

Internal migration: a two-way street with a one-way ticket

A study of rural-urban migration in India

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Abstract

The 21st century has witnessed the emergence of a new elite in several countries and the Indian story is no exception. However, the spoils of wealth and economic power have remained concentrated in a few major cities while rural India has largely been left neglected, forcing several million to migrate to the cities in search of a better life.

However, for most, this remains a pipe dream. The cities are expensive and overcrowded, and difficult for many to eke out a living. COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdowns in the country exposed the poor to increased vulnerabilities and reflected the inadequacy of infrastructure, health and sanitary conditions in urban landscapes. Most crucially, it highlighted the urgent need to decentralise economic opportunities, invest sustainably in equitable regional growth throughout the country and diversify the economy by encouraging entrepreneurship and innovation.

This paper evaluates government policies in the context of rural-urban migration and suggests ways in which rural areas can be sustainably developed. A plethora of secondary sources have been referred to, to better understand the long term trend of migration and its geographical and occupational impact. The paper concludes that an emergent and prosperous India is an idea whose time has come.

Introduction

India is emerging as an important stakeholder in today's geopolitical landscape. While its economy seems to prosper, it is questionable if the average person is experiencing a higher standard of living. Even though the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of India is \$2.1 trillion, it is reported that 68% of the Indian population live on less than \$2/day.¹

This raises the question: To what extent is wealth evenly distributed in the country and can we conclusively say that the standard of living has risen for the average citizen?

It is the government's moral obligation to the people, to ensure that they live a good quality of life. Oftentimes, coinciding social cleavages can cause problems: India has historically battled with issues vis a vis the caste system and religion.² Even post independence, the majority of the citizens in the nation remained disenfranchised while the select few who lived in metropolitan areas continued to grow richer. This paper deals with the people who are left behind by the system because they have been generationally starved of equal opportunity and ushered back to the same vicious cycle in which they were born.

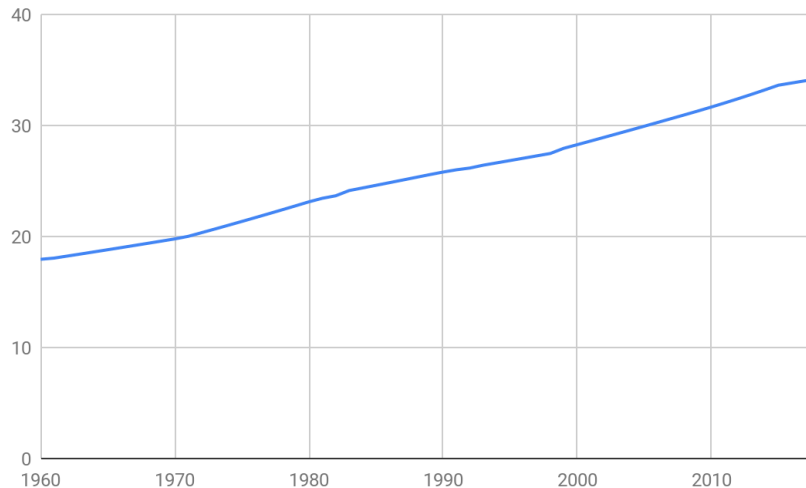
Rural-urban migration refers to the process where those residing in the under-developed areas of the nations internally migrate to the more developed cities in search of a better life. However, in most cases, this fails to happen and instead migrants overburden institutions in the urban landscape while rural areas remain underfunded and underdeveloped. This indicates the existence of a "two-way" street where both rural and urban populations are disadvantaged. At the same time, this migration is a "one-way" ticket in the manner in which it traps migrants into living worse lives in metropolises and denies them an opt-out mechanism. As a result of this, income inequality continues to worsen in the global south.³

This paper aims to highlight the reasons why rural-urban migration takes place, analyse the gaping holes with current schemes and propose solutions to ensure the sustainable development of the areas in the long run in the The Republic of India.

Internal migration today

India today is plagued by urban migration. Labourers from rural areas migrate to urban cities, in hopes of earning greater incomes and living more comfortable lives. Over the years, this has caused the urban population to significantly increase. While natural population growth is a contributing factor, rural-urban migration is singlehandedly the leading cause of this rapid growth. The graph below highlights how the urban population as a percentage of total population has been steadily increasing in India.

Urban population (as a % of total population)



Source: World Bank⁴

The trend above indicates that urban areas are getting increasingly populated. While the process of urbanization may sometimes be beneficial, the glorification of city life misleads many to migrate to urban areas under the misconception that they are guaranteed to live in a state of prosperity. This migration is often a “one-way” ticket because those who come from rural areas crucially lack the resources to make the journey back home. Since these workers live from paycheck to paycheck, they are stuck in the place to which they move.

When these workers migrate to already overpopulated urban areas, they are unable to find jobs and turn to the question of their own subsistence. To survive, they are coerced to take low paying jobs in the informal sector which often have poor working conditions and in many cases are extremely dangerous.⁵ Unable to afford the expensive houses in these cities, this has inadvertently led to the process of ghettoisation where migrant workers are pushed to live in abhorrent conditions in the outskirts of the cities. This looks like the Dharavi slums housing over a million migrant workers in Mumbai where “social divisions are mirrored in spatial ones”,⁶ and over 30% of Kolkata’s population living in slums.⁷

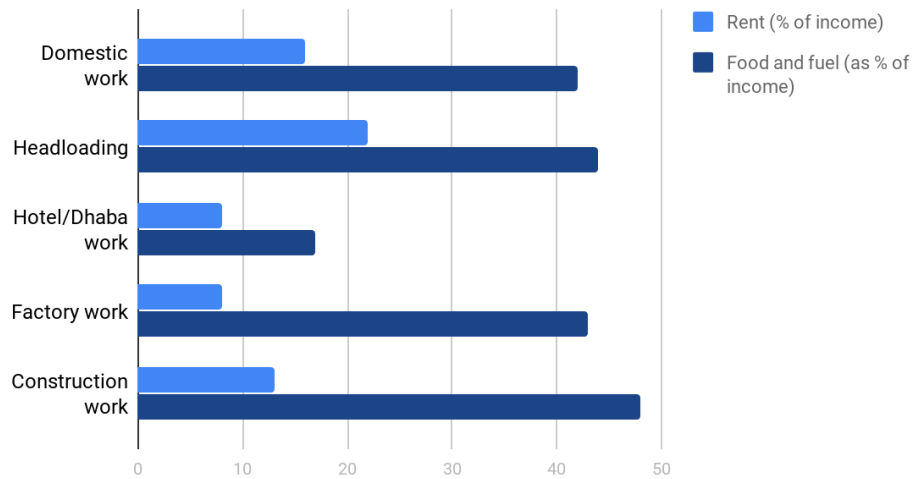
In addition to economic hurdles, urban migration poses significant environmental problems as well. Pollution of poverty refers to the degradation of the environment caused by “a lack of development”.⁸ As a result of urban infrastructure being overburdened by the ever-increasing population, environmental issues such as the improper disposal of waste in turn cause difficulties like the contamination of water, air pollution and lead to poor standards of sanitation.

It is reported that 25% of India's urban population does not have access to clean drinking water while 15% have no access to a drainage facility. Since resources are fundamentally scarce, increased competition further pushes up prices which leads them to become out of reach for many.⁹

It is ironic that these migrants leave everything they know in search of a better life but are oftentimes not only living worse lives themselves, but create unintended consequences that negatively affect a number of other stakeholders.

Schemes that are designed to help these migrants oftentimes do not even reach them. For instance, poor households in India are entitled to a "ration card" which enables them to purchase subsidised food, fuel and other commodities. However, many are conventionally excluded because the benefits can only be availed in the geographic location where the ration card was made. Consequently, many end up having to pay expensive market prices for such commodities. The graph below highlights how migrant workers in Ahmedabad, India (across the industries they work in) spend far too much on food and fuel, as a result of not being able to avail the schemes.

Expenditure on Food and Rent as a Proportion of Income for Circular Migrants Living in Rented Rooms in Ahmedabad



Source: Aajeevika Bureau¹⁰

Under the new "One Nation, One Ration Card" scheme launched by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharam, ration card holders will now be able to avail subsidised food up to the sanctioned amount irrespective of where they reside and where the card was made.¹¹ While this is intended to allow many more to benefit from the scheme, it raises questions of how the system will ensure non-excludability.

The scheme is infamous for its corrupt logistical infrastructure,¹² and while the modification is a step in the right direction, careful provisions must be put in place to ensure that the integrity of the programme is not compromised.

In addition to metropolises, even rural areas lose out. According to a report by the United Nations, India today has twice as many smartphones as toilets.¹³ Fan, Thorat, and Gulati write, “A strong urban bias has probably caused rural areas to suffer even more from the recent stagnating or declining investment trends.”¹⁴ This is made worse when migration takes place at a large scale: consequently rural areas lose out on the crucial labour required for the establishment of infrastructure. In turn, the lack of labour acts a disincentive for investment and rural areas are trapped in a system of stifled growth.

On the other hand, it has been widely argued that urban migration can be beneficial since the remittance sent back home allows the rural areas to sustain themselves. However, it is important to note that there is nothing exclusive to this income being in the form of remittances. Ultimately, rural areas lack investment and this income back home is a small fraction of what can be achieved if FDI and more government expenditure is concentrated into these regions. In fact, Rempell and Lobdell argue that remittances have been largely ineffective in spurring any form of development because of their insignificant amount.¹⁵ More importantly, remittance income is extremely unsustainable. When an economy begins to decline, low-skilled workers - being the least mobile - are oftentimes the most replaceable and thus the first ones to be laid off. In the wake of COVID-19, this played out in the Indian landscape and consequently millions of migrants lost their jobs and returned home because the infrastructure in urban areas failed them. Given that their income is so unpredictable, it is highly unsustainable for any region to be dependent on this remittance. Instead, as mentioned earlier, a steady flow of capital through enterprises will ensure a sustained growth and development in these areas. In the end, it is clear that this advantage of urban migration is superficial and the cons clearly outweigh the pros.

Recognizing the overall damage urban migration can cause, the Indian government has made several attempts to disincentive this movement. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) was implemented to check rural-urban migration and provide wide scale unskilled employment in rural areas. However programmes like these have achieved a modicum of success with regards to preventing migration from taking place. The main reason for this is in most places, MGNREGA simply facilitates the provision of a minimum wage - which while has its own merit - escapes the desires of those who choose to migrate in hopes of a significantly better life.¹⁶ If the creation of opportunities is ever going to be a disincentive for migrating, then crucially vocational training and the establishment of service sector high-paying jobs is essential.

Long term Solutions

1. Providing information: Today, migrants from rural areas do not have the right information to incorporate in their calculus while making the decision of moving to urban areas. First, it is imperative that city life is de-glorified. Given that the biggest push for migration are glorified narratives and the notion of living luxurious lives, this needs to take place organically. More importantly, both rural and urban populations need to have proper information regarding the schemes they are eligible to avail. Programmes like MGNREGA or subsidies for certain industries will only benefit those who claim it and aforementioned data points out the general lack of awareness.

Thus, it is the state's duty to educate its public about these programmes and schemes.

2. Infrastructure development in rural areas: It has been widely reported that rural development is the much-needed panacea. By funding infrastructure development in rural areas, in the short run the government will create more jobs here and therefore retain a lot of individuals who would otherwise overpopulate urban areas. In the long run, the infrastructure will provide better facilities to the locals and will drive domestic and foreign investment. The unprecedented times of COVID-19 present us with an opportunity to restart. Populations from urban cities are returning home in rural areas because of the lack of adequate infrastructure required to sustain their livelihoods in the metropolises. Those left back in urban ghettos are some of the worst victims of the pandemic, having to suffer in densely populated communities where the poor sanitation adds to the probability of the virus spreading. However, recognising that the migrant workers returning back home is a unique opportunity India has launched the Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyaan. Through this scheme, \$7 billion have been allocated to create jobs for the migrant workers. They will be employed in laying fibre optics cables, building railways, and working in sanitation and waste management.¹⁷ It is critical that similar schemes are rolled out across the nation to employ indigenous populations as well.

3. Better urban management. The process of ghettoisation also means that authorities are able to easily locate migrant workers in different pockets of urban areas. Routine checks from healthcare officials should be made and an effort for the establishment of infrastructure that facilitates proper hygiene is critical. In the long run, it is important that the government creates more houses and schools in order to sustainably accommodate and support the rapidly increasing population. The creation of these public projects will be incredibly important in the employment of many people as well. Better urban management will also lead to safer neighbourhoods. This is because dire circumstances push people to commit crimes of possession.¹⁸ By educating future generations, the government is providing them with the opportunity to work in well-paying jobs in the future which will enable them to support their dependents and live life on the right side of the law. In the long run, an educated demographic, accommodating infrastructure and a strong criminal justice system will drive foreign direct investment (FDI) into the country which will spur economic growth and development.

4. Social emancipation. As mentioned earlier, the social barriers of conflicting religions and castes can often create a glass ceiling preventing those born into specific families from advancing into a higher strata of society. However, it is undeniable that education is the golden ticket to a brighter future. Thus, in the long run, if educational institutions are established in rural areas, it will empower the rural population to take up higher paying jobs and move to careers in activism, politics and law where they will be able to shape policies that further emancipate their communities.

5. Diversification of the local economy: Finally, it is imperative that the funding for the development of rural areas is not for the continual growth of the agrarian economy, but also the creation of secondary and tertiary sector industries. Infrastructure development in the form of telecommunications networks, banking services and service sector businesses are set up. Today, microfinance institutions (MFIs) indicate a promising future and should be implemented on a wider scale in both nations. Moreover, the existing funding into agriculture should be earmarked for investment into more productive and efficient processes. Arguably, India's last big change in agriculture was during the green revolution. Decades later, it is now the world of technology and it is of

vital importance that the government enables farmers to transition into mechanised farming.

Conclusion

Ultimately, it is evident that urban-rural migration ends up becoming a lose-lose situation for the entire nation. If India is to truly emerge as an economic powerhouse, it is essential that the majority of the nation is lifted from their current state in abject poverty, and enabled to live a life of dignity with access to basic resources. This will happen organically at the point at which there is increased investment into rural areas for the development of infrastructure and when existing schemes are continually modified in order to maximise the benefits accrued by them. In the end, this two-way street can transform from mutual harm into a flow of wealth between urban and rural areas and in the end provide India a one-way ticket to prosperity.

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