

PUSH THE POLICY NEEDLE FORWARD ON MIGRANT SUPPORT

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Issues Related to Poverty, Inclusion, Employment & Sustainable Development

A long road for migrant labourers | Photo Credit: G. Ramakrishna

Only two years ago, in the [wake of a nationwide lockdown, India was left shocked by the plight of migrant workers](#) walking hundreds of kilometres, facing hunger, exhaustion and violence, to get to the safety of their home villages. The dire circumstances of the migrants tugged at our collective heartstrings. They became the focus of large-scale relief efforts by governments and civil society alike. The Government ramped up the One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC) project, announced the Affordable Rental Housing Complexes (ARHC) scheme, set up the e-Shram portal and began to draft a migration policy. These initiatives generated hope that the migrant crisis of 2020 would be a turning point, setting India firmly on a policy path by offering adequate citizenship and the accompanying social, economic and political rights to internal migrants.

Two years on, migrant distress has disappeared from our television screens but continues to be a lived reality. Repeated surveys have found that the incomes of migrant households continue to be lower than pre-pandemic levels, even after returning to cities. Migrants are finding less work and their children eating less. The post-1991 poverty alleviation of almost 300 million Indians, driven by migration out of farm work, is being undone. Despite this, a cohesive migration policy guidance remains elusive. Instead, disconnected policy initiatives and technocratic fixes chase specific agendas while nativism re-asserts itself through domicile quotas and reservations. The agenda of migrant inclusion has been pushed to the periphery of our collective consciousness.

This is not something India can afford to precipitate. Today, a third of the nation's workforce is mobile. Migrants fuel critical sectors such as manufacturing, construction, hospitality, logistics and commercial agriculture. Despite clear economic and humanitarian reasoning to bring migrants back into the policy discourse, the current policy scenario is at best fragmented and at worst waning. To course correct, we must recognise the entrenched structural constraints slowing the migration policy momentum and take strategic steps to push the policy needle forward.

First, we must recognise that migration is a highly politicised phenomenon in India. States are highly influenced by the political economy of migration. 'Destination States' experience a tension between economic needs, which require migrant labour, and political needs, which promote nativist policies that impose domicile restrictions on employment and social security. On the flip side, the 'sending States' are highly motivated to serve their "own people" because they vote in their source villages. This fragmented policy response to internal migration follows from State-specific calculations on what political dividends might be reaped (or lost) by investing fiscal and administrative resources towards migrants. Moreover, development policy in India has bet big on rural development as an antidote to migration. This widespread 'sedentary bias' continues to influence policy even though migration is an important pathway for impoverished marginalised rural households to find economic security (and social emancipation).

Second, migrants are a perennially fuzzy category in policy discourse, located inside two larger categories that have long troubled policymakers: the unorganised worker and the urban poor. Even the e-Shram portal, which has made impressive progress in registering unorganised

workers, has been unable to accurately distinguish and target migrants. Policy interventions in major urban destinations continue to conflate the urban poor with low-income migrants. Hence, slum development continues as the primary medium for alleviating migrant concerns, while in reality, most migrants live on worksites that are entirely out of the policy gaze. There seems to be an implicit assumption in the policy circles: if we cannot solve the problems of informality, how can we help migrants? Further, it is assumed that migrants will be automatically catered to with the formalisation of the economy, the labour market, the housing market, finance and so on. This pushes the timeline for addressing the migrant issue far out. It is no longer an urgent priority.

Third, migration policy discourse is seemingly paralysed by the now well-acknowledged failure of official datasets to capture the actual scale and the frequency of internal migration in India. Data systems designed to periodically record only one spatial location have posed great challenges to welfare delivery for up to 500 million people who are part of multi-locational migrant households. The novel coronavirus pandemic has placed a sharp focus on problems such as educating and vaccinating those children who accompany their migrant parents, or ensuring that migrant women avail maternity benefits at multiple locations.

Policy in India often emerges from the ground up, taking decades to cement into national law and standard practice. We have seen this in education and food security. In migration too, despite the structural constraints outlined above, it is heartening to see many initiatives on the ground that have immense potential to influence strategic shifts in migration policy. For example, many States have initiated data projects that can track migrants and generate dynamic real-time data that aid welfare delivery. Maharashtra's Migration Tracking System (MTS), which focuses on women and children has been successfully piloted in five districts. Chhattisgarh's State Migrant Workers Policy is premised on registering migrant workers at source and tracking them through phone-based outreach systems.

In States, a heightened awareness about migrants' issues is locating initiatives in departments other than labour, which has traditionally been the nodal department for migrant welfare. For example, Maharashtra's MTS is located within the Women and Child Development Department. However, there is further need for multisectoral approaches underpinned by a strategic convergence across government departments and initiatives. Odisha's Planning and Convergence Department, which offers an institutional mechanism for inter-departmental coordination, is one possible model.

In this scenario of well-meaning but scattered experimentation, migrants would be well served if the Centre played a proactive role by offering strategic policy guidance and a platform for inter-State coordination. State-level political economy constraints make the Centre's role particularly crucial in addressing issues of inter-State migrant workers at 'destination States'. The NITI Aayog's Draft Policy on Migrant Workers is a positive step forward in articulating policy priorities and indicating suitable institutional frameworks, and deserves a speedy release.

At a time when economic recovery and inclusive growth are urgent policy goals, migration policy can hardly afford to gestate. Strategic initiatives to provide migrants safety nets regardless of location as well as bolster their ability to migrate safely and affordably must keep up the momentum towards migrant-supportive policy.

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