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Counting the Invisible Working Hands in India

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Counting the Invisible Working Hands in India

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Abstract- **This paper enquires into the problem faced by migrant labors in the informal sector in India. It argues for the registration and tracking of migrants, particularly interstate migrants, as they constitute a significant proportion of the labour force. The mobility of labor is the natural mechanism for infusing inclusive and faster growth across the globe, and tracking the poor migrants would lead to investment in human and social capital, paving the way for integrating poverty alleviation policies and development strategies for overall better outcomes.**

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I. Introduction

Migrant workers in the informal sector in India have long been exposed to stretched working hours, unsafe working conditions, bonded labor instead of debt, different forms of modern slavery and, an unhygienic living milieu (Bhagat, 2010). Migrants are, to a significant extent, exploited by the forces whose primary objective is to mediate the economic conundrums despite statutory safeguards provided to them (Haan, 2011). The multiple hardships faced by several thousand migrants erupted like a volcano during the COVID- 19 lockdown. Most of them, after succumbing to neglect and deprivations, left the cities and towns where they worked to their native places, and many decided to walk hundreds of miles. Some died during their journey, and the rest traveled in the cargo compartments of trucks and containers huddled like a herd of cattle (Mukhra et al. 2020). The mass exodus of migrants during the lockdown was reminiscent of India's partition in 1947 and had turned the spotlight on them as this vulnerable section is estimated to be around 93 percent of India's informal workforce and contributes around 10 percent to India's GDP (Shome, 2021).

II. Is Migration a Necessary Phenomenon for Growth?

The migrant population is mired with uncertainty and deprivation and often jostled into shocks and new realities (Keshri and Bhagat, 2012). The policy objectives focusing on reducing the number of migrants seem to be socially desirable. Still, evidence shows that the mobility of labor is the natural mechanism for infusing inclusive and faster growth across the globe (Haan, 2011). The remittance amount migrants send home enhances the probability of their family moving upward in the income quintile and aids them to escape from the gnawing clutches of poverty. On average, it is estimated from the NSSO survey that the migrants within India send Rs. Thirteen thousand per year, and it is spent mostly on goods for household consumption and acts as a 'safety valve' for the poorer households (Kapur,2012). MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) has made a significant contribution in reducing 'distress migration' and has provided a choice to the poor households to find work in and around their villages rather than inflicting social and other pressures on their families by migrating elsewhere. But the labor mobility being a part of the growth trajectory and established livelihood strategies of poor households, migration will continue and even increase with rapid urbanization and development in the future (Coffey, 2013). So, what we need to focus on is not to minimize the migration or laissez-faire approach but to understand the complexity of migration patterns, perspectives of migrants, and their motives and design strategies to facilitate such labor mobility for overall better development outcomes.

III. Understanding the Interstate Migration from the Perspective of Migrants

Desperation, acute unemployment, seasonal unemployment, indebtedness, and chronic poverty are the major causes of migration; some households are being driven by the idea of better opportunities and thrust their young men and women into the informal migrant labor force in order to broaden their horizon. Clear governing principles are required to understand the distribution and movement of the interstate migrant population as they constitute a large part of the total labor force in this country (Haas, 2010). A migrant initially *departs* from a place, which can be defined as a state of origin or a place of departure; it is usually the area of residence at the beginning of his/her migration. The migrant's move terminates at the *destination* where the migrant is expected to reside for a specific *duration.* Destination State would be different from the State of departure or origin.

The *duration* of stay may be definite or indefinite. Indefinite migration is about the lack of a definite time reference on the last place of residence or a lifetime migration, which is not the subject under examination. Therefore it can be ignored. The definite migration is one of the governing principles for the movements of the informal workforce and thus requires

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elaboration. The migrants participate in enhancing the growth and overall well-being of the destination states. Still, the destination States tend to have a 'sedentary bias' towards a migrant that is excluding them from any social, and welfare measures and focuses only on the resident population (Mohanty et al. 2014). Most of the destination states regard the migrants as vagrants and perceive migration as a threat to their stability and social order. The access to PDS (Public Distribution System), health care, housing, immunization, and schooling are generally not made available to the migrant family at times, the migrants themselves refrain from obtaining the resident status in the destination states to retain their links with the place of departure or state of origin (Mohanty et al. 2016). Therefore, for the purpose accounting the duration of work for interstate migrants the period up to which a migrant laborer works in the destination States by retaining his or her residency in the place of departure or the state of origin can be counted.

The movement of migrants from some reasonable minimum *distance* should only be qualified as migrations by standard definitions (Lee, 1966). However for the purpose of interstate migration by the informal workforce, the distance criterion satisfying the three aspects above of departure, destination and duration would suffice. The mobility of a migrant can be counted as the distance traveled when his/her departure state is different from the destination state, and he/she resides for a certain duration in the destination state for an informal work. Applying these *4d principles,* with the help of the national data collection mechanism, the net inflow of migrants into any destination state can be computed by adding up the net outflow of skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workforce from all other states who moved into that destination state to participate in the informal workforce, after excluding the lifetime migrants, immigrants, and males and females migrated on account of marriage. Such an accounting would provide details on the dominant stream and reverse stream of the informal migrant workforce between states, which would further strengthen the policy formulation on poverty alleviation, skill development, and help in addressing the regional imbalances.

IV. Counting and Tracking the Interstate Migrants – National Migration Registry

The censuses, population register and NSSO survey, are the major sources of information on internal migration, but they represent only the past behavior of the population. Internal migration constitutes Intra, and interstate migrations. Intrastate migrations are the movement of people within a state from urban to urban, urban to rural, rural to urban, and rural to rural (NSSO, 2010a). From the standpoint of the safety net and other welfare measures provided by the states to their respective residents, intrastate migrant laborers are better off compared to interstate migrants. Therefore the interstate labour migrants require special attention, and focus on tracking. The rights for the interstate migrants are enforceable through the occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions (OSH) Code, 2020, which mandates decent working conditions, minimum wages, grievance redressal mechanisms, protection from abuse and exploitation, enhancement of skills, and social security to all categories of organized and unorganized workers, but when it comes to the question of boosting the economy versus rights of these invisible working hands, the former grabs attention and lead. The latter is by, and large neglected. It is also an irrefutable fact that the stagnation in real wages can hurt the consumption capacity of the poor and thereby worsen the plight of the migrants.

The NITI Aayog has recently proposed the development of a comprehensive National Database of Unorganized worker (NDUW) and has also launched a survey to track the socio-economic conditions of migrant workers (Bhagat, 2020). The 4d principles may be made central to the proposed data base to collect the movement details on interstate migrants/ unorganized workers, which can help in formulating policies on food, shelter, immunization, schooling, reskilling, credit, cash transfer, health and insurance for migrants and their children. Real-time tracking of migrants also can aid the governments in providing relief and rehabilitation measures during unforeseen circumstances like floods, drought, other natural calamities, and pandemic situations. It is pertinent to mention here that the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector (NCEUS) set up in 2004 has also recommended a universal registration system and smart social security cards for migrants (Bhagat, 2020). With increasing teledensity and technology, geo-coded data collection from the mobile telephones of migrants can also be explored for the purpose of registration and real-time tracking.

V. Conclusion - Benefits in the Long Run

The data collected on the movement of interstate migrants can be used to understand the dominant stream, reverse stream, and circular stream of migrants and surplus and deficit labor locations within the country. The migration improves the economic well-being of the poor households at the point of origin through remittances, but the remittance amount varies by state and migrants. The dominant stream would clearly indicate the presence of transient poverty at the point of origin. It will also indicate the presence of a significant number of poor households at the point of origin who are non-migrants by choice. They may lack initial endowments to trigger the migration leading to a

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higher incidence of chronic poverty and income inequality among them. Any policy intervention such as private investment, skill development, human capital up gradation, health care, immunization, education, housing, poverty alleviation program should consider the heterogeneous nature of poor migrant and non-migrant households. Such a data collection would also help understand the phenomenon of poor households escaping and falling into poverty across the country better. In the destination states, the migrants with low social capital are generally subjected to discrimination, exploitation, and abuse. The informal workforce is largely engaged in food processing, construction, mines, quarries, service industries etc. With the information from the National Migration Registry database made available to the destination states, stricter enforcement of labour legislations, better banking system for secure transfer of remittances, social protection schemes and basic amenities can be provided to the target interstate migrant population as they have already become an integral part of the thriving economy of the destination states. Integrating migration into the development strategies have to become an integral part of policy making as these invisible hands, despite hardships are also turning the wheels of the Indian economy to a significant extent.

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