

## Seasons of Migration to the North

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Perhaps the most poignant moment in the film "Peepli Live" - even though the movie is really more about the media than about the socio-economic realities of India - is at the very end, when the hapless protagonist, now a former farmer presumed to be dead and so without an identity, is seen as one of the many faceless workers on one of the innumerable large construction sites that clutter the urban landscape. The story leading up to that particular denouement may be concocted and exaggerated, but the background of many migrant workers in urban India is often no less dramatic, reflecting not just simple differences in wage expectations but extreme exigencies of domestic circumstances and individual survival.

The forces generating the movement of people for work are complex and rarely unidimensional, but it is still the case that a significant part of economic migration is the result of desperation rather than hard-headed economic calculation. And that in turn affects the conditions under which workers migrate as well as their lives and work in the destination.

The significant increase in short-term distress migration of both men and women in the mid-2000s was therefore associated with quite appalling conditions, especially for women workers who typically faced not only low wages and dreadful living conditions but even threats to their physical security. This was somewhat ameliorated from 2006 onwards by the spread of the rural employment programme, even though [MNREGA](#) has still not been fully implemented in either letter or spirit. Certainly employers in the construction industry and other activities reliant on migrant labour were heard to be complaining that workers were no longer available at the (often breadline and lower than subsistence) real wages that had become the norm.

In recent years, the rise of real wages and the expansion of the construction industry has led some analysts to argue that migration (even short term migration) is no longer distress-driven but demand-led, resulting from the rapid economic growth that has led to a proliferation on non-agricultural jobs in urban and peri-urban areas. The implicit corollary is that this is associated with significantly better conditions of migrant workers, as employers are forced by labour market pressures to offer a better deal for workers.

This rather optimistic assessment can be interrogated, of course, and recently several studies have highlighted that the conditions of migrant workers, especially recent and short-term migrants, remain problematic and even pathetic. A [new study of migrant workers](#) in Gurgaon district of Haryana ("Exploring rural-urban dynamics: A study of inter-state migrants in Gurgaon", Society for Labour and Development, March 2014) throws this into sharp relief.

Gurgaon is possibly one of the most iconic representations of the new India, combining in its shiny new exteriors and squalid byways all the possibilities, inequalities and contradictions of emerging India's recent rapid economic growth. Unlike Faridabad, its sister satellite city in the National Capital Region, Gurgaon emerged - one could even say erupted - in completely unplanned fashion, with civic

authorities always several steps behind the private land developers who exploited its locational advantages.

The township is now a city in its own right, with between two and three million estimated residents, even without counting the flotsam and jetsam of temporary and unregistered migrants who are essential to its construction and existence. It is home to some of the important automobile manufacturers who have made this an important exporting industry; to software companies; to services both modern and traditional that cater to those employed in these; and of course to the land development and construction industry that made it all possible in the first place.

Many of the country's elite now live in Gurgaon, commuting to the nation's capital, in a reflection of the fact that the power that used radiate outwards from the central heart of New Delhi is now finding other more upstart sources. But it is still a Wild West kind of place, bubbling with energy and aggressive assertiveness, only just beginning to be moderated by some norms as settlements begin to take root.

So the conditions of migrant workers in this most dynamic of urban locations must surely be at least a proximate guide to how they are faring elsewhere in the country. This recent study is fascinating because it examines migrant workers in their current location of Gurgaon as well as their prior conditions and the lives of their families back in their place of origin. It cover 200 migrant workers from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand, with the districts of Rural Kanpur, Gorakhpur, Nalanda, Nawada and Hazaribagh being chosen specifically for their predominance as place of origin among the migrant community in Gurgaon.

The surveyed workers included those in the garments and auto parts industries, in construction, in domestic work, and self-employed people in various activities. Four-fifths of the interviewees were male workers, while the females were all either garment workers or domestic workers. The respondents were mainly young, nearly 90 per cent of them between 18 and 40 years old. They also dominantly came from Other Backwards Classes, with a sprinkling of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

The most striking result of this survey is just how low the wages are for these migrant workers: 70 per cent of them earn between Rs 5,000 and Rs 7,000 per month, and 17 per cent more than Rs 7,000 but less than Rs 10,000. In all their cases, the monthly income of households back home is even lower, which constitutes an obvious and important reason for migration. The power relations experienced by them in both work and life generally are heavily skewed against them.

The migrant workers in this survey report authoritarian management practices, frequent physical or verbal abuse and a climate of intimidation created by hired goons, and in general a sense of the work environment being both unfriendly and unhealthy. Average daily work hours range between 8 and 12 hours without overtime, and 4 to 6 additional hours of overtime. In the auto parts and garments factories, during periods of heavy production, overtime work is made compulsory to fulfil the demand. Nearly three quarters of the surveyed workers have to work six days a week, while one-fifth have to work all seven days of the week.

Taking more than a week's leave from work, for whatever reason, can result in dismissal. This is particularly an issue for the women workers, who get absolutely no maternity benefits. Both domestic and garments workers cannot claim paid maternity

leave as a right. Indeed, the women working in garments factories noted that it is uncomfortable to work in the male-dominated factory floor in the last few months of pregnancy. So it is the typical practice for women workers to leave the job several months before delivery and return later after child birth to search for a fresh job.

None of the respondent workers have secure contracts, and even those who had been in the city a decade or more have changed several jobs, without any provision for job loss compensation. The insecurity of tenure also affects living conditions, since rented accommodation becomes more difficult to access and landlords typically do not agree to certify that the workers are their tenants on a regular basis. This in turn affects other quotidian aspects of urban life such as getting a gas connection, opening a bank account and so on. One result is that most of the workers buy LPG for cooking at the market price of Rs 100 per kg, which comes to Rs 1450 per cylinder.

In any case, the living quarters of the workers are generally cramped and range from modest to appalling. Their places of residence vary from rented room in chawls and multi-storied buildings to temporary slum dwellings. The rented rooms are typically in buildings that contain anywhere between thirty and a hundred rooms. Generally, a 10x10 square feet room is occupied by four to six workers. The investigators found that many of the rooms occupied by the migrant workers do not have proper ventilation, full-time water and electricity supply, proper sewage and drainage systems and several buildings do not even have all-weather accessible roads. For these rooms, rents must be paid by the 7th or 10th of every month, with a fee penalty for late payment and likely eviction for repeated non-payment.

Inevitably, sanitation conditions are dreadful as well. In the chawls and rented buildings, toilets are shared across five to eight rooms, with uncertain water supply. Only 2 per cent of the workers describe the conditions of their toilets as good, while more than half think they are bad or very bad. Open and overflowing drains are common sights in the localities where they live. Unhygienic conditions are likely to be associated with more frequent illnesses, especially of water-borne diseases and pollution-related chest and lung problems. Yet the workers can ill afford the luxury of falling ill, because of the loss of their wage incomes and the costs associated with privatised medical care.

Low wages combine with really impoverished living conditions - and all for the necessity of remitting at least some money back home. If this is demand-pull migration, what on earth would the distress-push kind look like? And what sort of destitution and degradation is prevailing in rural areas and the urban hinterland to encourage movement of labour in such dreadful conditions?

Reports like this one, and others that expose the real conditions of migrant workers in India, need to be focused on much more not only by policy makers but by citizens in general. We cannot hope to build a civilised and just society on the basis of such crass exploitation.

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