

Labour Migration in India: Trends, Challenges, and Future Outlook

Labour migration has undergone a profound change; migrants have grown from 31.4 Cr in 2001 to 45.5 Cr in 2011 showing a 45% increase. Traditional conventions continue to influence migrants, especially women. However, we do see the rise of new drivers for migration such as increase in business opportunities, education, and skill development that have the potential to boost migrant employment for both men and women in search of a higher wage premium.

Insufficient infrastructure, strict state laws for migrant labour and limited access to basic amenities have been a source of great angst for migrants. To leverage the skills of migrants, we need to work on resolving these obstacles and enable a good living ecosystem for them. This mandates states frame migrant sensitive regulations and ensure that these regulations are adhered to and are implemented to ease the burden of the migrant population.

Unravelling the Dynamics

Divergence among Genders

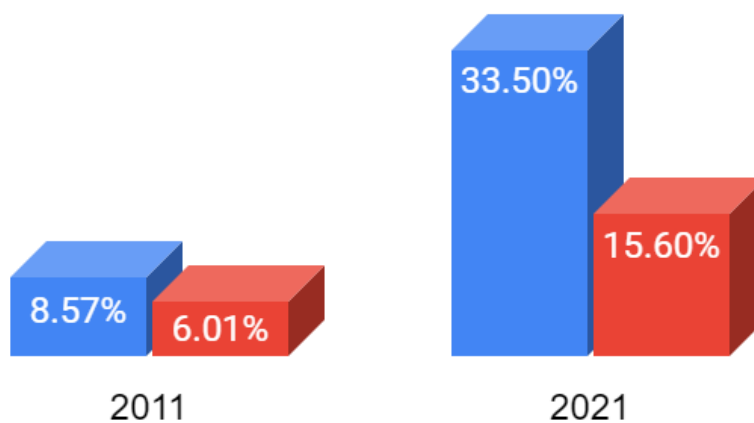
The tradition of men migrating for employment (84.53%) and women migrating after marriage (97.47%) continues and there has been only a marginal amount of migration observed among women for employment (15.47%). With changing times, this mandates a shift where women too migrate for high-paying jobs that would add value to the workforce and economy of the nation.

Male migration from rural to urban areas for high-paying jobs increased to 33.5% in 2021 as compared to 8.57% in 2011. A relatively smaller increase has been observed among women in the rural-to-urban migration between 2011 (6.01%) to 2021 (15.60%) for marriage and family. These trends in rural-to-urban migration are attributed to frequent seasonalities in agriculture work and insufficient infrastructure in rural areas.

Increasing seasonality in agriculture employment and low-wage jobs have decreased the choice of males to migrate from rural to other rural areas for employment. This is evident in the drastic decrease from 31.40% in 2011 to 18% in 2021. In contrast, this trend has had a minimal impact on females, whose migration patterns are relatively stable.

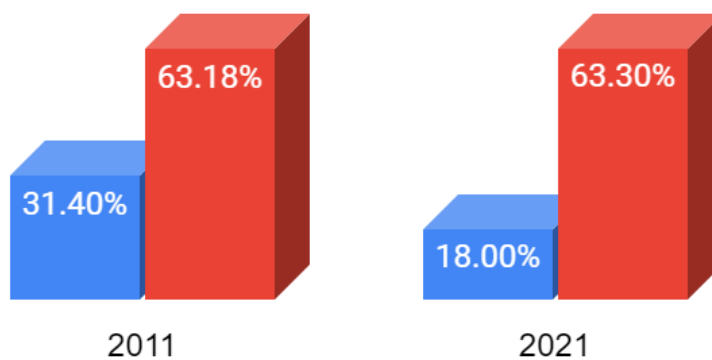
Gender-Wise Urban Migration By Years

Male Female



Gender Wise Rural Migration By Years

Male Female



Disparities in States

States or regions with good economic stability, accelerated industrialisation and urbanisation have become hotspots for migrants. Maharashtra is at the top with the highest migration rate (12.59%) for its thriving tech hubs (Pune & Mumbai) that provide ample job opportunities in various domains and well-developed infrastructure that supports migrant families with good education and healthcare. This attracts more people for employment (19.08%) and business (10.64%).

Conversely, Uttar Pradesh experiences lower migration as compared to Maharashtra for employment (7.62%) and business (8.18%). This scenario correlates well with the state's rural predominance that limits the growth of industries for high-wage employment, underdeveloped infrastructure and lack of access to basic amenities, and education support for migrant children.

New Shift in Migration Trends: Emerging Aspiration for Business

There has been a significant rise in migration for businesses among males (74.73%) and females (25.27%) since 2001, merely indicating the growing traction for business apart from regular employment. This necessitates impactful policy interventions in the budget for a transformational shift in migration.

Migration in Settlements

Among different kinds of migrant movement observed in India, rural-to-rural migration dominates the rest with 47.4%. This is an indication of people's persistent reliance on seasonal agricultural work for their livelihood. Also, there is an emergence of rural household businesses and agriculture-allied activities that are seen as new sources of employment by migrants.

Though rural migration dominates, around 22.1% migrate from rural to urban areas for high-paying sustainable jobs. The requirement to move to different places for Job promotions and transfers, the desire for a luxurious life are still the major push behind the 22.59% urban-to-urban migration.

A few (7.89%) in the urban move to rural areas due to unmanageable living costs and to start a simple rural business after retirement from government jobs.

Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 brought to the fore the struggles and disparities faced by migrant workers, especially those in the informal sector. The loss of jobs and less demand for work left these people in dire straits. Reduction in the salary of informal workers, which is already low posed the challenge in buying even basic necessities as all groceries were at peak price at that time. All these worst hits combined, had a big psychological impact on workers, pushing them into anxiety, isolation and depression. Notably, many were scared and hopeless about managing such an upsurge in the future.

The pandemic revealed crucial gaps in labour laws that need to be addressed to support migrant workers in any dynamic landscape to ensure job security, fair wages, proper health care and social security.

Challenges and Recommendations

Breaking Barriers for Women

Women need to be provided the freedom to migrate for employment and education irrespective of existing social restrictions. Laws such as the Factories Act of 1948, instead of preventing women from working in industries like oil extraction, glass and pesticide manufacturing, can enhance additional protection for them at work. This will ensure that they also get equal opportunities as men in terms of employment and salary in these high-demand industries.

Upskilling programmes, specifically for women, will pave the way for seeking employment and business opportunities that can bring about a pivotal shift in migration patterns. To support this change, there must be a concerted effort to improve social conditions for migrants, enhance visibility of opportunities across borders, and facilitate skill development that will enable women to seek employment opportunities beyond state borders.

Optimising Housing and Accommodation

Though laws like the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act of 1979 are in force, there is a long-lasting hustle for both urban and rural migrant workers to get good housing. Migrant workers in the construction, and manufacturing sectors often suffer due to congested spacing, poor sanitation, lack of ventilation and experience major health problems. New laws are needed to guarantee proper housing and sanitation for informal

sector migrants, whose work is the base for all businesses but whose low wages are insufficient to meet both housing and health expenses.

Migrants in urban areas find it difficult to afford the exorbitant rents to the extent that many of them are compelled to live in urban slums that are available at high rents and limited infrastructure. Although schemes like the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Smart Cities Mission and Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) have been introduced to revamp urban areas, they have not been able to solve the hurdles of urban migrants. The government must implement laws to provide housing for migrants and incentivise home owners or agencies to offer accommodation at nominal rates.

Creating Education Opportunities

Migrant children frequently face the problem of complicated education systems. Children who previously studied in government schools will face difficulties with new languages in other states. To solve this problem, the government has to establish special schools where migrant children can be educated in their native languages and introduced to the local language. There can be unique scholarships and fee waivers for migrant children as it will make education affordable. States can also fund NGOs such as Butterflies - an NGO in West Bengal, that supports migrant children with mobile education programs.

Regularising Healthcare

Continuous long working hours in unhygienic environments is the cause of serious health implications such as malaria, tuberculosis and anaemia among workers in the construction sector and for those working in factories. Maternal and child mortality due to malnutrition and poor immunisation have created dreadful fear among workers. This apathy of employers and contractors towards worker's health is unpardonable and unacceptable. Strict regulations must be implemented to hold employers responsible for the health and welfare of migrant labour.

The government should maintain a dedicated database to track employer and contractor initiatives toward migrant worker's welfare, especially in the informal sector. Employers could collaborate with NGOs such as the Avert Society in Maharashtra, CARE India in Uttar Pradesh and Delhi, HAMARA HIV/AIDS in Rajasthan to create awareness and organise free camps to prevent and treat various communicable diseases among migrant workers.

Liberalising Access to Basic Amenities

Migrant workers are often expected to provide or apply for a new proof of identity with the host state for access to basic amenities. Such biased practices are evident in the Public Distribution System (PDS) where migrants are denied access to government-subsidised products while the same is available for the locals. The demand for new identity proof, the tedious authentication process, biased access to amenities etc, will curtail future labour migration in the state, ultimately affecting the economy and employment growth.

NGOs such as the Jeevika migrant workers movement in Kerala, Gram Vikas Trust in Madhya Pradesh and Indian Social Institute - labour and migration unit in Karnataka are actively involved in helping to create ID cards and bank accounts for the migrants in their respective states. State governments must simplify identity proof requirements and map migrants' identity requirements to their UID or Aadhar to enable them access to basic facilities.

Prioritizing Social Security for Informal Migrants

The reach for social security schemes among formal workers is far higher than it is among informal migrants. Laws such as the Maternity Benefits Act, of 1961 and Unorganised Workers Social Security Act, of 2008 actively seek to ensure social security benefits for informal workers through various implementation and monitoring initiatives, but there is a huge population left uncovered.

A direct and simple enrollment process, weekly awareness by the government jointly with NGOs and providing incentives like a bonus to the workers for participation can increase the reach of these schemes. Different workers may have various requirements, so customising the social security schemes to their needs will further increase their participation. Starting mobile registration units near workplaces will be helpful for migrants who are new to the city/state.

The deductions for social security should be taken in such a way that it doesn't affect the base salary of informal workers which is required for their livelihood. Social security deductions for informal migrants must be subsidised and borne by the government so that these workers can afford a better quality of life on their income.

Revamping the Rural

Seasonality in agriculture has created uncertainty among the rural people for jobs and livelihood. This necessitates the government to create and fund new agriculture-allied, small-scale industries and processing units that will boost labour migration in rural areas. Rural youth have unexplored potential which can be harnessed with proper skill development programmes and prepare them for high-wage employment in secondary industries.

Nurturing Emerging Business

Business migration is gearing up in the current era, demanding government interventions to fund and seed new innovative businesses in the nation. Revitalising underdeveloped hubs, and creating new hubs in remote areas should be a definite part of the budget to fuel young entrepreneurs as they can provide jobs to migrants from other regions.

Labour migration offers a lot of potential to leverage the energy and skills of our young demographic across borders. This will also provide them with the opportunity to grow and thrive beyond the limitations of their hometowns. However, to support, promote and optimize labour migration, the central as well as state governments need to be sensitive to the needs of migrants. Policies supporting skill development, housing, healthcare, social security need to be designed and implemented to help to revolutionise migration trends. The government must frame new laws for migrant workers that address all of the issues that were brought to the fore during the COVID-19 pandemic. A myriad of challenges in the worker's community urge the need for transitional interventions to attain sustainable mass prosperity. Developing the skills of migrant labour and addressing the challenges faced by them will help to enhance productivity which in turn, will strengthen the nation's economy.

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