

# Exodus of Migrants from Urban Areas

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*Imaginative policies that simultaneously address rural and urban livelihood issues have to be put in place without delay to address the issue of labour migrants that has come into focus since the start of the pandemic.*

Return migration from various cities to their native places mostly in rural areas has shaken the conscience of India in the wake of COVID-19 lock down that began in the entire country on March 24, 2020. Although government and civil society claimed to be helping the migrants to stay back in urban centres, most were desperate to go home walking on roads and along railway tracks with their children and families, without food in the scorching heat of the summer. Many died in road accidents and even crushed under trains on railway tracks. The situation is very pathetic. Print and electric media are replete with reports of such incidences. Reporting of such incidences and happenings are replete in print and electric media. The government's support in the form of additional food grain, cash transfer and increased revamping of MGNREGS has not been able to convince them to stay back in urban areas. The help was meagre and not able to meet their immediate requirements of food and shelter at the place of destination. Many are also stuck on highways and are in transit, often lathi charged by police. It is also alleged that migrant workers are kept at inhuman shelter homes with inadequate provision of food, water supply and other living facilities. It is now a question of millions of stranded migrant workers who lost their jobs and livelihood due to long period of lock down. Their return is an immediate issue followed by their rehabilitation at the place of origin or facilitating their return if they wish to do so in future.

Not surprisingly, we do not know the actual number of migrant workers working in the informal sector, but estimates show it to be in the range of 60 to 65 million, and those who are willing to return to their respective states will be somewhere close to 20 million (Srivastava 2020)

It is time to think seriously about the nature of development that is taking place as linked to migration and mobility. Although migration is an integral part of development, migrants are hardly included in the development policy and programmes. At the most migration is treated as a problem that needs to be controlled and discouraged directly or indirectly. It is most visible in urban development policy and programmes which invariably look upon it as a problem creating pressure on urban infrastructure, urban congestion, growth of slums or even urban crimes.

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The positive side of the migration and migrants is always missed. That migrants build cities and infrastructure, provide workforce to the industries and services is hardly recognised. It is also

rarely acknowledged that they are engaged mostly in '3D' works namely, dangerous, dirty and difficult work, which the 'natives' hate to do. Yet the category of migrant does not figure in policy and programmes. It is assumed that poverty alleviation programmes will take care of them. But due to lack of identity and residential proofs many are not able to take the advantage of such programmes. Lack of registration also prevents them from benefitting from various provisions under several legislations, prominent which are the Inter-State Migrant Workmen's Act and the Building and Other Construction Workers Act.

Migrants do not usually constitute a vote bank as they are not able to go back their constituency of their origin state at the time of election. Nor do many have their names registered in the voter list (Bhagat 2011). The portability of the social security programmes along with portability of voting rights has been already recommended by the Working Group on Migration submitted its report in 2017 (Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation 2017).

The COVID-19 crisis has brought the migrant workers at the doorsteps of the government and exposed our policy and programmes that do not leverage migration with development programmes. It is also not clear whose responsibility migrant workers are, the state of their origin, state of their destination or the central government? Moreover, migration has always been looked upon as an issue of governance, regulation and management. The category like poor, informality, precarity and vulnerability need to be understood from the perspective of migration. Migration essentially raises a question of the nature of development and development programmes from the lens of space and place. Who is getting what and where? The question of where people live and work has been a question of space and place that has been ignored. How space and place shapes our life and access to resources or perpetuates deprivation are both theoretical and empirical questions we cannot ignore.

From policy and programme points of view this also raises an issue of the nature of urbanisation and sustainable urban development inclusive of migrants and response to the migrants' right. Our urbanisation process has been very exclusionary. Some of the policy changes by the Central Government such as portability of ration cards, and provision rental accommodations as measures to combat urban exclusions are welcome steps. However urban planning and the administrative practices of urban local bodies should also include concerns and practices responsive to the other needs, entitlements and citizenship rights of migrants.

More immediately as millions are returning to rural areas, there is need to take care of them. A cash transfer of Rs 6000 per migrant i.e the monthly payment of MGNREGS (@ Rs 202 x30 days = 6060) to each return migrant worker until their return to urban areas or being absorbed in rural areas would be of great help and restore their confidence which has been shattered.

In the long run, our rural development policy also must change guided by the principles, strategies and planning of PURA as conceived by former President of India A.P.J. Abdul Kalam (providing urban amenities rural areas) and its variant like *Rurban Mission* which has rightly visualised the concerns and opportunities in rural areas promoting local over global based on

approaches of convergence, decentralisation and participation of people. The recently announced package for MSME should be integrated with *Rurban Mission* to promote rural development and employment generation. This also requires a change in our fanatical vision of one size fits all in a big country like India full of diversities and opportunities at local level.

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