

Migration and Reverse Migration in the Age of COVID-19

Commentary

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The notion of the “migrant” in the current capitalist times and the world of migrants in it are explored. The source to destination streams of migrant labour is outlined, and it is then argued that reverse migration will perhaps usher in the greatest crisis in the rural landscape of India, for which we are not yet prepared.

The coronavirus pandemic has triggered a massive reverse migration from the “destination” to “source” in large parts of the country. We witness hundreds of thousands of labourers marching back to their villages in order to find some warmth and empathy more than anything else, as the rest is going to be too hard to come by. This article is about that migration.

The available data indicates a widely differing reality about migrants in India. While, as per Census 2011, the total number of internal migrants would be 450 million—more than 30% higher than 2001—the actual numbers perhaps are higher than what is captured by the census. Field realities do indicate that Uttar Pradesh (uP) and Bihar are the biggest source states of migrants, followed closely by Madhya Pradesh (MP), Punjab, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Jammu and Kashmir and West Bengal; the major destination states are Delhi, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala. Another marked change in the migration pattern in the last decade has been the interstate movement to new growth centres, especially in small and medium sized towns and million plus cities. However, the defining feature of who is a migrant is rather flexible, even in official records. Usually the migrants do get defined on the basis of place of birth or last place of residence and a deviation from it. Hence, such a characterisation puts severe constraint to understand the issue of migrants in this form of definitional context.

Compounding the issue is another limitation in the analysis as the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) as well as the census fail to capture the short-term seasonal movements, which form a large component of the migration process. Apart from the above, there are other issues too that relate to the problems of data. These are the inadequacies in capturing the extent of tabulating the migration of children of a particular age group as well as women who would accompany the household heads to the destination points. The data is also inadequate in terms of understanding the very large-scale migrations that occur from tribal areas and of tribal and Scheduled Caste people. We, however, do know that in the last two and a half decades, India has urbanised at a rapid rate, and this urbanisation is built on the labour of the migrant population as well as the services to a rapidly urbanising India. Hence, a very rough estimate

would put India's migrant labour, which would include daily wage labour, local migrants, seasonal migrants and long-distance migrants, at a fairly large numbers than what is computed.

Source and Destination Points

So what are the major streams as well as the sources and destination points of this vast mass of migrant population? First, the major area of work they are engaged in would be agriculture labour, brick kilns, construction sites, services (maids to watchmen to drivers) industrial non-skilled workers, small and tiny road side businesses (tea shops, dhabas, small eateries, hotels, restaurants, etc).¹ This entire workforce falls under the informal sector, which, of course, constitutes 93% of India's total workforce. The total Indian informal sector workforce is calculated at around upward of 450 million as per varying estimates.

Where were the migrant labour deployed in the peri urban and urban locales of the economy? Certain studies on this issue do come up with some major areas. It does appear that the major concentration of the migrant labour in the urban economy was on the construction sites, and brick kilns located at the edge of the peri-urban areas followed by the concentration of unskilled ones who are on daily wages (employed from the daily wage labour markets or the "naka," which is ubiquitous these days in all our cities). The other major area of migrant labour employment is, of course, the green revolution states of Punjab, etc, and related areas as well as the sugar cane growing areas and the three-crop areas. These were seasonal migrants. Apart from these, there were of course the other service sector areas that accounted for migrant labour employment.

There have been issues raised in terms of whether this kind of migration is due to distress or is opportunity-oriented. Given the nature as well as the shared experiences, the so-called source regions are inscribed by low social and economic developmental indices. Large-scale migration induced by greater and greener pastures of economic growth is largely a myth, as most of the migration is for subsistence and survival and falls under the citatory of distress migration.

Given the diverse realities of expanding of urban settlements in which lives of migrants are embedded, it is important to note that the coping strategy of the migrants constantly vacillates between the inhuman work conditions of urban and peri-urban India on the one hand and the impoverished and destitute landscape of the rural on the other. The significance of the "source" village in the coping strategy of the migrants differs with the varying stages of the work cycle of migrants. Invariably, the outer limits of these individual or group adaptive strategies are determined by the work opportunities and survival conditions at "source" and "destination." It is here that region specificity and the possibilities of different contexts assume significance. Such contexts create a characteristic heterogeneity that is fully understood in terms of a sliding scale, "a continuum on which only the extremes on both sides are in sharp contrast to each other" (Breman 2013a: 80-81).

Failed Development

The so-called source regions that see a large influx of migrants to the destination regions are Bihar, Odisha, Rajasthan, MP, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, largely eastern UP, parts of Maharashtra and Gujarat (especially the tribal areas). Invariably, these regions internally also experience chronic drought, have deforested landscapes and devastated agro-ecologies that bear the imprints of tardy implementation of welfare schemes as well as schemes in the arena of agriculture services of soil and water conservation. This failed development contributes to the continuation of poor resource bases and assets of marginal and small farmers, which is accentuated by the persistence of a context of subjugation that perpetuates severe economic deprivation and thrives on entrenched social discrimination—the exploitation of the poor, the landless, and the castes at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Due to the young male population out-migrating, the source niches are also getting increasingly characterised by the feminisation of agriculture that has meant the largely distress-induced participation of women. Thus, migration is not a reflection of failed agricultural policy alone. It can be viewed as a risk diversification strategy, and the remittances do contribute a share in household incomes. The issue, however, is the low threshold of such incomes that perpetually keeps families at subsistence levels. Thus, the world of migrants is shaping urban transformations as a captive construction force where each seasonal brick kiln worker, semi-permanent to permanent casual construction worker, loader, carter and carrier, and domestic worker occupies a different niche and provides cheap and often unaccounted human labour that shapes our peri-urban and urban landscape. The Table (p 29) below presents a representative example of movements between source and destination regions in some selected parts of India.

Seasonal migration is circulatory in character, and even for semi-permanent and permanent migrants, “source” continues to be the only social reality they could draw upon. In the narratives of most of the migrants, “source” is equally important as “destination.” In fact, the cash remittances from seasonal migration often complement the meagre agricultural produce from which food security of the household is somehow met. As so many of the migrants testify, cash earned from the destination helps them negotiate the rural economy that is increasingly monetised.

Old and New Forms of Subjugation

Thus, in the overall context of the ongoing urbanisation and rural industrialisation, what needs to be understood is the manner in which the subordination, exploitation and control of labour takes new forms that are a combination and an ingenious adaptation of the older forms of control and bondage contextualised to new conditions of capitalism. It is necessary to comprehend the reproduction of “vestiges” of older forms to better understand processes internal to the new conditions of capitalism. The core of labour servitude draws upon older forms of subjugation,

thus offsetting the belief propagated by capitalism that it is based on free labour. Instead, it would be worthwhile to develop a perspective that offers useful insights into the realities of the institutionalisation of labour vulnerabilities through an adaptive system of labour exploitation. In proposing the term industrial serfs, there is an effort to delineate the contours of the “age old contrast between freedom and servitude,” to see “what it received from the past, as if passing it through a prism, and transmitted it to succeeding ages” (Bloch 1962: 279). Mapping the world of the unorganised poor in India clearly shows that “capitalism is not dissolving this matrix of social institutions but reconfiguring them slowly, unevenly and in a great diversity of ways” (White and Gooptu 2001: 89–119, 90).

It is in this context that the term “neo-bondage” suggested by Jan Breman is more appropriate as it captures the experience and fate of “footloose labour” tied to a “cycle of production” that is seasonal and operates in different ways like a combination of “advanced payments and postponed payments” (Breman 2013b: 343–45) Arguing that “labour bondage is not likely to disappear when economic growth is sustained at its current rate of increase,” Breman locates the continuation of this practice in the on-going restructuring of capital and suggests that

the emergence of neo-bondage is strongly connected to the reinforcement of the casualisation ..., informalisation of employment and reflects the increased monetisation of commodity exchanges and of social relationships. (Breman 2008: 83–90, 86)

In labour studies, the aim is to understand and “envisage a crude and primitive world with its moments of tragedy” (Bloch 1962: 264). Being tied to the land and master is the defining attribute of classical (mostly pre-industrial) versions of serfdom. The associated attribute that, by default, grips the serf is the lack of any new opportunities to learn new skills. In modern times, especially after liberalisation, there is a transition to a bondage that is more rooted in the immobility of the structures of capital.

It is in this context that we need to understand the world of farmers, the agriculture labourers and the nomads who, today, inscribe the world of the migrants. The pauperisation of the habitats of that world has led to the creation of conditions in which labour is being harnessed in a most iniquitous manner by the emerging capitalist system today. The nature of such a process should then, inevitably, lead to a major political and societal crisis, where the edifice of urbanisation, driven by an economy riding on debt, may totter. Perhaps, this is why we see a reverse migration today as the “destination” is soulless and devoid of any other meaning other than deriving profits and cheap labour. However, what is the situation in the “destination”?

Effects of the Lockdown

The imposition of the lockdown as a measure to contain the exponential progression of the COVID-19 pandemic has hit the unskilled and semi-skilled migrant labourers the most. In the last few weeks, we have all been witness to harrowing, nerve-wrenching and bone-chilling images of the exodus of these marginal and “invisible” drivers of the informal economy of urban

India. Indian highways emptied of most vehicles were lined with bedraggled, poor pedestrians, many carrying all their worldly belongings in bundles on top of their heads walking to their home villages, hundreds or thousands of miles away across states. Add to that equally desperate attempts by small distance migrants to somehow reach their destination from medium-sized towns and cities and we have a scenario of crowding back villages that constitute the famished and dried up “source.” Even as this is being written, there are field reports emerging about scarcity of food and water compounding the dried source. The issue of crop harvest for rabi and the sowing of kharif will create some relief in the short run but the source regions cannot be relied upon to take the additional load of the returning sons and daughters of the region. Rough estimates indicate that roughly more than 120 to 140 million are, at the moment, either walking back or are stranded in various camps. This number does not take into account the vast majority of slums that characterise our cities and house the migrants. The actual numbers wanting to return home would be fairly large. The post-coronavirus recovery of the shattered world of migrants would witness diverse and multiple realities. International Labour Organization estimates are that around about 400 million workers in the informal economy are at the risk of falling deeper into poverty during the crisis. What is the nature of this dried up “source”? What awaits the returning people at the “source”?

Agrarian Crisis and Migration

The so-called source over the last two and a half decades and more has witnessed an unprecedented crisis in the arena of agriculture. The “source” villages where these migrants have managed to return somehow are passing through an agrarian crisis that gets firmly inscribed in these diverse ecoscapes of India with each passing agricultural season. The majority of them are smallholder subsistence economies reeling under the crisis of falling productivity, water scarcity, crisis of other livelihood options, and competing claims by private capital on natural resource endowments. The lands are now fragmented to such an extent that the bottom 50% are cultivating 0.4% of the total cultivable lands. This is, of course, compounded by low investments in agriculture, negligible capital formation, debt-ridden farming and improper price mechanisms that farmers have to deal with. A combination of these elements over the last two and a half decades has resulted in lakhs of farmers committing suicides and turning the agrarian rural landscape into a barren one. Moreover, the average holdings have drastically reduced to almost 1.13 hectare, and it was this agrarian crisis which, in the first place, induced the migration from the agrarian areas to the rapidly urbanising areas. We must also take into account the fact that Indian agriculture for the last two decades and more is in a terminal crisis, and it cannot hope to sustain this pressure on land and resources in an instant manner. For Indian agriculture to sustain, the new post-coronavirus rural would be the last straw.

Hence, the process of recovery is going to be long-drawn-out and painful for those who would opt for meager options available at source and equally for those who would be looking for opportunities in urban spaces. Due to the diffused nature of India’s urbanisation and the phased-out partial manner in which the lockdown is going to be lifted, the contractor-driven labour supply chains are going to take time to get regrouped. Some sectors, especially

construction that accounts for a large proportion out of the streams of migrant workers, are not going to recover soon. There is going to be an increased pressure on interstate migration to nearby towns and cities that may not be able to offer much. Overcrowding and cheap supply of labour would have disastrous consequences for collective bargaining, security and entitlements of the labouring classes.

Need for a Charter of Rights

In such a context where the capability of the “source” is already severely compromised, social kinship ties with their embedded hierarchies are going to compound the crisis of human survival in these regions as they would be stretched out to their fullest limits. The pressure of this reverse migration is going to be felt in the fields of agriculture and allied activity and will put immense pressure on a system that is already broken. We need a complete transformation of economic and administrative processes, practices and policies to enable the rural to face up to the issues that the coronavirus-induced reverse migration has thrown up. We need a charter of the rights of the working population across the board that ensures the right to livelihood, food, security and above all dignity of labour. Such a charter should become the guiding principle in the post-coronavirus phase of India’s polity and economy. A failure to consider the above will result in a calamity.

Note

1 This observation is based on fieldwork on the issues of migrant workers in five states: Odisha, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra. This fieldwork was funded by Sir Dorabji Tata and Allied Trusts.

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