

EXCLUSIONARY STATE

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

In India, you do not have to be excluded from the National Register of Citizens to experience a sense of loss of territory, identity, belongingness and livelihood. You could just as easily feel that way if you were a rural-to-urban migrant worker facing dislocation and “uprootedness” — a state of constant threat and anxiety with no sense of control over your spatial and temporal existence. This is akin to the experience of refugees who lack citizenship rights.

A large chunk of migrant labourers' shelter and work are deemed “illegal” within Indian cities. The 2011 Census pegs the total number of internal migrants in the country, including those who have moved within and across States, at a staggering 139 million.

The state's role is not as dormant as it appears, when it comes to undocumented workers. It is proactive in allowing the absorption of cheap labour into cities, to serve the bulging demand of the urban middle class. Sometimes these labourers are exploited, required to work below subsistence levels, and reside in subhuman conditions, which is then perceived as encroachment.

When the onus of “giving back” is on the state — of providing migrant workers with proper documents, secure jobs, housing and provisioning of other public utilities — the state often consciously and systematically derecognises them, and conveniently brackets them as “illegal”. Illegality, in turn, results in labels such as “criminals” that must be dealt with by the state again, to protect its “full” citizens, and to exclude the migrants further from the fruits of this “full” citizenship.

Consider the Smart Cities Mission of 2015 that proposed investment allocations of 2,039 billion to convert 99 Indian cities into smart cities. A mere 8% of the intended projects have been completed so far in the past three years, according to the recent report released by Housing and Land Rights Network. Interestingly, many smart city proposals identify slums as a “threat” to the city in their “SWOT” (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis while totally failing to account for migrant labour in the schemes. The report documents forced evictions and shelter demolitions in 32 out of the 99 proposed smart cities so far. Politically, inter-State migrants do not matter at all anyway because their votes do not count in the destination city.

The national obsession with bringing order to international boundaries could also be applied within nation states, cities and neighbourhoods. The state's role in ensuring equality, basic dignity, livelihood and providing minimum social security to its people must be upheld before all other priorities.

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