

Internal Migration in India: Integrating Migration with Development and Urbanization Policies

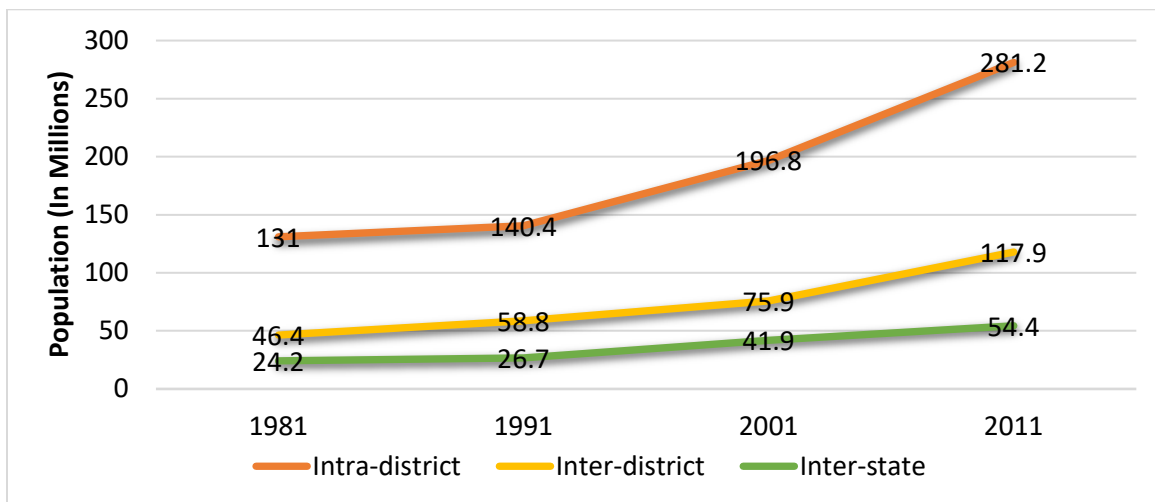
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This policy brief examines the various socioeconomic dimensions of internal migration and reviews its inherent relationship with development, especially with regard to urbanization policies. Short-distance migrants compose a significant share of all internal migrants in India. Most are engaged in temporary and seasonal movements and hail from poor and marginalized communities. While rural-rural migration is the largest migration stream, rural-urban migrants make up an important part of urban spheres all across the country. Despite being integral to the economy, such migrants often end up on the margins of society. A broad-based policy is required to expand these migrants’ access to housing, healthcare and livelihoods.

Internal Migration in India: Features and Characteristics

Internal migration is an important and pervasive feature of the Indian economy and society. The 2011 Census enumerated 450 million internal migrants based on place of last residence, or 37 percent of the total population. The Economic Survey (2017) estimated that an average of 5–6 million Indians migrated annually between 2001 and 2011, leading to an inter-state migrant population of “about 60 million” and an inter-district migrant population “as high as 80 million” (Government of India 2017a). Migrants’ main places of origin have traditionally been the densely populated and less urbanized states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, with major receiving states being the more industrialized and urbanized states of Maharashtra, Delhi, Punjab, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala.

Figure 1. Internal Migrants in India, 1981–2011



Source: Census of India 1981–2011.

The majority of internal migrants in India are short-distance, intra- and inter-district migrants (figure 1). Kone et al. (2018) note that the proportions of long-distance inter-state migration is considerably less than other developing countries such as Brazil and China, notwithstanding the fact that there are no legal restrictions to inter-state migration in India. One of the main barriers is the non-portability of social welfare schemes such as subsidized grain and the requirement of state domicility for government jobs. Munshi and Rosenzweig (2016) similarly theorize that low migration rates among male migrants in India are due to the lack of a formal insurance system that would help them hedge the risks of migration costs, coupled with relatively well-functioning rural informal insurance mechanisms.

Among major geographical streams, the most prevalent stream of migration is rural to rural, accounting for 62 percent, followed by the rural to urban stream at 20 percent, then the urban to urban at 13 percent, and urban to rural migration at 5 percent (Government of India 2010). According to the 2011 Census, 68 percent of all migrants were females. Over the years, it has been seen that the main reason cited for the migration of females has been marriage, followed by employment (Rajan and Neetha 2018). On the other hand, males mainly migrate for employment and education (Rajan and Sivakumar 2018). However, an underreported fact is that women, while primarily migrating for marriage, do enter the labor market at their destinations; this underreporting as well as a strongly male-centric view of migration leaves the issues of women migrants too often invisible (Rajan, Sivakumar and Srinivasan 2020).

Another aspect to note is that rural areas still depend on employment in agriculture. With agriculture heavily dependent on seasonal factors, this seasonal cycle also shapes the rural-urban migration stream. The rate of temporary and seasonal migration is seven times larger when permanent and semi-permanent migration is considered. An estimated 21 out of every 1,000 migrants in India are temporary and seasonal migrants, which amounts to approximately 14 million persons circulating annually. Despite newer evidence from a number of developing countries that seasonal migration is not necessarily a response to destitution (Lucas 2021), in India, there is a preponderance of economically and socially marginalized communities in seasonal migration (Keshri and Bhagat 2013).

The Link between Urbanization and Migration: A Picture of Exclusion

Urbanization has been a growing phenomenon in South Asia, including India. As of 2011, the population living in urban areas in India was about 31 percent (about 377 million persons), still below the global average of 55 percent. In fact, India has one of the lowest urbanization rates in the world. Even in the South Asia region, where India is a regional power, only Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Afghanistan have lower rates of urbanization (United Nations 2018). Although net rural to urban migration contributes about one-fifth of urban population growth, the net annual outflow from rural to urban areas is about 2 million (Bhagat 2012). Another main issue that influences migration to urban areas is the primacy of urban employment opportunities in the manufacturing sector. However, employment in manufacturing has been stagnant in India for a number of years, with low labor absorption (Iyer 2013). Research has shown that formal employment in labor-intensive industries such as manufacturing is actually moving out of urban areas to rural areas, leaving workers in urban areas with few options beyond informal employment (Ghani, Goswami, and Kerr 2012).

Migrants take up significant space in India's large urban centers, with the Census of 2011 indicating that almost 46 percent of India's urban population is migrants. They work in both formal and informal sectors, such as in manufacturing and construction, as well as occupation such as brick making and textiles (Srivastava and Sutradhar 2016; Deshingkar and Akter 2009).

A number of urban policies have been undertaken over the decades to ensure that increasingly large urban centers turn into engines of growth. The contribution of urban centers to India's gross domestic product (GDP) is expected to rise from 47 percent in 1980–81 to an expected 75 percent in 2030,

provided that urban infrastructure development keeps pace with its potential (Gupta 2019). Some of the recent schemes claimed to have a holistic urban renewal program are the Smart Cities Mission and Atal Mission for Urban Rejuvenation and Transformation (AMRUT), launched in 2015.

However, ample research has noted how migrants have been excluded from most benefits in cities, including access to social security programs, with many living in cramped slums (Chandrasekhar and Mitra 2019). The invisibility of migrants is also reflected in inadequate statistics. For instance, migration data as a part of employment and unemployment data were last collected by the National Sample Survey in 2007–08. In order to link migrants with urban development, much needs to be done by way of public policy. Recent announcements by the central government during the COVID-19 pandemic on the portability of ration cards and rental housing for migrant workers are some important steps in this direction (Rajan 2020).

Toward a Policy for Integrating Migrants with Development

The urban exclusion of internal migrants was flagged by a UNESCO (2012) policy brief which found that migrants were denied access to rights in the cities where they lived, often working in informal jobs with inadequate social, economic, and health security or education for their children. In view of this, the Government of India, through the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation (MHUPA), constituted the “Working Group on Migration” in 2015 and submitted a report in 2017. The report made a number of recommendations and provides a roadmap for the better inclusion of migrants at their destinations (Government of India 2017b).

Social and Economic Protection

To date, there has been only one piece of legislation governing the conditions of migrant workers in India—the Interstate Migrant Workmen’s Act, 1979. However, migrant workers have been governed by various labor laws with no focus on migration status such as the Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act, 1970; Building and Other Construction Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1996; and the Unorganized Workers Social Security Act, 2008. In 2020, different labor laws were amalgamated into four labor codes, but with little concern for migrant workers. Because many establishments are excluded, and also because many labor migrants are not registered, the benefits of labor laws do not reach most migrant workers.

HealthCare and Housing

It is important to ensure access to healthcare developed through portable insurance systems and easy access to public healthcare systems at destination. Moreover, the provision of temporary or rental-based housing culminating in ownership may be helpful in many urban contexts. This would also pave the way for migrants to acquire an identity, encouraging them to avail themselves of the right to vote and participate in local development. Urbanization and rural empowerment policies at national and sub-national levels need to harmonize, with a view to making the benefits of migration available to all.

Skills and Education

Programs must be set up in order to upskill migrant workers to better their conditions in terms of both work and wages. Programs to provide education for migrant children will also engender more long-term and robust migration to urban centers.

Financial Inclusion

It is important to ensure that migrants get access to formal channels of banking and credit systems, to not only increase their assets, but also to ensure legal channels for migrant remittance transfers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that these measures are of the utmost importance. The tragic scenes of migrant workers walking India’s roads on their way home could have been avoided if basic

safety nets had been in place. Larger urbanization policies have to dovetail with rural empowerment programs, which seems to be absent in most discussions on urbanization policies, including the recent “Smart Cities Mission.” More importantly, responsibility toward migrants should be clearly defined and adequate policies need to be formulated with unambiguous operational feasibility. A holistic rethinking of welfare measures, both legislatively and operationally, would ensure that internal migrants are not left vulnerable and excluded in the future.

Conclusion

A unique identification project known as Aadhaar has been quite successful, and it is now easier to implement the policy of inclusion. Over the years, a push to use better mobile facilities along with the use of the Aadhaar system to ensure greater financial coverage have occurred through governmental programs like the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY), which oversaw a massive increase in the opening of bank accounts. However, issues still remain. For example, despite the opening of bank accounts, access to credit facilities is still limited, especially in rural areas (Sinha and Azad 2018). This is an area that needs to be developed. Further, the increase in digital coverage should make access to food security, housing, health, and education of migrants’ children a top priority. While state and local governments are the implementing authorities, the central government is required to create favorable legislative and policy frameworks with respect to all internal migrants, including inter-state migrants.

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