

Internal Migration and Development in India

Originally published by: *Indian Journal of Human Development, 2024*

Introduction:

Rural-to-urban migration is a key feature of economic development globally. However, India stands out with one of the lowest rates of internal migration worldwide, with only 5% of the population changing residence over five years. Despite experiencing significant economic growth, India's internal migration remains low compared to other Asian countries. This phenomenon can be attributed to the dominant discourse around sub-caste networks and state-level entitlement schemes, which restrict mobility and contribute to low permanent migration from rural areas. Additionally, official statistics in India often underestimate migration rates, particularly those of short-term and circular migration. Empirical studies on migration examine both source and destination perspectives, shedding light on structural and spatial inequalities. Key findings from these studies include: the duration of migration significantly affects access to amenities and housing in urban areas; migrant housing and in-factory living arrangements often exacerbate exploitation; while remittances improve the welfare of rural households, poor urban living conditions persist; migration from historically impoverished regions is often a response to crises rooted in capitalism and caste structures; and informal work and precarity in urban destinations are reinforced by caste hierarchies.

Key Findings:

- **Circular Migration:** Circular migration involves the back-and-forth movement between rural and urban areas, encompassing seasonal, short-term, and longer-term migration. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted circular migrants, as the loss of urban employment led to large-scale reverse migration to rural areas, highlighting their vulnerability and the precarious nature of their livelihoods.
- **Post-Pandemic Migration:** As the pandemic eased, migrants returned to urban areas due to the lack of opportunities in rural regions. Migration remains a crucial livelihood strategy for rural households, even in the face of adverse urban conditions. This return underscores the persistent economic disparities and limited rural employment prospects that drive people back to cities in search of better opportunities.
- **India's Growth Process:** India's rapid economic growth has not translated into widespread development, resulting in increased inequalities. The country faces an employment crisis characterized by low and negative employment growth rates, high youth unemployment, and skill-biased job creation, all of which exacerbate economic disparities. Social inequalities are further deepened as Dalit and Adivasi workers experience higher levels of casual employment and lower intergenerational mobility, highlighting the persistent social and economic challenges within the nation.
- **Rural-Urban Relationship:** Structural change in India has been slow and uneven, marked by a gradual shift from agriculture to industry and services, coupled with rising informality in non-farm sectors. Migrants often find themselves working in low-wage, precarious urban informal jobs, reflecting the challenges of urban informality. Agrarian distress significantly drives rural-to-urban migration, predominantly affecting Dalit and Adivasi communities,

who are compelled to seek better opportunities amid the persistent hardships in the agricultural sector.

- **Migration–Development Nexus:** The mainstream view regards migration as beneficial for both source and destination regions, as well as for the migrants themselves. In contrast, the critical perspective focuses on the structural causes of migration, such as poverty and exploitation, and the adverse incorporation of migrants into development processes. This perspective emphasizes the need for creating good jobs in both rural and urban areas to foster economic development and address social discontent. Employment and remittances play crucial roles in this context, highlighting the importance of equitable and inclusive growth.

Conclusion

India's urban development is characterized by exclusionary practices that leave migrants marginalized, resulting in slow urbanization and a challenging rural-urban transition. The growing rural-urban divide, marked by rising inequalities, significantly influences migration patterns. To address these issues, there is a pressing need for policies that ensure the protection and well-being of migrants while fostering the creation of good jobs in both rural and urban regions. Such measures are essential for achieving equitable economic development and social cohesion.

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