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Unheard But Seen: Marginalised Migrant Workers Of India

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Abstract

Are the migrant workers of India yet another group of people who remain unnoticed, vulnerable class? The research studies, NSSO statistics clearly reveal that every year in the modern India 6 million people migrate from one state to another. It has clearly doubled in the last two decades. The apathy of the state machinery is that the statistics do not convey the true living status of the migrant workers. Fundamental rights and state legislations guarantee all Indians the right to live in any part of India, seek education, employment and livelihood. This poses an interesting question on their exploitation, their basic demands and the efforts of the government to protect them.

The push and pull factors of migration are well known, the unavailability of rural employment and the attraction of the big towns and cities are the twin basic reasons for the migration to happen in India. The states that have maximum uncertainties such as shortage of rain, floods or unresolved social and political conflicts, high population density, poverty are the states that contribute to maximum outflow of migrants.

This paper explores the status of unorganised migrant workers who remain marginalised, seen but unheard, adding to the vistas of contemporary history of India.

Key words : Migrant workers, Marginalised, Migrants

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The Status of Marginalised Migrant workers

Introduction:

Being marginalised refers to denial of identity, an active place and voice to a collective group of people in the society. Migrant workers are found in every major city and town are one such marginalised group of India. The process of globalisation and the lifestyle of the new millennium have demanded a need for the migrant workers. Poverty, lack of work options and the availability of work elsewhere are considered to be the fundamental trigger and the pull for rural migration .They are at most places neglected and exploited.

This paper explores the status of unorganised migrant workers who remain marginalised, seen but unheard, adding to the vistas of contemporary history of India.

The states of UP and Bihar are prevalently known for rural emigration for decades and newer regions of Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and North Eastern sisters have become suppliers of manual labour throughout India. Among the largest establishments of migrant workers is the construction (40 million), household work (20 million), textile business (11 million), transportation, brick work (10 million), mines & quarries and agricultural labour.

Marginalisation of the migrant workers mostly those who are in unorganised sector, manifest in several subtle ways. Usage of abuse and derogatory language against them or referring to them as common thieves and immoral is often too common. The common issues faced by the migrant workers can be briefly classified into

Socio-Cultural Issues: Migration is considered to be a means of escape from poverty as well as allows an opportunity to be liberated from the shackles of customary traditions. They struggle to access fundamental entitlements of subsidized food, clean drinking water, safe shelter and health facilities. Promise of social justice merely remains in paper as the children do not have access to education and the elders do not get health, insurance or banking services. Illiteracy, high population, lack of awareness, information and collective bargain power results in the silent suffering of

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migrant labourers. The problem suffered by migrant workers is directly proportionate to the distance from their home town, more the distance, more is the suffering.

Migrants are referred as burden to society and are socially excluded from city planning and development projects. The absence of family support for the migrants also leads to disruption of the family systems and traditions, and increases the exposure to crimes and deviant behaviours.

Trafficking, forced labour and abuse is reportedly very high among the migrant communities. The law enforcement also brand them as 'unreliable outsiders' and treat them as miscreants and illegals. Migrants are forced to live a vigilant life.

The children of migrants are pre-dominantly illiterate due to lack of access to education, constant movements and unavailability of funds. The children may suffer from language barriers at schools and at most cases cannot benefit from the Right to free education. The UNESCO Global Education monitoring report [Nov,2018] states 9 million people migrated within India between 2011 and 2016 and 80% of migrant children across seven Indian cities do not have access to education.

Shared housing and sanitation facilities results in the increase of health complaints such as diarrhoea, air borne infections and seasonal fevers

Economic Vulnerabilities: Many migrants become prey for unscrupulous contractors and middle men who employ them in informal sector such as domestic servants, vendors or construction workers. The life quality depreciates instead of progressing. Rural to urban migrants continue to be vulnerable to social discrimination in wages and labour market segmentation which reserve the most repetitive, unskilled, monotonous jobs for them. They tend to work in unorganized informal sector and experience long working hours for a very low wage, un-healthy or perilous working conditions, and they are frequently subject to physical, psychological and sexual aggression.

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Migration often separates family members. Women left behind at home as the men migrate have poor decision-making power within the family—be it about property or education and mobility of their children. In many families, they may not any claim over the wages sent by men. Lack of awareness about social legislations and entitlements prove to be bigger challenge for migrant workers.

Most of the migrant workers fail to save money due to insufficient wages and they also have a huge burden of supporting large families at the village or home town. The contract workers are paid periodically rather than monthly resulting in huge debts and ultimately being exploited by the money lenders.

Denial of Civil and Political Rights – Despite the startling presence of migrants everywhere, the schemes and policies of the state are negligible. They are becoming vulnerable due to ignorance and neglect. The legal and social protection of migrants is not offered by the home state or at the place of domicile. They are in a state of movement and it is easy to leave them from social protection than including. They are compelled to live and work in pathetic conditions without legal aid or human rights. Access to voting becomes impossible. They may not have the proper documentations to claim the entitlements that are provided by the Central and State government. They also tend to become victims of identity politics and parochialism. They are out of limits for government initiatives as they are largely "invisible" urban poor and not part of coveted vote bank. There are few protective mechanisms available for migrants and the awareness regarding the same as well are minimum and less spoken about. The much touted protective legislation the **Inter-State Migrant Workers Act, 1979** aim to safeguard migrants is hardly enforced.

Majority of the schemes of the centre is enforceable throughout the country. But majority of central government benefits reach the people through the state or local administration. Unless otherwise specified, such benefits are available only to the permanent residents of the respective state. In such a situation, the interstate migrants lose their entitlements when they cross borders of their native state. A common grievance of migrant labourers of the states of Bengal, Assam or Bihar is that they had

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received benefits of PDS in their home state but they do not get the same in their destination state such as Kerala.

Threat of Violent attacks

The media reports of 2018 suggested extreme violence and attacks against the migrant workers of the states of Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh reminded many about the mass exodus of North East workers from all over India in 2012. The increased reports of violence are starkly connected with the economic opportunities and employment. Local inhabitants blame the migrants for their lack of opportunities and crimes against children and women and resort to violent attacks. The support of certain political parties or groups to such attacks creates extreme threat to migrant population who should rightly demand their constitutional rights and place in India.

Ways to move ahead- recommendations

Achieving sustainable growth, inclusive progress will remain a distant dream without transformation of migrant workers, women and children.

There is a need for inclusive urbanisation policy of India - The impactful contribution of migrant labourers to national income is massive but there is little done in reciprocation for their quality of life.

The awareness level on the Inter- state Migrant Workman Act is very poor. The Labour officials lack awareness and the monitoring on the ISMW Act is also very poor. There are very few cases filed and even fewer cases are prosecuted.

Annual survey of migration & Census of labour migration on gender disaggregated basis could be taken up. Legal rights awareness campaigns for the migrants can be done to tackle discrimination, exploitation and violence. It is also the duty of the state to ensure that migrants are provided with government identity cards or Aadhar ensuring benefits for migrant workers. The state government can provide provisions on subsidiary rates through PDS. Benefits of Food Security Act 2013 must reach the

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migrant communities. It will enable the migrants to meet their basic nutritional needs. Networks of migrants could be established at the local village as well as the migration site for hand holding.

Associations or Trade unions of migrant's workers men could be formed. Governments departments like can encourage partnership with NGO and civil society groups in developing and implementing social schemes for the welfare and empowerment of migrants.

The schemes focusing on health, children, welfare, nutrition and development provided by the ICDS [Integrated Child Development Scheme] and the schemes of Women and Child Development such as Girl Child Benefit scheme can also effectively implemented.

Prime Ministers Jan- Dhan scheme of providing accidental and disability insurance can also be taken to localities of migrant communities or made mandatory through the implementation of Migrant welfare Act.

Conclusion

Urbanisation must be treated as an opportunity and migrant workers need to looked at positively for bringing growth and development to the indigenous people. Spread of awareness that the availability of the workers is making a place market or industry friendly and public and private investments flow in such places should be made. Local community must be engaged in efforts for urban planning and earmarking of funds for welfare of the migrant population should become a healthy practice.

Migrants should not labelled and marginalised as 'floating' invisible groups. The constitution guarantees to all its citizens equal rights, freedom of movement and provide themselves with livelihood opportunities. It is the responsibility of the civil society to take care of one another and be protector of human rights and dignity.

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