

A CHANGE IN MIGRANT POLICY

Relevant for: null | Topic: Urbanization, their problems and their remedies incl. Migration & Smart Cities

A combination picture shows Dayaram Kushwaha, a migrant worker, carrying his five-year-old son, Shivam, on his shoulders as he walks along a road to return to his village, in New Delhi on March 26, 2020 (top) and Mr. Kushwaha poses for a portrait with Shivam after returning to Jugyai village in Madhya Pradesh on April 8, 2020 (bottom). | Photo Credit: [REUTERS](#)

Seasonal migration is one of the most critical issues of our time. The condition of seasonal migrants has emerged as no less an important issue than the [novel coronavirus](#) itself. The COVID-19 crisis has, for the first time, brought migration to the centre stage of public health and disaster response in India.

In the past, a mass exodus would take place because of a disaster such as a famine, drought, flood, or regional conflict. An exodus would be from the area where such a calamity was unfolding. While we continue to see episodes of such exodus, now there are new narratives of mass exodus caused by demonetisation, violence against migrants, and the lockdown imposed to contain the spread of COVID-19. What is common in these narratives is the decisive role played by the state or the lack of it. It is in the context of state action that migrants have drawn sharp attention in debates over public health and political economy for at least five reasons.

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First, the numbers involved are very high. Let's take the example of Bihar which has a population of about 123 million. The number of migrants in Bihar is estimated to be close to 10 million, of which three million may be inter-State migrants. An estimate based on NSSO 64th Round and Census 2011 data and a look at monthly per capita expenditure data suggest that there are approximately 2 million daily wage workers. The months of February and March are a lean season for rural-to-rural migration, yet the current figure of inter-State seasonal migrants stands at about 1.4 million. Further, if we take the example of the National Capital Region, where, as the data suggest, 20% of Bihari migrants are working, we are referring to 0.28 to 0.3 million seasonal migrants. Even if half of them try to return home during a crisis, facilitating their journey can be a logistical improbability.

Second, India's economy, particularly of the growth centres, depends on the services of migrant workers. Sectors such as construction, garment manufacturing, mining, and agriculture would come to a standstill without them. One of the biggest challenges after the lockdown is lifted will be to bring back the migrants to kickstart these sectors.

Third, the return of migrants brings to the source States an economic shock as there are no compensatory sources of livelihood. The poor States may find it difficult to sustain themselves without the remittances. This will not only cause demand side setbacks but also impact nutrition, health, education and the well-being of the older population.

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Fourth, in the case of epidemics, the exodus of seasonal migrants creates apprehensions about the spread of the disease and runs counterproductive to the very purpose of a lockdown. Working from home or getting paid leave is largely a middle-class luxury. Daily-wage earners do not have the capacity to stay at a destination without work. Their families back home depend on their daily savings. A considerable number of workers live within the manufacturing units or at

work sites. Any lockdown results in loss of their accommodation too.

Fifth, the pathetic working and living conditions of migrants defy the very idea of decent work and general security. Slums and slum-like colonies are breeding grounds of ailments and communicable diseases. People living in these areas simply cannot practise social distancing. Lack of sanitation, hygiene, safe drinking water, health services, social security measures, and affordable housing have resulted in a low quality of life.

Some amelioration may be in sight with the 1.70 lakh crore relief package announced by the Central government. However, despite the government's good intentions, the package will not benefit seasonal migrants. Those migrants who are unable to return home and are not ration cardholders in the cities where they are stationed will not benefit from additional free foodgrains under the PDS. They cannot avail of increased MGNREGA wages until they go back home. As many seasonal migrants are landless or marginal farmers, they will not benefit from the grant to landholders. Neither will they get benefits under the Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare Board because of low registration. Thus, this workforce will remain largely deprived of the benefits under the present package at their destination places. The State needs to think out of the box in delivering relief packages.

Disasters provide opportunities to correct structural wrongs. The state could work out a strategy of addressing immediate distress conditions and simultaneously initiating long-term measures to bring structural changes in the policy towards migrants and the informal sector.

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