

Exodus of Migrant Workers: The Mobility Conundrum during COVID-19

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Large scale exodus of migrant workers from Delhi and other metro cities following the announcement of the nationwide lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis has brought the topic of migration to sudden attention in public debates. Scenes of people defying instructions for containment of population and attempting to trek long distances to reach their home stations swamped the media- first from the national capital Delhi and later from cities in industrialized states. While a complete lockdown is an untested exercise anywhere in the world, a complete disregard for migrant population in official policy making is quite baffling.

Migration for employment reasons has great economic significance for the migrant families and to the cities where they migrate. Individually, the migrants are visible everywhere in the city, but collectively, they are rarely accounted for in the city's demography. Documents on Indian domestic migration have highlighted how most of the migrants, especially those coming for employment, lack access to government welfare schemes in their respective places of migration. This lack of portability of welfare entitlements adds to the need for reverse migration in the face of economic downturns that have uncertainties over their livelihood. In the following section, we look at some key dimensions of migration in key cities with special reference to Delhi.

Dimensions of Migration – National Perspective

Census counts people at their usual residence, which is the place where they live and sleep most of the time. Migrants are those who

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report that they were staying elsewhere before coming to the place of enumeration. The National Sample Surveys (NSS) also follow a similar definition where they define the usual place of residence as the one where the respondents have stayed for six months or more or intend to do so. In this process of identifying migrants those who come and work in urban areas without making it as their place of usual residences gets omitted. Such short-term migrants can be identified only from the households from where they migrate.

The definitive data on number of migrants comes from the decennial population census. As per Census of India 2011, there were 177.6 million migrants in urban areas constituting 47% of the urban population. Of these migrants, 17.3% reported work/employment as the reason for them coming to the city. If we consider migrants who came to urban areas during the last 10 years as recent migrants, then we find that 15% of them came for work from urban areas of other states and 9.3% came from rural areas of other states.

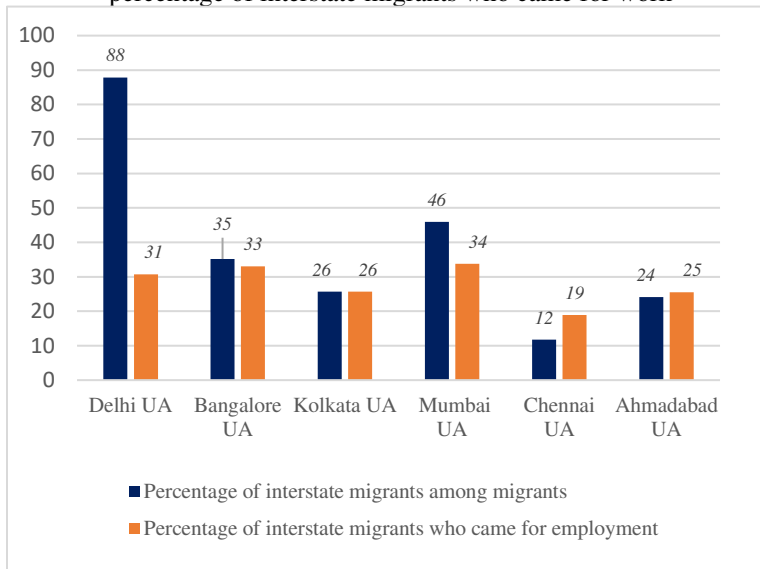
The Economic Survey 2017-18 presented as part of the national budget 2018-19 using new metrics found that the changes in same-age cohorts using the Census data yields an annual inter-state migration of about 5-6.5 million between 2001 and 2011. Besides, after analyzing railway passenger data from unreserved rail travel, the survey suggested an annual inter-state migration flow of close to 9 million since 2011. The findings of the Economic Survey from indirect data would therefore make us believe that there has been massive increase in migration in general and interstate migration in particular, in recent times. Unfortunately, we do not have recent statistical data either from NSS or any other national level surveys to gauge the recent trends in internal migration.

Economic Lockdown and Reverse Migration

All previously known disasters have been natural disasters with damages to production capacity and dislocation of supply during a short time. Under this pandemic, many countries including India have adopted the strategy of physical lockdown and the production, distribution and consumption have suffered due to complete or near complete stoppage of economic activities in the whole of the country. The full impact of the steps taken to contain the spread of COVID-19 through the ongoing economic and social lockdown is yet to be understood at this stage. But its impact on livelihood of migrants are blatantly regressive. The tenuous nature of their employment, mostly informal would have been the first to get hit due to the economic shutdown. Many firms in the Information Technology (IT), banking, financial, online commerce, etc. could introduce 'work from home' and other innovations to tide over the lockdown. However, large number of migrant workers and their families depending on the informal sector will have no such option open to them. The drying up of their income sources and their poor living arrangements would make living in the city untenable. Thus, the most affected segment of migrants in this category would be the interstate migrants.

Migration data from the 2011 Census shows that the migration pattern is not uniform across cities and towns. The six urban agglomerations (UA) of Delhi, Ahmadabad, Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai and Bangalore accounted for 20% of all urban migrants. Importantly, their share of the total urban migrants who came for work was 26%. Naturally, these metro cities are expected to have a huge migrant issue in the present context. Unfortunately, the currently available city level data does not allow us to examine the socio-economic conditions or the nature of their employment or the spread of migrants within the urban agglomeration. This deficiency in migration data is the major reason for our failure to foresee the reverse migration crisis that we now face.

Figure 1: Percentage of interstate migrants among all migrants and percentage of interstate migrants who came for work



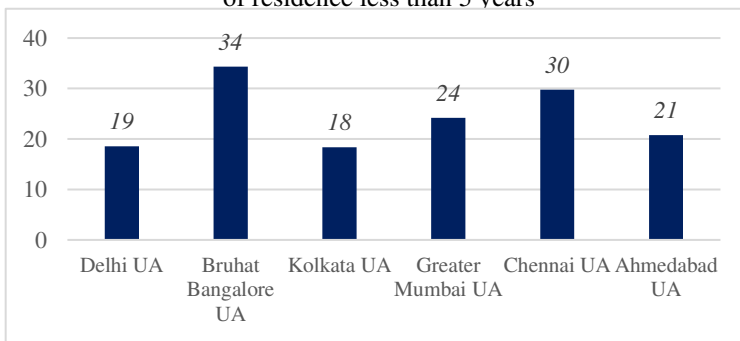
Source: Census of India, 2011

In the 2011 Census, the National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi had a population of 13.9 million. Of this, nearly 51% were migrants from within India. Close to a million (14% of the Delhi NCT population) was people who migrated for employment. As Figure 1 above shows, the percentage of interstate migrants is quite significant except for Chennai. It is expected that these figures would have increased since 2011, as these cities have become centres of IT-related services and modern manufacturing.

In the case of NCT of Delhi, the Census provides district level data and we can peek at the migration scenario in some greater detail. An important point to note is that the migrants in Delhi are not evenly distributed within the city. While the New Delhi and Central districts together account for only about 3% of the migrants, majority of them are scattered in the peripheries of the city.

Another fact that came to the fore during the current reverse migration is the direction of the movement. Over half of the Delhi migrants are from the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, accounting for about 65% of the migrants who came for work to Delhi. Other states having significant migrant population were: Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttarakhand. These five states accounted for 75% of the migrants in Delhi in 2011. If we see the migrants who came for work, then these states account for 81% of them. Travel demand from migrants makes it clear that the eastern states provide the bulk of migrants to the other metros as well.

Figure 2: Percentage of migrants coming for employment with duration of residence less than 5 years



Source: Census of India, 2011

In any city, migrants with a longer duration of stay are expected to be more established in terms of housing and other welfare entitlements. Recent migrants take time to settle down. Among those for whom duration of migration was recorded in 2011, 34% of migrants who came for employment had less than 5-year duration of stay in Bangalore (See Figure 2) followed by Chennai (30%).

Where Data Fails the Migrants

We have very little data on the on the living arrangements of the migrant population and their economic or occupational engagements especially at city levels. In the case of Delhi, the geographical dispersion of recent migrants within the urban agglomeration suggests that, instead of the city center, migrants settle in the city periphery that has a lower cost of living. They largely remain invisible for the city planners. There will be very little to distinguish them from the commuting workers except for the fact that the latter by virtue of their permanent residences have access to welfare entitlements.

The Census of India 2011 does provide the aggregated numbers with limited qualitative dimensions. Migration data has fared very badly in the statistical priorities of the Government. We do not have any inter-censal surveys to project the census migration data before the next census. While the Census is held decennially, the NSS used to fill the gap with five yearly surveys on employment and migration. These have been dispensed with. The last NSS survey on internal migration and outmigration was last held in 2007-08. Importantly, many significant decisions (budgeting, staffing etc.) related to provisioning of basic urban services are based on the Census data relating to population projections. For example, the Mission statement of Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) links the decisions related to the establishment of water and sewerage lines throughout the city to the Census data.

Census data is practically incapable of accounting for the dynamic migration flows that we see today in India's metropolitan cities. A large majority of these migrants remain unrecognized, which again deprives them of access to urban basic services. It is time for a comprehensive plan to address the data issues that will help factor this part of the city's population in city planning and

in times of calamities - whether natural or COVID-19 type health crises.

The cities need to understand the living conditions of migrants in more detail. The conventional definition of households used in surveys like NSS, are likely to discriminate the migrant households who stay in camps or in temporary shelters in short spells. While nobody wants the citizens to be tracked in any intrusive manner, it is important to understand their geographical spread, housing conditions, access to welfare, sources of income, family ties, occupational pattern, etc. to be able to factor them in decision making at all levels.