

Enhancing mobility: Political and social rights for circular labour migrants



- In brief**
- Scholars estimate that 100 million Indians ‘circulate’ between their villages of origin and multiple destinations in search of livelihoods.
 - This project implemented two surveys and group discussions with male and female migrant workers in ten localities of origin and ten destination localities to understand the multiple facets of migration within and outside the Indian state of Bihar.
 - Researchers found that the overwhelming proportion of migrants is male labour migrants.
 - Results show labour migrants are inhibited in their mobility by a restrictive social protection regime that hinges on sedentary, rather than portable public entitlements.
 - Furthermore, labour migrants are politically disenfranchised due to migrants’ voting rights being tied to their villages of origin.
 - Researchers call for policymakers to take into consideration the rights of people on the move and to conceptualise and implement portable social policy.

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Introduction: What is the problem and why is it important?

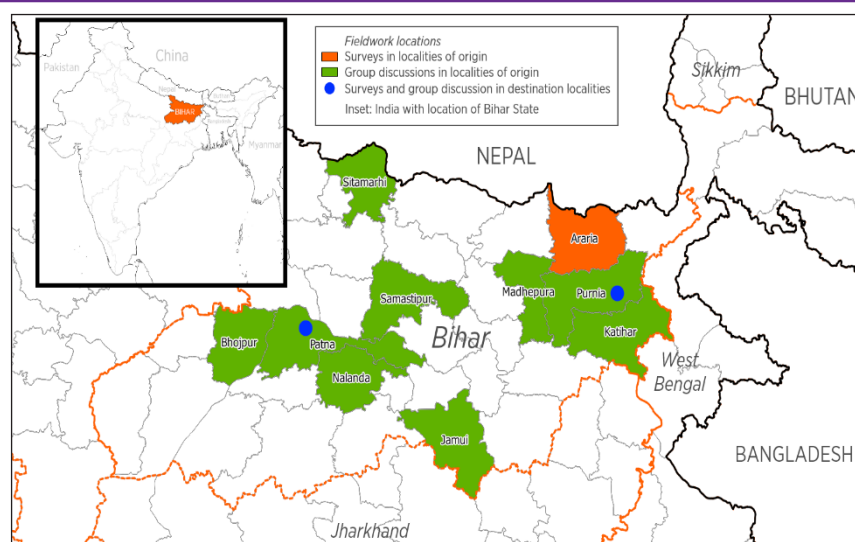
India is in the throes of political, social, and economic change. The country has registered high rates of economic growth over the last decade. Agricultural activities employ a lesser proportion of the population than they did in the past. Popular movements and growing sentiments against caste hierarchies have resulted in people depending less than ever before on rural patrons for work. People are able and willing to leave their ancestral villages in search of employment, although such migration tends to be temporary rather than permanent. Scholars estimate that 100 million people ‘circulate’ between their villages of origin and multiple destination localities in search of dignified lives and livelihoods. Hardly any of them are provided for under India’s current electoral laws and social protection regime. Such lack of coverage proves a disincentive for further labour mobility, thereby undermining India’s growth needs.

The research that this policy brief draws on examined continuities and changes in the attitudes and practices of migrants originating in rural Bihar. It suggests that the overwhelming majority of people who migrate from the state are labour migrants who iterate between different localities in search of dignified employment. While the broader research and the resultant Working Paper (Roy, 2016) elaborate a number of themes pertaining to labour migration, the present policy brief focuses on one salient issue, namely political and social rights for India’s 100 million circular labour migrants.

Methods

The research which forms the basis for this policy brief adopted a sociological approach to the question of migration. The project design was multi-sited (See Figure 1), reflecting the multi-locational reality experienced by itinerant labour migrants. Two surveys were implemented under this project, to understand the multiple facets of migration within and outside the state of Bihar. The surveys gathered primary data from multiple ‘source’ and ‘destination’ locations and were implemented by Koshish Charitable Trust, a Patna-based advocacy and research organisation. The surveys were supplemented by community-level group discussions, conducted by Praxis Institute of Participatory Approaches, a Delhi-based action research organisation with an office in Patna.

Figure 1: Map of fieldwork locations



Results

The key results are as follows:

1. The overwhelming proportion of migrants are labour migrants.

An analysis of the survey and group discussion data reveals that at least one member in nearly one fifth of all households migrated away from their village to work. Nearly all the migrants were labour migrants in that they left their rural homes in search of employment. An overwhelming number of the migrants are male. Almost none of them have left the village on a permanent basis or intend to do so.

2. Labour migrants are inhibited in their mobility by a restrictive social protection regime which hinges on sedentary, rather than portable entitlements.

None of The migrants can carry with them their entitlements under India's Public Distribution System (PDS). They are therefore dependent on either the open market to purchase their food supplies or on labour contractors/employers to provision for them. Purchasing from the open market implies a substantially higher cost to them than if these entitlements were portable. Similarly, when labour contractors provision for workers, the costs are deducted from labourers' wages. During group discussions, migrants suggested that many more people would migrate, albeit temporarily, if the entitlements under the PDS were portable.

Figure 2: Source of food provisioning for migrants in localities of origin

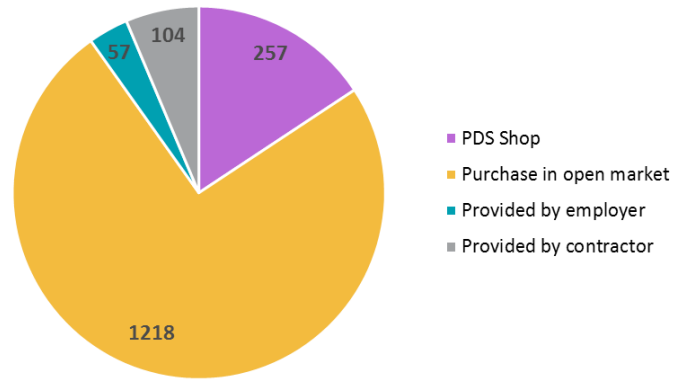


Figure 3: Source of food provisioning for migrants in destination localities



3. Labour migrants are politically disenfranchised.

Voting rights within India are not portable. Migrants' voting rights are tied to their villages of origin, what the census calls their usual place of residence (UPR), despite the fact that they give the best part of their working lives to the destination localities. On the one hand, this voting restriction reduces their value to the destination locality's politicians, who do not need their votes to win elections at all. On the other hand, migrant labourers are not able to always go back to their homes during election time to cast their votes. Consequently, they subscribe to one of three strategies. One option for them is to time their movements according to the electoral calendar. A second option is for them to return home to vote, incurring the attendant expenditures themselves. The third option is to return home by using transportation provided by one of the many political parties contesting the elections in their localities of origin. All three strategies are sub-optimal in terms of economic and electoral autonomy.

Figure 3: Source of help for migrant workers in times of need in localities of origin

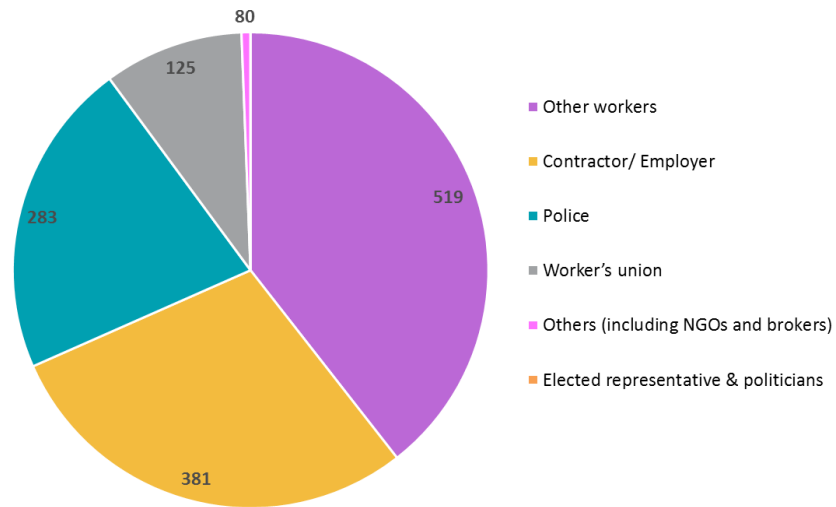
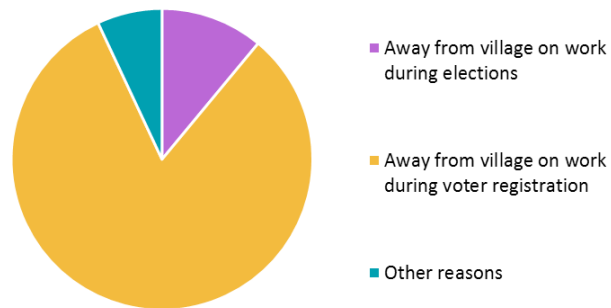


Figure 4: Reasons for migrants not being able to vote in previous Legislative Assembly elections in destination localities



Conclusions

India's existing policy regime truncates the rights of the 100 million itinerant labour migrants who are the engines of its economic growth. Social protections and voting rights are not portable. As a result, they cannot avail their social rights or exercise their political rights when they are away from their villages of origin. They are left to their own fragmented strategies as they fend for their livelihoods. Such precariousness reduces people's incentives to migrate, undermining India's economic growth prospects

Implications and recommendations

The migration literature is awash with scholarship claiming to espouse either optimistic or pessimistic narratives of migration. This paper urges policymakers and activists to be more realistic about the migration scenario.

The study on which this paper draws questions the commonplace assumption that populations are migrating permanently from villages to towns. In fact, populations are far from sedentary. Temporary migrants are the engines of growth in emerging economies not only in India but also elsewhere. Research on the dynamics of economic growth needs to consider the vibrant dimensions of migration and respond to empirical conditions of mobility and flexibility rather than be confined to the assumptions of the Westphalian nation-state.

Migration is a reality, whether within national borders or across them. Many governments strive to keep people in their places, considering their mobility a threat to the polity and economy. Political rights and social policies are predicated upon the assumption that populations are and will remain sedentary. However, the experience of labour migrants who have been the subjects of this research should compel analysts and policymakers alike to conceptualise and implement portable social policy. If the role of the state is to facilitate economic growth and human development, then it is imperative that the rights of people on the move be taken into consideration.

Reference

Roy, I. (2016) Labour migration from (and in) Bihar: Continuities and change. International Growth Centre.