

THE WAY WE MOVE

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Migrants have made notable contributions to their countries of origin as well as destination. This is especially true for South Asia. To commemorate their efforts, the UN celebrates the International Migrants Day on December 18 every year.

For several years, India has ranked the highest among countries that receive remittances from migrants. States such as Kerala have benefited enormously from migrants to countries in the Persian Gulf. But there is a need to understand international migration from the country in all its diversity. In other words, we need to understand the distinctive characteristics of migrants from different states of the country, their choice of destinations and the patterns and purposes of migration.

Today, India's international migrants are not just from the southern states but also come from the north, including from Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Bihar — this is partly due to the demographic dividend of these states. However, there has been very little by way of research to understand the changing patterns of migration from India. We need fresh thinking at both the national and state levels. But before we do that, it is equally important to discuss the current state of research on migration from India.

Kerala has conducted a series of eight migration surveys while Tamil Nadu, Goa, Punjab and Gujarat have produced state-level data only once. Migration is a changing phenomenon and understanding its dynamics requires research at adequate intervals. Moreover, state-level surveys have focused only on legal and voluntary cross-border migration. And, surveys have focussed on households to understand the emigrants or return migrants. It was only last year that a survey in Kerala tried to understand the people intending to migrate.

Moreover, migration studies cannot be confined to labour. While there is much work on labour migration from India, we are yet to study cross-border human trafficking, undocumented migration, small and medium Indian entrepreneurs in different countries, student migration, family migration, left-behind husbands and the challenges faced by migrants in integration. These themes need both methodological and theoretical attention. We must conceptualise migration studies beyond producing databases — though that too is important. We need to understand migration through the lens of historians, psychologists, sociologists, geographers and legal specialists. An interdisciplinary approach could make the field that is currently dominated by economists and demographers much richer.

We also know that migration patterns are dissimilar between genders. Migration studies would, therefore, benefit from a gender studies perspective. Current research focuses on a small sub-population of woman migrants such as nurses and domestic workers. However, Indian woman migrants also comprise students, professionals, including scientists, doctors, IT engineers and teachers as well as beauticians, sales associates and hotel workers. Besides, women are trafficked to different countries in the Gulf for a variety of purposes ranging from domestic work to immoral activities. Much work is, therefore, needed to deepen our understanding of migration and gender.

Of late, there have been changes in the destination choices of Indian migrants. The preference seems to be for non-Anglophone countries despite the integration challenges. Indian students are moving to China, Japan, Germany and the countries of the former Soviet bloc; we can also see a South-South pattern of student migration along the India-Nepal corridor. Yet, the

predominant focus of migration studies is on Anglophone countries.

India is also a destination for students from African countries, but such migration is largely an unresearched area. Nurses and teachers from India migrate to African countries such as Zambia, Ethiopia and Eretria. Among the Indian professionals, the trend is slowly changing towards migrating to Southeast Asian countries such as South Korea and Taiwan, and European countries such as Norway, Sweden and Belgium. We need to study the considerable challenges and problems of living in non-English speaking countries.

Distress migration does not receive enough attention. Such migrants can be victims of human trafficking, workers who do not have proper documents, migrants trapped in a war zone or conflict areas or those who have been involved in workplace accidents. We do not know much about Indian migrants jailed in different countries or cheated by fake recruiting agents. We know that the cases of Indian workers dying in the Gulf countries have been on the rise over the years. However, we lack national- and state-level data on deceased Indian workers. In recent years, there have been reports of Indian workers held captive by pirates in African countries. There have also been reports of human smuggling from Punjab to Greece and Italy.

Social media has become a powerful tool to highlight the plights of migrant workers. In several cases, the Union Ministry of External Affairs has taken swift action after there were reports on the plight of migrants in social media. But migration studies have not given much thought to increasing the use of social media for migrant welfare.

Centres for migration studies can be established in universities and research institutions. Recently, a research programme on 'International Migration from Kerala' was inaugurated at the Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram. The erstwhile Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs had set up a research unit on international migration in 2006.

One way to bridge the knowledge gap is to replicate the Kerala model of migration surveys in all states. Finally, it is equally important to frame a comprehensive national migration policy to address the issues faced by migrants.

Rajan is Professor at the Centre for Development Studies, Kerala and Arokkiaraj is Post Doctoral Fellow at Leibniz Science Campus, Eastern Europe-Global Area, Leipzig, Germany

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