of the country. The two macro data sources on migration which are the Census and the NSSO show that rural to rural migration is the most dominant stream. Though migration is found to be positively related with monthly per capita expenditure, the case of short term migration differs sharply in its characteristics features. From a policy perspective, it is therefore important to correctly examine the magnitude and underlying dynamics of short term migration which is most often a distress driven phenomenon.

**Keywords:** Rural labour migration, unemployment, seasonal migration

### 1. Introduction

Migration is a characteristic feature of the growth process of any nation. Migration occurs as a response to unbalanced growth and economic inequality. Macro level estimates of the trends using both Census and the NSSO shows that migration for economic reasons has increased in the recent years. According to estimates from the Census, the total number of economic migrants increased from 19.85 million in 1991 to 28.9 million in 2001. Rural-Urban economic migrants comprised 41.9 percent of the total in 2001. Even the NSS estimates show a steady increase in the urban male migration rates from 12.73 per cent in 1993 to 14.36 per cent in 2007-08 (Srivastava, 2011) <sup>[9]</sup>.

As labour migration among the poor occurs in most cases due to distress situations; it acquires importance from the policy perspective because labour migrants who keep floating across the span of the country are not protected from the risks and costs associated with labour contracts which are invariably exploitative. In this backdrop, this paper tries to discuss the definitional and conceptual differences of migration. It also outlines the magnitude of out migration and characteristics of migrants to examine the different factors that cause people from rural areas to migrate. Although labour migration occurs even across international borders, the scope of this paper remains limited to the case of only internal labour migration within India.

The rest of the paper is divided into four sections. The first one discusses the definitions and conceptual issues in the two major sources of migration data in India. The second section estimates the magnitude of out migration and characteristics features of migrants. The third one discusses the special case of short duration migrants and the last section concludes the paper by highlighting the need for immediate policy initiative.

### 2. Migration Data: Secondary Sources and its Conceptual Differences

The data on labour migration in India is collected by the Census and the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO). Census collects data on migration after every ten years but the NSSO does not have any regular survey on migration. The most recent data on migration by the NSSO is the 64<sup>th</sup> Round. There are conceptual differences in the definition of a migrant used by the Census and the NSSO. Census defines migrants by *place of birth* and by *place of last residence*. A migrant, according to the place of birth concept, is one who lives in a place (place of enumeration) that is different than her place of birth. On the other hand, a person is considered migrant by place of last residence if the place of enumeration during census is

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different than her last place of residence. The NSSO in order to find out migrants enquires about *usual place of residence*. Therefore according to NSSO, a person is a migrant in case he/she stayed for more than six months in a place which is different than her last usual place of residence.

Although the Census and NSSO are the largest macro sources of migration data, the definitions of migrants used in these surveys, e.g., Place of Birth, Place of Last Residence and change of last usual place of residence are not employment related. Also the magnitude of migration is not estimated precisely in these official surveys. There have been many contestable debates regarding the actual scale and magnitude of labor outmigration reported using secondary source data with the estimates provided by smaller micro level surveys. However, there is consensus on the findings using the Census data on migrants based on place of last residence and the NSSO using information by monthly consumer expenditure of the households that migration occurs more in households with higher monthly per capita expenditure (Srivastava, 2011; Bhagat, 2009; Kundu and Sarangi, 2007)<sup>[9, 3, 6]</sup>. Srivastav (2011)<sup>[9]</sup> has also argued that migration rates are higher among those with higher educational attainment, social group status and per capita consumption. This implies that the socially and economically better-off have a higher propensity to migrate.

These findings although true are not found in the case of short duration migrants who mostly follow seasonal or circular patterns of migration. The NSS 64<sup>th</sup> Migration Round estimated 15.2 million short duration out-migrants who belonged to the socially deprived, less educated and poorer backgrounds, in sharp contrast with long duration migrants. Other empirical studies have also shown that short duration migration takes place several times a year depending on the seasons and crop operations (Bird and Deshingkar 2009)<sup>[4]</sup>. Several field studies have found that the magnitude of seasonal migration is much higher. In West Bengal, migrant agricultural labourers work at least 20 days in each season and for this work, Bardhaman district alone receives more than 500,000 seasonal migrants (Rogaly *et al*, 2001)<sup>[8]</sup>. The sugarcane field of Southern Gujarat is

estimated to receive between 100,000 to 150,000 laborers from Dhule district of Maharashtra and some villages in South Gujarat (Teerink, 1995; Breman, 2007)<sup>[10, 5]</sup>.

### 3. Magnitude and Characteristic: Estimates from Secondary Data

The data on migration from Census 2011 is yet to be in the public domain. According to the Census 2001, about 300 million people (about 30 per cent of the total population) were identified as migrants on the basis of place of birth criterion. Female migrants were substantially more in number than male migrants in 2001. Around 59 per cent of the total migrants moved within a district of the enumeration.

**Table 1:** A profile of Migrants in India by “place of birth”, Census 2001 (in millions)

Migrants by place of birth	2001 Census (including J&K)	1991 Census (excluding J&K)
Total population	1,028.6	838.5
Total Migrants		
Persons	307.1	229.8
Males	90.4	-
Females	216.7	-
Intra-district	181.7	136.2
Inter-district	76.8	59.1
Inter-state	42.3	27.2
From abroad	6.1	6.9

**Source:** Reproduced from Census India 2001, Table D1, D2, D3 (link: [http://censusindia.gov.in/Data\\_Products/Data\\_Highlights/Data\\_Highlights\\_link/data\\_highlights\\_D1D2D3.pdf](http://censusindia.gov.in/Data_Products/Data_Highlights/Data_Highlights_link/data_highlights_D1D2D3.pdf), accessed on January 22, 2015)

The following table gives a detailed idea of migrants on the basis of place of last residence. The total number of migrants was 314 million. Out of these migrants, 85 per cent migrated from one place of a state to other place of the same state, i.e., they were intra-state migrants. Around 193 million people out of the total migrants within the state (268 million) were migrants from the same district of enumeration.

**Table 2:** A Profile of Migrants by Place of Last Residence (in millions)

Category	Migrations by Place of birth	Percentage
Total Population	1028.61	
Total Migrations	314.54	30.6
Migrants within the state of enumeration	268.21	85.3
Migrants from within the districts	193.59	72.2
Migrants from other districts of the state	74.62	17.8
Migrants from other states in India	41.16	13.1
Migrants from other countries	5.15	1.6

**Source:** Reproduced from Table 11, Census India, 2001 (Link: [http://censusindia.gov.in/Census\\_And\\_You/migrations.aspx](http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_And_You/migrations.aspx))

Census also provides information on the streams of migration on the basis of origin and destination. The four categories made by census are, rural to rural, rural to urban, urban to urban and urban to rural. By place of last residence, migration from rural area of India to other rural areas in India was around 53.3 million in 2001 (Census, 2001), followed by rural to urban migration (20.5 million). While majority of them moved due to employment or work related reasons, most of the female migrants (around 65 per cent) had moved due to marriage. Table no. 3 below from Census data 2001 gives a detail description of migrations according to the reasons cited for migration.

A much higher percentage of males were found to have

migrated for employment reasons compared to the females. Around 38 per cent of the male migrants moved out in search of employment. This proportion is very low for the female migrants (3 per cent). Thus if the economic reasons of migration is alone used, then migration for employment has been the most important reason. One reason for the expansion of migration over these years it has been facilitated due to the establishment of wide social networks, better transport and communication networks and many labour contract systems that have reduced the costs and risks of migration and made it a more attractive choice (Bagchi and Majumdar, 2011; Baily, 2011; Prasad, 2011)<sup>[1, 2, 7]</sup>.

**Table 3:** Reasons of Migrations of Migrants by Place of Last Residence (in millions)

Reason for migrations	Number of Migrants			Percentage to Migrants		
	Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females
Total migrants	98.30	32.90	65.40	100	100	100
Reason for migration : Work / Employment	14.45	12.37	2.07	14.7	37.6	3.2
Business	1.14	0.95	0.19	1.2	2.9	0.3
Education	2.92	2.04	0.88	3	6.2	1.3
Marriage	43.10	0.68	42.42	43.8	2.1	64.9
Moved after birth	6.58	3.43	3.15	6.7	10.4	4.8
Moved with households	20.61	8.26	12.35	21	25.1	18.9
Other	9.52	5.16	4.35	9.7	15.7	6

**Source:** Reproduced from Table 13, Census India, 2001 (Link: [http://censusindia.gov.in/Census\\_And\\_You/migrations.aspx](http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_And_You/migrations.aspx))

In the NSSO (2007-08) survey, it was found that migration rate was the highest in the social category *others*. This was true in both the rural and urban areas (NSS report no. 533: Migration in India, 2007-08, Page no. 24). Rate of migration was the lowest in the *scheduled tribe* and *scheduled caste* category. Interestingly, migration rate was found to be lower in the bottom MPCE (Monthly Per Capita Expenditure) class in the rural areas and as one moved up the MPCE class; the rate of migration had a tendency to increase. Nearly 29 per cent of the male migrants in the rural areas migrated for *employment related* reasons, while women, like in the Census, migrated mainly due to *marriage* (NSS report no. 533: Migration in India, 2007-08, Page no. 31). As already discussed, most of the male migration in India is rural to rural and for employment reasons. This is typically due to the bouts of rural unemployment in the lean agricultural seasons because of which labourers move from one place to other in search of employment during the harvesting and sowing

season and also for other casual work in non-farm sector.

#### 4. The Case of Short Duration Migration: State-wise Estimates from NSSO

The NSSO in the 64<sup>th</sup> Round (2007-08), which is the recent most comprehensive survey on migration, collects information on short-term migration. A short-term migrant is one who has migrated for work for more than 30 days but less than 180 days. This concept of NSSO helps one to understand the seasonal nature of migration. By collecting data in different sub-rounds the NSSO also attempts to capture the seasonal movements more accurately. As we have already identified from the above tables and discussion on the data on Census 2001 that the majority of the migration is of rural to rural nature it is highly likely that majority of the rural-rural migration is of seasonal and follows the agricultural cycle of the respective region.

**Table 4:** Short Term Migrants, States/UTs

States / UT	Total (Migrants + Non Migrants)	Migrants	% Migrants (proportion of short term migrants in the population)
Jammu & Kashmir	6795509	91732	1.35
Himachal Pradesh	5678283	28957	0.51
Punjab	15950149	113289	0.71
Chandigarh	97537	0	0.00
Uttaranchal	6497349	27919	0.43
Haryana	15888063	63829	0.40
Delhi	975521	2160	0.22
Rajasthan	44593314	679482	1.52
Uttar Pradesh	135432466	1858011	1.37
Bihar	68191366	2071386	3.04
Sikkim	461087	1691	0.37
Arunachal Pradesh	850151	15344	1.80
Nagaland	741252	22267	3.00
Manipur	1486822	7042	0.47
Mizoram	483222	1988	0.41
Tripura	2875550	8495	0.30
Meghalaya	1941233	24665	1.27
Assam	22665196	262718	1.16
West Bengal	60055234	1467766	2.44
Jharkhand	20523684	535980	2.61
Orissa	31368266	416818	1.33
Chattisgarh	19343109	320164	1.66
Madhya Pradesh	45994628	1185963	2.58
Gujarat	31315914	1059160	3.38
Daman & Diu	99350	1260	1.27
Dadar & Haveli	177307	21	0.01
Maharashtra	56197322	664511	1.18
Andhra Pradesh	54727075	756102	1.38
Karnataka	32917926	369261	1.12
Goa	624211	5796	0.93
Lakshwadweep	33993	138	0.41
Kerala	22829488	112535	0.49
Tamil Nadu	35199556	402969	1.14
Pondicherry	361065	3943	1.09
Andaman & Nicobar	223968	1204	0.54
Total	743596166	12584566	1.69

**Source:** Computed from NSS Unit Level Data, 64th Round, Migration Survey

As short duration migration occurs mainly in response to dwindling employment opportunities in rural areas along with an underdeveloped nature of the non-farm sector, the Table 4 examines the percentage of out migrants from rural areas only. The Table 4 presenting the state-wise total number of short duration migrants as well as their percentage share in the total population of the respective states shows that Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Nagaland are the states with the highest percentage of short term migrants in India. Among the major states, Gujarat and Bihar has the highest percentage of short duration migrants. The all India rate of short term migration is 1.69 per cent in rural areas. At the same time it was found that mainly the males were found to be involve in short term migration (NSS report no. 533: Migration in India, 2007-08, Page no. 93).

In the next Table.5, we show the percentage of short duration migrants from rural areas by their household type to give their economic background, which we expect will underscore

the seriousness of the problem from a policy perspective. Only the major states identified as having the highest percentage of short duration have been presented in Table.5. Much to our speculation and in corroboration with the findings of empirical studies; most of the migrants have agrarian backgrounds either as *agricultural labour* or *self employed in agriculture* household. Out of the 10 states, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, Maharashtra are the states where a large proportion of short term migrants belong to the above two categories of household (Table 5). In sharp contrast short duration migration from households engaged in self employment in non agriculture is less than 15 per cent in almost all the states. In case of 'other' labour, it is slightly higher than those who are self employed in non agriculture but much less than those having agricultural backgrounds. The last category of 'other' which captures households engaged in sectors such as regular and salaried work, the percentage of short duration migrants is almost negligible.

**Table 5:** Short Term Migrants by Household Type (Rural)

State	Agriculture		Non Agriculture			Total
	Self Employed in Agriculture	Agricultural Labour	Self Employed in Non agriculture	Other Labour	Others	
Uttar Pradesh	792792 (42.67)	401104 (21.59)	290580 (15.64)	319859 (17.22)	53676 (2.89)	1858011 (100)
Bihar	543919 (26.28)	868459 (41.97)	363145 (17.55)	179019 (8.65)	114797 (5.55)	2069339 (100)
West Bengal	251498 (17.17)	664308 (45.36)	181355 (12.38)	335636 (22.92)	31797 (2.17)	1464594 (100)
Jharkhand	202886 (37.85)	59856 (11.17)	87158 (16.26)	168494 (31.44)	17587 (3.28)	535981 (100)
Orissa	85671 (20.55)	158755 (38.09)	44342 (10.64)	117034 (28.08)	11016 (2.64)	416818 (100)
Chattisgarh	78694 (24.58)	215642 (67.35)	5636 (1.76)	17871 (5.58)	2321 (0.72)	320164 (100)
Madhya Pradesh	251105 (21.17)	539322 (45.48)	75133 (6.34)	312723 (26.37)	7678 (0.65)	1185961 (100)
Maharashtra	123035 (18.52)	417148 (62.78)	30265 (4.55)	52764 (7.94)	41300 (6.22)	664512 (100)
Andhra Pradesh	98788 (13.07)	369437 (48.86)	85450 (11.30)	176264 (23.31)	26164 (3.46)	756103 (100)
Karnataka	99756 (27.01)	179737 (48.67)	37627 (10.19)	46132 (12.49)	6011 (1.63)	369263 (100)

**Source:** Computed from NSS Unit Level Data, 64th Round, Migration Survey. Note: Table shows only Major States identified from Table 4 as having high percentage of out Migration.

What can be concluded from the above discussion is that seasonal migrants/short duration migrants invariably belong to the labour class who are either landless or land poor. Unlike the case of long duration migrants whose migration pattern reflects their better off status in being able to receive employment of a longer duration in urban areas, short term migrants on the other hand fall in the bottommost rung of MPCE decile class and are absorbed in low end, irregular and temporary work (Table.6).

**Table 6:** Short term Migrants per 1000 Persons

MPCE Decile class	Male	Female	Person
0-10	45	10	27
10-20	39	9	24
20-30	37	7	22
30-40	32	5	18
40-50	32	6	19
50-60	26	4	16
60-70	21	3	12
70-80	22	3	13
80-90	16	3	9
90-100	14	2	8
All classes	28	5	17

**Source:** Reproduced from NSS report no. 533: Migration in India, 2007-08, Page no. 93

The seasonality factor of agriculture influences the mobility patterns. Their return to source villages coincides with the

agricultural seasons to take part in the harvesting and/or sowing seasons. However besides this, another main reason for the short duration of stay in destination areas is the limited resources they have to fall back on for a longer period. The labour contracts they receive under contractors or 'sardars' are prefixed for short duration which makes these labourers remain in a floating condition to be available at construction sites all over the country. According to the NSSO, more than 80 per cent of the short term migrants from the rural areas were found to be engaged in the construction, agriculture and manufacturing sector (NSS report no. 533: Migration in India, 2007-08, Page no. 96). Their lack of permanency also results in their inability to claim for social security and other amenities such as housing, health care and Public Distribution System. Short duration migrants are also engaged in rickshaw pulling, brick kilns and hawking in the urban areas which do not guarantee any form of social security.

## 5. Conclusion

Labour migration is a very dynamic and contested domain in development discourse. In India, labour migration is closely linked to the economy and society. As employment related migration is the most important in India, the policy makers may take a note of this and try to identify the bottlenecks existing in the labour market. Although out migration for employment has been a ubiquitous phenomenon everywhere, the growing rate of seasonal out migration highlights the

larger problem of distress in agriculture which has been argued to be accentuated in the post liberalization era. The very characteristics of short duration migrants vis-à-vis long duration migrants underscores the ineffectiveness of policy initiatives in offering better alternatives to address rural distress. This therefore requires the reconsidering of the flagship employment programmes such as the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) to address the persistent problem of seasonal unemployment. As migrant members are also found to belong to households engaged in self employment in agriculture it also flags the need for initiatives to make agriculture viable.

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