

# THE URBAN MIGRANT AND THE 'RITUAL' TUG OF HOME

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

Did our urban, means-ends rationality get it wrong again? Was it lockdown-related job loss that poisoned the well and led migrant workers, mostly single men, to head for their villages? Or, was there something non-economic, not quite this-worldly either, that turned their stomachs?

The migrant worker, when in crisis, is not seeking material help from his family in the village; they are, anyway, much poorer than he is. What disturbs him profoundly at such times is the fear of dying alone with nobody to perform the rites for him.

Also read | [Cabinet clears affordable rental housing for urban migrants](#)

In nearly every religion, the family plays a central role in the observance of mortuary rituals. Not just that, these have to be performed correctly so that the departed soul can easily negotiate the afterlife.

It is considerations of this kind, more than financial hardship, that prompt single migrant workers to leave for their rural homes. The Indian labouring classes are much less rattled by joblessness as unemployment is a frequent, if unwelcome, visitor at their door.

This is clearly an outcome of the fact that 93% of our economy is informal. Ironically, the Industrial Disputes Act encourages this trend. It mandates employers to pay severance wages, and other benefits, only if workers are hired, and on the rolls, continuously for over 248 days.

This law has had the unintended consequence of making it attractive for management to periodically flip labour around. As a result, only a minuscule minority stays employed for long.

Also read | [After turning their backs during lockdown, cities now want migrant workers back](#)

Most other workers suffer joblessness for long periods in the bear pit called the city. Yet, it took just two days of the lockdown for a large number of male workers to start the trudge to their respective villages.

When faced with an imminent threat to life, the tug of home and family is much stronger for the migrant worker than the industrial glue that comes with an urban occupation. This job could be well paid and the worker may have even held it for some time.

There are no laboratory conditions to settle this issue, but a comparative approach might help. In Surat in 1979, when there was a widespread fear that a satellite was going to fall smack in the city centre, causing untold deaths, a large number of migrants there left for their villages.

Again, in Surat, in 1994, the plague scare prompted over 6,00,000 to leave their work stations for the railway station. In both these instances, jobs were not threatened, but there was this perceived fear of death.

On the other hand, when demonetisation happened in 2016, only a few migrant workers left because this distress was primarily economic, without a threat to life. Later, in 2020, when COVID-19 started killing wantonly, there was a radical shift; now, men without families went

home because they did not want to die alone.

## Lockdown displaces lakhs of migrants

We missed paying attention to this fact in the latest pandemic exodus because it was accompanied by an economic downturn. It also satisfied our middle-class mentality because, from our angle of vision, economic lenses provide the right focal point.

For the better off, even a temporary job loss can be traumatic. Besides a bruised self-esteem, there are also equated monthly instalments, or EMIs and mortgages to be paid. It is not uncommon, under these conditions, for a middle class person to turn to the family, as the first port of call.

A 2018 CBRE survey shows that 80% of young Indian millennials live with their parents. Further, a YouGov-Mint-CPR Millennial Survey conducted in 2020 tells us that they depend on their parents' real estate property and savings to give them a start.

No wonder, Census figures show that joint families are growing, albeit slowly, in urban India, but declining in the villages. But the short, bullet point is that unemployment does not send migrant workers to their villages because their families there are in no position to help them financially.

What brings them home is the dread of dying on alien soil without the necessary prayers.

Also read | [Two-thirds of migrants have returned to cities or wish to do so: survey](#)

Among Muslims, washing of the body as well as the lowering of the shrouded corpse are important aspects of death rituals and ought to be performed by the immediate family. Despite regional variations, certain aspects of Islamic mortuary customs are constant.

Death rituals vary among Hindus too. There is no consensus, for instance, on how many days must elapse before major mourning rituals such as *chautha* and *shraddha* can commence. Also, most Hindus are cremated, but some are buried too.

Only the family would know the minutiae of these details. Further, among Hindus, male blood kin alone can perform the *pind daan* and the ritual erasure of debts, or (*rin*), of the dead relative.

If these, and other rules, are not followed correctly, the soul of the dead person could suffer perpetual torment in the other world. It will take more than a job somewhere to overcome the fear of dying anonymously, without proper ceremonies being performed.

Forced by poverty, workers can take economic hardship on their chin and stomach at the same time. They may have a face for radio and a voice for silent films, but in the theatre of survival, they move adeptly, playing their part.

Also read | [Migrant workers returning to cities to reclaim jobs, Solicitor General tells Supreme Court](#)

It is in the theatre of death that they need their families to provide the props. If about 90% of slum dwellers in Dharavi stayed put, post lockdown, it was because most of them lived with their wives and children and did not fear a death without rituals.

Newspapers were quick to notice that it was mostly men walking on highways, or leaving from train stations and bus stands. Though the image of vulnerable women and children in the midst

of all this is much more wrenching, their numbers were not that many.

This is not a trivial observation because women actually form 55% (or, the majority) of rural migrants to urban India. If there were fewer of them on highways it was because arranged marriages have brought most of them to the city, not a flimsy job prospect.

This makes their transition more permanent because they now generally have properly anchored urban husbands. These women, in the fullness of time, make a home, birth a family and nobody in that unit need any longer fear dying alone and un-prayed.

On the other hand, rural men migrate with tentative employment prospects and it will be a long time before they can, if at all, imagine getting their families over. Of course, a stable job, with entitlements, would let them live that dream. Till then, the thought of death and a frantic bus ticket home will always be paired.

Even so, despite economic uncertainties, and underemployment, about 72% of slum dwellings are owned, not rented. This shows the overwhelming preference the poor have for family life, only if they could afford one.

When urban workers rush to their rural homes, it is because they fear a death where nobody prays for them more than a life where nobody pays them.

*Dipankar Gupta is Retired Professor of Sociology, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi*

You have reached your limit for free articles this month.

To get full access, please subscribe.

Already have an account ? [Sign in](#)

Start your 14 days trial now. [Sign Up](#)

Find mobile-friendly version of articles from the day's newspaper in one easy-to-read list.

Move smoothly between articles as our pages load instantly.

Enjoy reading as many articles as you wish without any limitations.

A one-stop-shop for seeing the latest updates, and managing your preferences.

A select list of articles that match your interests and tastes.

We brief you on the latest and most important developments, three times a day.

\*Our Digital Subscription plans do not currently include the e-paper ,crossword, iPhone, iPad mobile applications and print. Our plans enhance your reading experience.

Dear reader,

We have been keeping you up-to-date with information on the developments in India and the world that have a bearing on our health and wellbeing, our lives and livelihoods, during these difficult times. To enable wide dissemination of news that is in public interest, we have increased the number of articles that can be read free, and extended free trial periods. However, we have

a request for those who can afford to subscribe: please do. As we fight disinformation and misinformation, and keep pace with the happenings, we need to commit greater resources to news gathering operations. We promise to deliver quality journalism that stays away from vested interest and political propaganda.

Dear subscriber,

Thank you!

Your support for our journalism is invaluable. It's a support for truth and fairness in journalism. It has helped us keep pace with events and happenings.

The Hindu has always stood for journalism that is in the public interest. At this difficult time, it becomes even more important that we have access to information that has a bearing on our health and well-being, our lives, and livelihoods. As a subscriber, you are not only a beneficiary of our work but also its enabler.

We also reiterate here the promise that our team of reporters, copy editors, fact-checkers, designers, and photographers will deliver quality journalism that stays away from vested interest and political propaganda.

Suresh Nambath

Please enter a valid email address.

Subscribe to The Hindu now and get unlimited access.

Already have an account? [Sign In](#)

Start your 14 days trial now [Sign Up](#)

You can support quality journalism by turning off ad blocker or purchase a subscription for unlimited access to The Hindu.

[Sign up for a 30 day free trial.](#)

**END**

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com