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Temporary Migration in India: Findings from Statistical Data and Learnings from Case Studies

Evgeny V. Kochkin^{a*} and Srilata Sircar^b

*^aThe Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy
and Public Administration
82 Vernadskogo, Moscow, 119571, Russia*

*^bLund University
12 Sölvegatan, 62 Lund, SE-223, Sweden*

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The subject of rural-urban migration in India and its close association with the question of rural development has been studied over a long period of time. Official data suggests that short-term migration is a rare phenomenon in India while several case studies from across the country reveal quite the opposite. This paper has attempted to identify some loopholes in the official data. It has further reviewed the existing literature and case studies to identify informal indebtedness as a prime motivation for temporary migration. On the whole, the paper seeks to explore the arenas and potential for future research on the theme of temporary rural-urban labour migration in the context of India.

Keywords: temporary migration, rural-urban linkages, rural development, India.

Research area: 22.00.00 – sociology.

1. Introduction

The subject of rural-urban migration and its close association with the question of rural development has been studied over a long period of time. The discussion over this phenomenon has largely been framed by the theory of urban bias in development policies and strategies; and migration has on many instances been seen as merely the spatial transfer of poverty from rural to urban areas without having any significant positive impact on income poverty and overall living conditions. However the form of migration that has been dominant in academic interest

is long-term or permanent migration. Internal temporary migration is a relatively less studied phenomenon that has evoked interest only in the recent times. The aim of the paper is to discuss trends, causes and consequences of this type of migration in present day India.

The paper is divided into three parts. It begins with a review of literature on different aspects of temporary migration in India. In the second part, using statistical data from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) report on Migration in India¹ we will attempt to illustrate key features of the phenomena. In particular, we made an attempt

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* Corresponding author E-mail address: ekochkin@gmail.com

to estimate what social groups tend to choose this kind of migration, what differences in trend in temporary migration might be detected between states/regions of India, and what factors motivate temporary migration. We attempt to fill the gaps in learning arising from this data through case studies by independent researchers available in the existing literature. The final part of the paper is a detailed discussion of our main findings where we reflect on the ramification of temporary migration on income poverty, terms of labour and overall rural development.

2. Literature Review

Recent studies conducted in different developing countries have shown that internal labor migration is growing considerably year by year. The biggest part of migrating population is temporary migrants. Frequently, there are poor rural people with low level of education and other assets who leave their family behind to search for a temporary job as constructions or manual workers in rural towns and big cities. According to different estimations, about 20 million Indians join this track each year (Deshingkar 2005:30).

The phenomenon of growing temporary migration in India has been stated in many recent village studies. Since the Constitution of India safeguards the fundamental right to live and work in any part of the country without registering either at the place of origin or at the place of staying, it is difficult to quantify the flows of migrants in the context of the country as a whole. A survey by Banerjee and Duflo (2007) carried out in rural areas of Udaipur shows that “60 percent of the poorest households report that someone from their family had lived outside for a part of the year to obtain work” (Banerjee & Duflo 2007:153). Similar survey conducted by an UN team in the rural areas of Madhya Pradesh has shown that more than 50 % of households in studied villages had at least one family member

who was a temporary migrant (Deshingkar & Akter 2009:55). The percent was even higher (75 %) in the most remote and hilly tribal villages (ibid). A study carried out by Dayal and Karan in 12 villages of Jharkhand has demonstrated an analogous trend; in particular, 30 % of rural households have at least one temporary migrant (Deshingkar 2005:31). The amount of temporary migrants again was significantly higher among the poorest of the poor; among migrants from the area, 80 % were landless and 88 % were illiterate (ibid). There are only a few examples of studies that have been completed on the topic; however, a common finding is that the rate of temporary migration is significantly higher than permanent migration and the poorest social groups or people from the poorest areas tend to join temporary migration. Apart from these features, these studies pointed out some other important characteristics of temporary migration in India. It has been shown that usually the head of the household is the person who migrates to find a job, migrants typically do several trips in a year, and the median length of a trip is not longer than one month (Rogaly 1998; Banerjee & Duflo 2007; Deshingkar & Akter 2009).

Reasons which motivate people to migrate temporarily from rural areas to towns and cities seem to be the most debated aspect of the issue of temporary migration in India. The “push-pull” model dominates the existing literature on the topic. According to the literature, households make a rational decision to send some of their members to work away in an attempt to “minimize risks of various market failures such as drought, flood, or drop in prices” (Haberfeld et al. 1999:474). In other words temporary migration makes household income more stable. The second important reason which is widely discussed in the literature is scarcity of land. This factor is said to be the most important motivation to migrate for such social groups of Indian society as Scheduled Tribes and

Castes (Haberfeld et al. 1999:474; Deshingkar 2005). The third factor pointed out by several authors is economical diversity among different Indian regions caused by differential industrial and agricultural development. For example, "workers from backward states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa and Rajasthan routinely travel to the developed "green revolution" states of Maharashtra, Punjab and Gujarat"(Deshingkar 2005:30).

Scholars interested in temporary migration flows in India argue that apart from significant amount of drawing forces which motivate people to migrate, there are several institutional factors that make people migrate not permanently, but temporary. In particular, we can mention such factors as diversity of languages, caste loyalty, traditions to marry at the young age, the importance of living within household, high cost of travel and information, close social connections of people with their families and communities etc (Haberfeld et al. 1999; Banerjee & Duflo 2007). Because of these factors it is less desirable for people to migrate from one area to another permanently. Thus, describing the reasons why people migrate only for short periods of time Banerjee and Duflo mentioned that "making more money is not a huge priority, or at least not a large enough priority to experience several months of living alone and often sleeping on the ground in or around the work premises"(Banerjee & Duflo 2007:165).

How profitable is temporary migration for rural households? The question has been raised and discussed by many scholars. Taking into account the fact that people from the poorest social groups usually join the process, temporary migration can be seen as an effective instrument to fight rural poverty. However, it must be mentioned that this type of migration does not change the financial situation of rural households considerably enough. In particular, temporary migrants in

India working as construction or manual workers are prone to frequently changing their jobs (Banerjee & Duflo 2007:153). In this situation, it is quite difficult for them to accumulate new skills and contacts. In other words, frequently the only possible job opportunity for this type of migrants is manual, badly paid, low status work (Rogaly 1998:22).

3. Results

3.1. *Who Are the Temporary Migrants² in India and How Many Are They?*

The NSSO report on Migration in India (2007-08) defines a migrant as any member of a household "whose last usual place of residence (UPR), at any time in the past, was different from the current place of enumeration" (NSSO 2007-08: 11). In contrast, the definition of short-term migration did not involve change of UPR at all. Any member of a household who had stayed away from his current place of enumeration for a period of one month or more but less than six months within the last 365 days, for the purpose of employment or in search of employment, was counted as a short-term migrant (ibid). This definition of short-term migration is significant because it takes into account the purpose behind such temporary movement i.e. employment or search of employment. Unlike the category of permanent migrants which includes women who migrate due to marriage, this category focuses specifically on migration induced mainly by economic factors. This should be an important consideration while evaluating the numbers that the NSSO reports.

According to the report, short-term migration did not form a significant part of the study of migration in India because the rate of short-term migration was only 1.7 % in rural areas and negligible (less than one per cent) in urban areas (ibid: H-iii). However these rates are calculated as proportion of entire population. Since the definition

itself takes into account the purpose of migration, the rates should be calculated as proportion of the workforce (population between the ages of 15 and 59)³. Since the report concentrates only on data from rural areas the same has to be done in this paper hereafter. Although the NSSO study is not a census, the sampling size and strategy are aimed at making generalization of the findings reliable (ibid: 1). On the basis of these facts, the following deductions can be made: the absolute number of short-term migrants in rural areas is 1.7 % of the total rural population which is approximately 14.5 million individuals⁴, this number when seen as a proportion of the rural workforce⁵ constitutes 3 % of the total rural workforce. Despite being large in absolute terms, the figure is still quite small as compared to the proportions revealed by some other small-scale studies by independent researchers quoted in the prior sections. One of the reasons for this could be the fact that the NSSO study is a household based study rather than an individual based one. It is likely that many short-term migrants may be living as individuals rather than as part of households. While the Census regards such individuals as households in their own right, the same is not true of the NSSO study. Moreover, short-term migrants are not counted in the out-migrants category which makes the estimation of their exact number further difficult.

Even with all these limitations in mind, the socio-economic profile of the short-term migrant thrown up by the data from the NSSO study is quite telling. First of all, for every 28 male short-term migrants, there were only 5 female short-term migrants indicating that short-term migration is nearly six times more prevalent among males than among females (NSSO 2007-08: Table15 Appendix A). Secondly, when the sample was divided into deciles on the basis of Monthly Per Capita Expenditure (MPCE) the incidence of short-term migration was seen to be

increasing in deciles of decreasing MPCE with highest concentration in the two lowest deciles (ibid: 94). Since the data was not disaggregated on the basis of caste and religion, it is difficult to profile the short-term migrants on these bases. But on the basis of existing studies it can be safely argued that short-term migration is a strategy of the poorest income groups which are most often constituted by marginalized groups such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and religious minorities such as Muslims. Further corroboration of this can be found in the qualitative studies that explore the motivations behind short-term migration.

3.2. What Motivates Short-term Migration in India?

The NSSO report states that 51 % of male short-term migrants migrated within the state of their usual residence while 72 % of them migrated to urban areas. For female short-term migrants, migration within the state was higher at 69 % but migration to urban areas was lower at 42 %. While the definition already takes into account the purpose of employment or search of employment, the usual principal activity status of these migrants further corroborates this. According to the report construction, agriculture and low-skill manufacturing together constituted 80 % of the usual principal activity of short-term migrants, with construction engaging 43 % of males and agriculture engaging 45 % of female migrants. These figures make it abundantly clear that employment is the prime motivation behind undertaking short-term migration but also brings forth the observation that the forms of employment of the short-term migrants are not such that are expected to be high-income or capable of upward social mobility. This leads to the question why some sections of the rural population are migrating seasonally to find employment in activities that are not apparently

economically or socially uplifting. The answer to this can be found in some specific case focused studies conducted by various scholars.

Several articles in the volume titled *India's Unfree Workforce: Of Bondage Old and New* (Bremen et al 2009) associate the issue of indebtedness to seasonal migration and informal employment. Srivastava (2009 cited in Bremen et al 2009) points out that in the absence of formal sources of credit many vulnerable sections in rural areas are forced to enter into “voluntary, informal debt relations” that are marked by high rates of interest and power relations shaped by caste affiliations. Seasonal migration is often resorted to as a means to repay debt rather than merely to enhance income. Other studies (Heuze & Guerin cited in Bremen et al 2009) emphasize on the role of intermediaries and the network of middlemen involved in recruiting seasonal migrant labour in both agriculture and rural non-farm sectors. Studies based in the brick kilns of West Bengal and Tamil Nadu (Shah 2006) have revealed that the recruiters often pay advances to the workers which enables them to repay their debts but simultaneously keeps them tied to the informal low wage jobs for which payment is made at the end of the season. This payment then goes into repaying the advances of the recruiters thus generating a vicious cycle of permanent indebtedness.

It has been argued that in such cases, familial, caste and kinship ties further reinforce dependency and consequent bondage rather than acting as empowering forces. For instance, David Picherit's (2009 cited in Bremen et al 2009) ethnographic study of the hierarchy of middlemen in migration processes in villages of Andhra Pradesh revealed that migrants belonging to the same caste as the recruiters were more vulnerable to informal bondage and obligatory informal employment than those belonging to other castes. It also led to a tendency among the migrants to

aspire to rise within the hierarchy of recruiters thus replicating the process over time and keeping the community tied to the system. In this regard the construction of identity becomes another important source of motivation for seasonal migrants (Rogaly et al 2003, Shah 2006).

A study of the recruitment process for migrant workers in rice cultivation in West Bengal (Rogaly et al 2003) involved ‘upper caste’ employers having to visit, accept hospitality from and establish familiarity with Scheduled Tribes, which they did grudgingly in the absence of an alternative. This process not only enabled the work-seekers to evaluate which employer was more trustworthy but also gave a boost to their self-esteem and image as a community. A similar study of seasonal workers from Jharkhand migrating to brick kilns in other states (Shah 2006) showed that this was seen as an opportunity by the young workers to escape the supervision of parents at home and explore a new place and opportunities for prohibited amorous relationships (:93). Thus this seasonal migration acted as a source of liberation that paved the way for young workers to acquire their own independent sense of self.

3.3. What trends in temporary migration might be detected between states?

According to NSSO data the rate of permanent migration is significantly higher in India than rates of temporary migration. Thus, only 5 % of all migrants from Indian rural areas are migrating temporarily. However, if we estimate the rate among different states and genders within those states, we can see significant differences (see Fig. 1). For instance, the rate of temporary migration is very high from rural areas of such states as Manipur (92 % of all migrants migrate temporarily), Arunachal Pradesh (80 %), Nagaland (62 %), and Lakshadweep (56 %). By contrast, the lowest rates of temporary migration

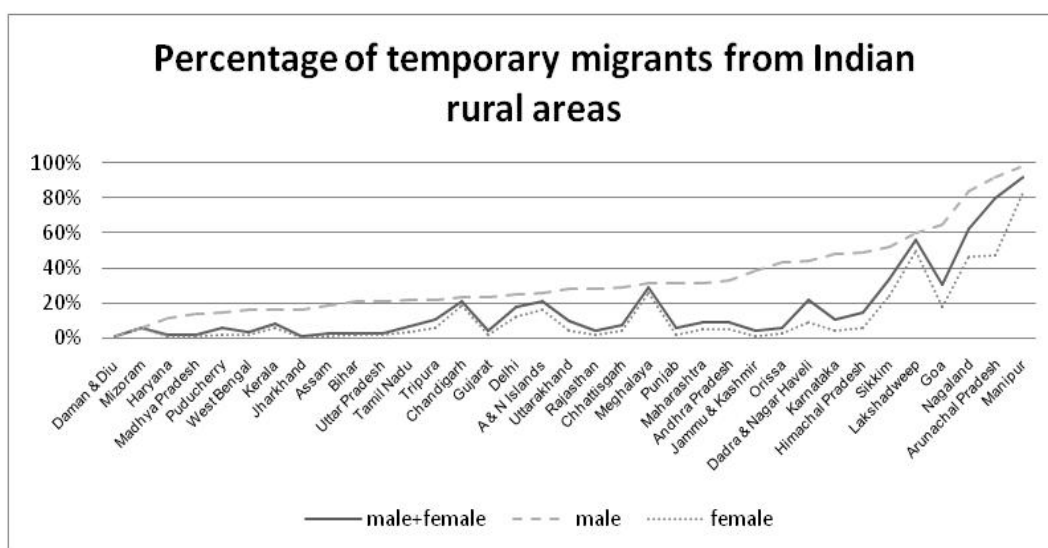


Fig. 1. The figure was generated by authors of the paper based on NSSO data (NSSO 2007-08: 54-56). It describes percentage of temporary migrants among all migrants from different Indian states. It is important to mention that the figure shows rates of temporary migration only from rural areas

occur in such states as Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Jharkhand, Daman & Diu – temporary migrants constitute only 1-2 % of all migration flows from rural areas of these states.

Taking into account such factors as gender we can see that the highest rate of male temporary migration again occur in such states as Manipur (98 % of all male migrants migrate temporary), Arunachal Pradesh (92 %), Nagaland (84 %), Lakshadweep (60 %). The highest rate of female temporary migration is found in rural regions of the same four states Manipur (83 % of all female migrants migrate temporary), Arunachal Pradesh (47 %), Nagaland (47 %), Lakshadweep (60 %). The lowest rate of male temporary migration was found in 4 states: Daman & Diu (1 %) Mizoram (6 %), Haryana (11 %), Madhya Pradesh (14 %). It should be mentioned that in twenty states, the percentage of female temporary migration is not higher than 5 %. The lowest rate of such migration was found in rural area of four states: Jharkhand, Assam, Daman & Diu, Madhya Pradesh – in all these states the percentage of females who migrate temporarily among all female migrants

is less than 2 %. It is important to mention that rates of female and male temporary migration significantly and quite strongly correlate to each other (Pearson’s correlation coefficient = 0,825; $p < 0.01$). The implications of these findings have been discussed in the following section.

4. Discussion of Results

It is evident that there are serious gaps in the official data concerning short-term migration in India. There are great discrepancies in the rate of temporary migration estimated by region specific case studies and that projected by the NSSO study. This may be due to the fact that temporary migration is concentrated in certain regions and in certain income groups which may have had restricted representation in the sample. For instance, data from the north-east states of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Nagaland reflect very high rates of temporary migration although they may have had low representation in the sample due to their low share in total population of the country. Similarly, social groups like Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes which

are repeatedly referred to in several case studies are minorities in terms of their representation in the population. Thus there needs to be a statistical study specifically focused on measuring short-term migration in the country.

This brings us to the issue of trends and patterns, which finds passing mention in the report. State-wise disaggregation reveals that despite limitations of sampling etc temporary migration seems to be a regional phenomenon. The north-east seems to be the hot-bed of temporary migration. This is not surprising since Scheduled Tribes constitute a large part of the population of this region and they have been identified in the case studies as a group vulnerable to short-term migration. The region is also backward in terms of both agricultural production and industrial development. Thus the overt reason of employment or search of employment is logically applicable to temporary migrants from these states. It will be interesting to find data on the destination of these temporary migrants and analyse if they find employment within the respective state or outside. The report does not disaggregate data on destinations at the state level but considering the overall high proportion of in-state temporary migration, some speculations can be made about the destinations. What the report fails to take into account is the issue of indebtedness that figures large in all the recent case studies.

Since much of the indebtedness is through informal arrangements, there seems to be a large gap in the official data in this regard. In fact, the data on remittances and the use of remittances does not take into account remittances from short-term migration thus making a blanket assumption that the motivation behind this form

of migration is merely income enhancement. It is possible that a more in-depth study would reveal the use of short-term remittances for payment of informal debts and would also reveal a mechanism of continuous debt creation that keeps specific social groups trapped in the cycle of temporary migration and debt payment. This has serious implications for policies of social security and rural financial inclusion. As the case studies suggest, indebtedness reduces the potential of short-term migration to alleviate income poverty and the network of moneylenders, recruiters and employers may have damaging implications for the terms of labour.

5. Conclusion

To summarise the key findings of the paper, official data suggests that short-term migration is a rare phenomenon in India while several case studies from across the country reveal quite the opposite. The paper has attempted to identify some loopholes in the official data. There is consensus in all studies over the fact that short-term migration is concentrated in lowest income groups and is most prevalent among weaker social groups such as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Indebtedness is brought up as a major motivation for temporary migration in the case studies but in the absence of official data on informal indebtedness, it is difficult to analyse the relationship between these two phenomena. This in turn makes it difficult to estimate the potential of temporary migration for poverty reduction and income enhancement. Thus on the whole, short-term migration in India has tremendous potential for future research that can shed light on policy solutions for important aspects of rural development.

¹ The NSSO is under the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Govt. of India. It is the only official source of national level household data in India apart from the census. Data for this report was collected during the 64th Round of NSS from July 2007 to June 2008. The report was published in June 2010.

² 'Temporary Migration' and 'Short-term Migration' are used interchangeably in this paper.

- ³ Workforce in the Census of India 2001 is defined as the population between the ages of 15 and 59 who are either employed or are willing to be employed. Due to absence of data and purposes of simplification here it is taken to be all population within the age-group of 15 to 59.
- ⁴ The population of India is 1.2 billion of which 72 % or 850 million is rural population. 1.7 % of this is 14.5 million. See Census of India, 2001 available at <http://censusindia.gov.in/>
- ⁵ 57 % is the national average for population in this age group and the numerical equivalent for rural population would be 485 million.

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Временная миграция в Индии: анализ кейсов и статистических данных

Е.В. Кочкин^а, Шрилата Сиркар^б

*^аРоссийская академия народного хозяйства
и государственной службы при Президенте РФ
Россия, 119571, Москва, пр. Вернадского, 82*

*^бУниверситет Люнда
SE-223 62, Швеция, Люнд, Солвегатен, 12*

Предмет внутренней миграции из села в город изучался в Индии на протяжении долгого времени. Согласно официальным данным, временная миграция из села в город очень редка в условиях современной Индии. Однако изучение отдельных кейсов из различных районов страны показывает совершенно обратную картину. Цель данной работы – пролить свет на недостающую информацию в официальной статистике. А именно в статье рассматриваются следующие аспекты внутренней миграции в условиях современной Индии: объемы внутренней миграции по различным штатам; социальные группы, которые с большей вероятностью отправляются во временную миграцию; факторы, мотивирующие людей выбирать временную миграцию как форму заработка для своего домохозяйства.

Ключевые слова: внутренняя миграция, социальные связи между городом и селом, миграция из села в город, Индия.

Научная специальность: 22.00.00 – социология.
