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Policies should Recognise Migrants

An interview with R B Bhagat

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R.B. Bhagat is Professor at International Institute of Population Sciences (IIPS). In the interview he says that there is a need to include short term migrants in NSS data set and question on out-migration can be included in Census. Government should recognise migrants as a category in its policies.

According to you what are the changes that are to be made in large data sets like Census and NSS while collecting data about migrants?

It is true that Census and NSS are two main sources of data on migration in India. The census provides data on migrants based on place of birth (POB) and place of last residence (POLR). If the place of birth or place of last residence is different from the place of enumeration, a person is defined as a migrant. On the other hand, if the place of birth and place enumeration is the same, the person is a non-migrant. Migrants defined on the basis of POB are called lifetime migrants because the time of the move is not known and also duration of migration could not be ascertained. On the other hand, migration data based on POLR is extremely useful as it relates to last move and duration of migration is provided.

NSS does not provide migration data based on POB, but gives data based on POLR. As census is taken in 10 year's time, NSS data fills the gap in between censuses. However, it is important to mention here that NSS includes questions on migration occasionally. In addition to POLR, NSS also provides data on out-migrants/emigrants, remittances, return migrants and short term migration. There is a need to include short-term migration question in census also. A question on out-migration could also be included in the census as a part of household schedule and a question on remittances could be very useful. On the other hand, from NSS schedule the characteristics of out-migrants are not known as they are not the de facto member of the households. The inclusion of questions in respect with out-migrant/emigrant in NSS will be quite helpful in linking the characteristics of out-migrants/emigrants with that of their households.

There are some studies which say that the climate change migrants will be mainly poor. Do you agree with this statement?

This is partly true because climate change could lead not only migration but also displacement from the areas affected by extreme weather events like cyclone and flash floods. Our recent book with Prof Irudaya Rajan on "Climate change, vulnerability and migration" (https://www.routledge.com/Climate-Change-Vulnerability-and-Migration/ Rajan-Bhagat/p/book/9780415790727) shows the impact of climate change on migration in the Indian subcontinent. It also shows how the socio-economically poor are worst affected in these circumstances and resort to migration to survive.

Due to the migration of people from rural areas to urban areas is there a threat to the agricultural sector in our country?

In my opinion this is not true. About half of the workforce of India is still dependent on agriculture contributing just 14 per cent of GDP. So we have enough surplus labour in rural areas, although there some seasonal shortage in some parts because manual work is generally undertaken by illiterate, SCs and STs. On the other hand, emerging literate population wants non-agricultural job which very few people get. In this context there is a huge unemployment and underemployment in rural areas. Migration is not a threat to agriculture but may pave the way for technological changes in agriculture if migration and remittances are integrated with agricultural and rural development.

There are not many studies about the people who are left behind in rural areas. Is it the lack of data which prevent studies in this subject area?

There are number of studies based on primary data, and numbers are growing, but sometimes results are conflicting. It depends upon the area selected, the cultural and ethnic groups and also the forms of migration- like seasonal, temporary, and long-term migration taken into consideration. Migration is an area where lot of diversity exists, so there is need to study more from different perspectives and approaches.

Do you think that government in bringing out any policies to improve the infrastructural facilities especially the housing problems of migrants in India's cities?

No, there is no recognition of migrants as a group or category in government policy and programmes. It is subsumed under the category of poor and various other categories like slum dwellers, construction workers, domestic workers and informal workers etc.

Sir, you have many papers on internal migration, seasonal and temporary migration which are the other areas that you are currently working on?

Apart from migration I have worked in the areas of demographic data and politics, urbanisation, development and right to the city, and population and environment relationship. Population and health policies are another area of my interest and recent works.