

Circular Migration in India

Policy Brief No 4.

Prepared for the World Development Report 2009

Kate Bird and Priya Deshingkar

Summary: This brief explores circular migration in India and the policy response, and impact of this policy response, on the welfare of migrants and more broadly, on regional inequality.

1. Introduction

This brief explores the circular migration in India and the policy response, and impact of this policy response, on the welfare of migrants and more broadly, on regional inequality.

The first section of the brief briefly outlines the development, poverty and inequality context in India. The second section explores regional inequality and migration in India and the third section examines the policy response to migration and the impact of this response. The fourth section concludes.

2. Regional inequality and circular migration

Between 1993 and 2000, average incomes rose more rapidly in urban than in rural India areas between 1993 and 2000, implying a widening spatial gaps in average incomes (Deaton and Drèze, 2002 in Deshingkar and Anderson, 2004).

Official datasets, such as the 2001 National census and the 1999-2000 NSS data indicate a slow-down in permanent or long term rural-urban migration in India (Deshingkar, 2003). Micro-level studies of migration in India paint a different picture, however, and find that there has been a sharp increase in population mobility, in terms of long term and temporary migration and commuting (Deshingkar and Anderson, 2004).¹ Circular migration, or rural-urban migration, is emerging as a dominant form of migration amongst poorer groups in India. Short term out-migrants have been estimated to number 12.6 million but recent micro-studies documenting large and increasing numbers of internal migrants suggest that the true figure is 30 million and rising (Deshingkar, 2006b).

Circular migration rates are high in remote rural areas, particularly amongst chronically poor people. Particularly high rates are found in drought prone areas with low agro-ecological potential, poor access to credit or other pre-requisites for diversification and high population densities. For example, an estimated 300,000 labourers migrate from drought prone Bolangir District in Western Orissa every year (Deshingkar, 2003). In the highly drought prone and poor district of Ananthapur in

¹ The disjuncture between findings from official national-level surveys and reality is illustrated by a study which showed that a village supposedly completely dependent on agriculture (98.4% of the households and 97.7% of the labour force reported agriculture as their primary occupation in the NSS survey of 1993-94), was actually highly diversified, with roughly 90% of the households engaged in non-farm activities high rates of migration (Shylendra and Thomas 1995 in Deshingkar, 2003).

Andhra Pradesh, migration increased between 1980 and 2001, with people attracted by wages in Bangalore which, at Rs.100 to 150 per day, were nearly three times the local wage (Rao 2001 in Deshingkar, 2008). The remote drought-prone and forested tribal areas of Madhya Pradesh show similarly high levels of out-migration. For example, Deshingkar and Start (2003) found that more than half the households in four out of six study villages in Madhya Pradesh included migrant family members. The figure was as high as 75% in the most remote and hilly tribal villages with infertile soils.

Circular migration is particularly high among the poor, scheduled castes (SCs), scheduled tribes (STs) and Muslims.² In the tribal districts of southern Madhya Pradesh, 65% of households included migrants (Mosse et al., 1997). In Jharkhand, a study of twelve villages found that one-third of the households had at least one member migrating. Short-term migration was higher among poorer groups, involving over 80% of the landless and 88% of illiterate people and migration among SCs and STs was nearly twice that of upper castes (15% of the SC/ST households compared to 8% of upper caste households) (Dayal and Karan, 2003). In Rajasthan, 95% of the migrants congregating at *Chakoris* (recruiting points) are dalits coming from Bhilwara, Ajmer, Tonk and Kota areas of Rajasthan (Jagori 2001). There are extremely high rates of migration among tribals from southern Rajasthan who migrate to Gujarat to work in seed cotton farms and textile markets (Katiyar 2006 and Venkateswarlu 2004).

Unsurprisingly, young adult populations have a greater propensity to migrate and there is a link between larger families and migration, especially where single family members migrate (Deshingkar, 2006b). Permanent migration rates are higher among the more educated but illiterate and unskilled people appear to dominate seasonal labour migration (Deshingkar, 2006b).

Migrant destinations are towns and cities, industrial zones, stone quarries and coastal areas for fish processing and salt panning (Deshingkar, 2006b). Jobs tend to be in factories, agro-processing plants or working as porters, domestic servants, bus conductors, rickshaw pullers, street hawkers, petty traders, and construction workers. Migrants are often willing to take on jobs that others cannot or do not want to do (those that are dirty, degrading and dangerous). The work is commonly poorly paid and insecure but it is very attractive to those from marginal areas where wages are too low to make a living (Deshingkar, 2005). A recent and growing trend is the large-scale migration of tribal girls for domestic work to the capital city of Delhi from the eastern tribal belt of Jharkhand and West Bengal. High productivity agricultural areas ('green revolution areas') continue to be important destinations but more migrants are opting for non-farm employment in both rural and urban areas because of greater returns (Deshingkar, 2006b). Interestingly, studies of areas of Bihar that have experienced a doubling of out-migration rates since the 1970s show that migration is now mainly to urban areas as work availability has declined in traditional destinations in irrigated Punjab (Karan 2003 in Deshingkar, 2003). It must be noted, however, that migration is part of a mix of livelihood strategies and methods of asset accumulation adopted by households. A study in Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh found that many rural migrant households cultivated one rain-fed subsistence crop and few chose to settle permanently at their migration destination, recognising that keeping a foot in both the rural and the urban economies provides them with greater security (Deshingkar, 2006b).

² Migration rates are high among Muslims in states where they have been socially excluded and chronically poor, as in the case of Bihar (ADRI, 2006).

A range and combination of push and pull factors drive circular migration. Income is one driver, with people migrating in search of paid employment. Migrants may be pushed to migrate by debt³, poor access to credit, declining access to common property resources or commodity price crashes (Deshingkar, 2003). Agricultural pressures and rural unemployment also drive migration, which is driven by the scarcity of cultivable land, inequitable land distribution, low agricultural productivity, land degradation (particularly in arid and semi-arid areas), reduced access to common property resources, high population density and few opportunities for diversification away from agriculture (Deshingkar, 2003). Demand for labour in both rural⁴ and urban⁵ areas and anticipated better wages and working conditions are also major incentives to migrate (Deshingkar, 2003). The desire to acquire new skills, access better services and leave oppressive patron-client relationships or avoid caste-based (or other) discrimination are also motivating factors. Further, the prospects migration offers for asset accumulation drives migration and has been found, through participatory poverty assessments, to play an important role in upward mobility. For example, in Bihar migration has reduced the dependence on moneylenders and in 5-10% of the migrant population, allowed the accumulation of assets such as land (Deshingkar, 2006a). Improved access to roads and communication infrastructure, and social networks in urban locations, also drive, and facilitate, circular migration in India (Deshingkar and Anderson, 2004).

There is overwhelming evidence that internal migration can lead to positive change in both sending and receiving areas (Deshingkar and Grimm, 2004). Migration can help to reduce poverty or to halt the slide into poverty. For example, the income earned by women migrating from West Bengal to Delhi to work as housemaids meant that they had been able to move out of poverty (Mukherjee 2004). It can increase income, savings and assets. For example, a study of 955 migrant households in Tamil Nadu found that 57% of lower income migrants had seen their income increase and 53% had increased their asset holdings (Sundari, 2005) and migrants from Mahbubnagar District, Andhra Pradesh to the paddy fields of Karnataka have been found to save an average Rs 2000-3000 per season (Khandelwal, 2002). It can lead to the sending of remittances to marginalised sending localities, which can be used to invest in human capital or in productive assets in sending localities and can play an important role in reducing vulnerability, improving food security, stimulating land markets in sending areas, increasing local wages and the demand for local goods and services and generally improving the economy (Deshingkar, 2006b).⁶ It also helps tighten rural labour markets (Wiggins and Deshingkar, 2007).

³ Seasonal migration is often linked to debt cycles and the need for money for repaying debts, covering deficits created by losses in agriculture, or meeting expenditures of large magnitude on account of marriages, festivals and ceremonies (Deshingkar, 2003).

⁴ Rural-rural migration accounted for roughly 62% of all movements in 1999-00 according to National Sample Survey data. Workers from 'backward' states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa and Rajasthan routinely travel to the developed green revolution states of Maharashtra, Punjab and Gujarat for the transplant and harvesting season (Deshingkar, 2003)

⁵ Urban migration is increasing, particularly of young men who travel to work in construction and urban services (Deshingkar, 2003)

⁶ In Mumbai, remittances account for much of the £126 million (2005) sent using money orders from the Mumbai post office to Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal (Deshingkar, 2006b). Earnings from migration were found to account for more than half of the annual earnings from labour in unirrigated and forested villages of Madhya Pradesh (Deshingkar and Start, 2003). In the more prosperous Andhra Pradesh the overall contribution was much lower but in the village that was in the unirrigated and poor north-western corner, migration contributed 51% of household earnings. 80% of cash income in project villages (in Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Rajasthan) was found to come from migration (Mosse et al., 1997).

There are some negative impacts to acknowledge, however. Migration can lead to an acute shortage of labour and high dependency ratios in sending areas. Mass male migration can lead to worsening poverty, but these risks are off-set where wage rates are sufficiently high to allow regular remittances. People who are away for a long time may lose access to natural resources and lose their voice in community decision-making. Migration can also have a negative effect on collective action and natural resource management, where significant labour inputs are required (Deshingkar, 2003).

The majority of migrants and commuters are absorbed into the informal sector, which is characterised by low productivity and limited prospects for exiting poverty. Many are adversely incorporated into labour markets, with middlemen and contractors maximising their own profits. Some suggest that, as a result, migration can only deliver survival wages. However, others have found that migrants have been able to escape poverty while remaining in the informal sector. Migrants in Delhi slums have move into higher income, regular jobs once they have gained experience (Gupta and Mitra, 2002 in Deshingkar and Anderson, 2004); in West Bengal, migrants now view migration as a way of accumulating a useful lump sum, rather than simply surviving (Rogaly and Coppard, 2003 in Deshingkar and Anderson, 2004) and in Madhya Pradesh (MP) and Andhra Pradesh (AP) lower caste people have used migration to both farm and non-farm work to break out of caste constraints (which are especially strong in rural areas), find new opportunities, and escape poverty (Deshingkar and Start, 2003).

3. Policy response to circular migration in India

Despite the large numbers of people migrating, migration-related issues rarely get onto local, state or national policy agendas. The economic benefits of migration are not recognised and migration tends to be viewed as an economically, socially and politically destabilising process because it overburdens urban areas, deprives rural areas of productive members, destabilises family life, leads to labour exploitation by the informal sector and causes administrative and legislative headaches (Deshingkar and Grimm, 2004; Deshingkar and Anderson, 2004).

There have essentially been two forms of policy response (or non-response) in relation to migration at the state and national level in India, neither of which have enabled, nor controlled, migration. The first response has been to increase rural employment, in an attempt to stem the flow of migrants out of rural areas. This responds to the assumption that deteriorating agriculture leads to out-migration and improved natural resources bases and employment opportunities in rural areas can reduce or reverse migration (Deshingkar, 2003). The suite of policies in place aimed at increasing the availability of rural employment include the National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme, which promises 100 days of wage labour to one adult member in every rural household that volunteers for unskilled work; numerous watershed development programmes which aim to improve agricultural productivity; and programmes to develop small and medium towns, to help arrest migration to urban areas. On the whole, these attempts only partially reduce circular migration, as opportunities are still better in urban areas and high productivity rural areas. Watershed development programmes have had some success in providing local employment and stemming migration but this has been limited (Deshingkar, 2003). For example, in arid areas of Gujarat, high urban incomes meant that government employment schemes such as the Jawahar Rozgar Yojana (JRY) and improved irrigation were unable to reduce out-migration (Deshingkar, 2003). This approach is inline with the Indian government's view of villages and agriculture as the engine of

rural growth and poverty reduction. But policy needs to recognise that rural livelihoods in marginal areas are strongly linked to urban development and manufacturing and reallocate resources accordingly (Deshingkar, 2006b).

The other policy response is essentially a 'non-response'. As mentioned above, the centrality of migrant labour to economic growth in India is not recognised and due to the perceived negative economic, political and social effects, state and national governments and local governments remain hostile towards migrants, while employers routinely disregard laws designed to protect their rights and needs (Deshingkar, 2005; Andrew Shepherd, pers. comm.). In many cases, policies remain predicated on a supposedly 'sedentary' population (Deshingkar and Anderson, 2004). By not providing flexible approaches to access public services, housing, subsidised food and legal work, migrants are not provided with the public services permanent residents might take for granted. The application of local development, planning and zoning regulations, and the regulation of the informal sector by the local police and bureaucrats, results in harassment and exclusion (Andrew Shepherd, pers. comm.). The result is that:

- Migrants often **live in illegal settlements**, where they have poor access to water, sanitation and electricity and face constant threats of eviction, disease, sexual abuse, underpayment and police harassment (Deshingkar and Anderson, 2004).
- Migrants are **excluded from the ration system** because they cannot use their cards outside their home local authority. This means they spend a considerable proportion of their wages on basic food supplies and rents and when whole families migrate, children often do domestic chores while their parents work, missing out on an education (Deshingkar and Anderson, 2004);
- Migrants **do not have adequate access to essential services and amenities** such as water and sanitation, health care and education (Deshingkar and Grimm, 2004);
- Migrants are **generally discriminated against, sometimes exploited, are generally paid less than non-migrant workers and conditions of work are poor** (Deshingkar and Grimm, 2004; Deshingkar, 2005).

These policy responses – encouraging rural employment and ignoring and excluding migrants – do not stop migration. They do mean, however, that migrants are poorer and more marginalised at their destination than they might otherwise be, and their children are likely to be trapped in intergenerationally transmitted poverty, due to limited schooling and poor health. Because migrants are only entitled to vote in their home location, and not the location of migration, their political agency is limited and their concerns are rarely raised effectively at their destination.

In response to this, labour unions, donors and non-government organisations (NGOs) have started to take on the problems facing migrants. For example, mobile ration cards for 5,000 migrants are being piloted in small and major towns in Rajasthan, India. In Madhya Pradesh, the UK Department for International Development is funding a comprehensive migrant support programme in eight tribal districts, which aims to provide information on opportunities and improve bargaining power by enhancing skills. Several NGOs, such as the Gramin Vikas Trust in Madhya Pradesh and Adhikar in Orissa, have migrant support programmes to

improve the efficiency, safety and cost of remittance mechanisms and ID cards have been used with very positive results in MP under a migrant support programme implemented by the Gramin Vikas Trust (Wiggins and Deshingkar, 2007). As well, national level legislation has recently been passed to extend social protection and insurance to informal sector workers (Andrew Shepherd, pers. comm.).

4. Conclusion

Migration is a routine livelihood strategy adopted in India and not simply a response to shocks (Deshingkar and Anderson, 2004). People certainly do migrate because there is not enough work locally, but such migration should not be understood as forced or distress migration. Many poor people perceive migration as an opportunity. It allows them to escape highly exploitative patron-client relationships in their home village, earn more than they would have done before and provides them with improved roads, communication networks and an expanded informal economy (Deshingkar, 2003). Short-term, non-permanent, migration from poor and under-developed regions to more prosperous regions and countries can (but does not always) offer people an important opportunity to diversify and exit from poverty. The current policy and institutional set up does not allow the sending households and areas, as well as receiving areas, to maximise the benefits from internal, regional and international migration (ODI, 2007). Without the opportunity to migrate many poor people would have fallen into deeper poverty and experienced severe food insecurity (Deshingkar, 2006a) The costs and risks of migration might be cut by more flexible schools, pro-poor programmes and insurance for mobile populations (Deshingkar, 2006a).

Negative government attitudes combined with ignorance created by inadequate data sets has led to the widespread neglect of migration as an important force in economic development (Deshingkar and Grimm, 2004). Internal migration could contribute significantly to poverty reduction and policy makers need to recognise the importance of migration to poverty reduction and development. Internal migration can play an important role in *poverty reduction* and economic development. It should therefore not be controlled or actively discouraged. Policy should instead attempt to maximise the potential benefits of migration to individual migrants and to society at large (Deshingkar and Grimm, 2004).

However, new policies must be implemented to secure the status of the migrant workers and ensure benefits are distributed evenly (Deshingkar, 2006b). Priorities should include reducing the costs and risks faced by migrants; ensuring that entitlements to state services are portable; facilitating migration through transport and information policies; facilitating remittances; improving accountability and transparency in labour markets; and raising awareness of and enforcing labour rights (Deshingkar and Anderson, 2004; Wiggins and Deshingkar, 2007).

Given current development patterns and future projections on urbanisation, the growth of manufacturing and agricultural development, it is very likely that internal migration in India, both temporary and permanent, will persist and grow. This will transfer populations from rural/agriculture to urban/non-farm areas and occupations. The rate at which this occurs will depend on how willing the national and state governments are to allow more people to settle in urban areas (Deshingkar, 2006b).

References

ADRI, 2006 The Socioeconomic and Educational Status of Muslims in Bihar. Asian Development Research Institute, Patna.

- Dayal H. and A. K. Karan (2003) Labour Migration from Jharkhand, Institute for Human Development, New Delhi.
- Deshingkar, P. (2003) Improved Livelihoods In Improved Watersheds: Can Migration Be Mitigated? In "Watershed Management Challenges: Improving Productivity, Resources and Livelihoods" International Water Management Institute, Colombo.
http://www.odi.org.uk/plag/RESOURCES/books/05_priya_migration_mitigation.pdf
- Deshingkar, P., and Start, D. (2003) Seasonal Migration for Livelihoods in India: Coping, Accumulation and Exclusion. ODI Working Paper 220.
http://www.odi.org.uk/publications/working_papers/wp220.pdf
- Deshingkar, P., and Anderson, E. (2004) People on the move: new policy challenges for increasingly mobile populations. Priya Deshingkar and Edward Anderson. Natural Resource Perspectives. Number 92, June 2004.
<http://www.odi.org.uk/nrp/nrp92.pdf>
- Deshingkar, P. and Grimm, S. (2004) Voluntary internal migration: an update. Paper commissioned by the Urban and Rural Change Team and the Migration Team, Policy Division, DFID. ODI. September 2004.
http://www.odi.org.uk/plag/RESOURCES/reports/0509_voluntary_internal_migration_update.pdf
- Deshingkar, P. (2005) Seasonal Migration: How rural is rural? ODI Opinion No. 52. September 2005.
http://www.odi.org.uk/publications/opinions/52_migration_sept05.pdf
- Deshingkar, P. (2006a) Time to recognise the importance of internal migration for poverty reduction and development. ODI Blog.
http://blogs.odi.org.uk/blogs/main/archive/2006/12/15/Priya_Deshingkar.aspx
- Deshingkar, P., (2006b) Internal migration, poverty and development in Asia. ODI Briefing Paper, No 11. October 2006.
http://www.odi.org.uk/publications/briefing/bp_internal_migration_oct06.pdf
- Deshingkar, P. (2007) Migration, remoteness and chronic poverty in India. CPRC Working Paper, forthcoming. Chronic Poverty Research Centre.
<http://www.chronicpoverty.org/resources/index.html>
- Deshingkar, P. (2008, forthcoming) Migration, Remoteness and Chronic Poverty in India. CPRC Working Paper, forthcoming. Chronic Poverty Research Centre.
www.chronicpoverty.org
- Gupta, I. and Mitra, A. (2002) Rural Migrants and Labour Segmentation, Micro-level Evidence from Delhi Slums. Economic and Political Weekly. January 12, pp. 163–8.
- Jagori 2001 Migration, trafficking and sites of work: vulnerabilities and rights. A pilot study, initial findings from Rajasthan and Gujarat. New Delhi: Jagori,
- Karan, A. (2003) Changing Patterns of migration from rural Bihar pp 102-139. in Iyer, G. (ed) (2003) Migrant Labour and Human Rights in India, Kanishka Publishers, New Delhi.
- Khandelwal, S. (2002) Study on Temporary Migration in Ghattu Mandal. Society for the Elimination of Rural Poverty, Government of Andhra Pradesh
- Mosse, D. Gupta, S. Mehta, M. Shah, V. & Rees, J. 1997. Seasonal labour migration in Tribal (Bhil) Western India. Report to DFID-India, New Delhi. (KRIBP Working Paper, Centre for Development Studies University of Wales,

- Swansea). ODI (2007) Resources on Migration in Rural Livelihoods.
<http://www.odi.org.uk/plaq/livelihoods/migration.html>
- Mukherjee, N. 2004 Migrant Women from West Bengal -- Livelihoods, Vulnerability, Ill-Being and Well Being: Some Perspectives from the Field. Development Tracks in Research, Training & Consultancy, New Delhi.
- Rao, G.B. (2001) Household Coping/ Survival Strategies in Drought-prone Regions: A Case Study of Anantapur District, Andhra Pradesh, India SPWD-Hyderabad Centre.
- Rogaly, B., Coppard, D., Ratique, A., Rana, K., Sengupta, A. and Biswas, J. (2002) 'Seasonal Migration and Welfare/Ilifare in Eastern India: A Social Analysis', *Journal of Development Studies* 38.5: 89–114
- Rogaly B. and Coppard, D. (2003) 'They Used To Go to Eat, Now They Go to Earn: The Changing Meanings of Seasonal Migration from Puruliya District in West Bengal', *Journal of Agrarian Change* 3 (3), p.395, July.
- Shylendra H.S. and P. Thomas 1995. Non-Farm Employment: nature, magnitude and determinants in a semi-arid village of Western India. *Indian Journal of Agricultural Economics*. 50(3): 410-416.
- Katiyar 2006 Wages of Adolescence: Annual Exodus of Tribal Adolescents from South Rajasthan to Bt Cotton Seed Plots of North Gujarat. Sudrak, Udaipur.
- Sundari, S (2005) Migration as a Livelihood Strategy A Gender Perspective *Economic and Political Weekly* May 28-June 4, 2005. pp 2295-2303.
- Venkateswarlu D. 2004 Child Labour In Hybrid Cottonseed Production In Gujarat And Karnataka http://www.indianet.nl/Guj-Karn_cottonseed.doc
- Virgo, K. R. Yadav, Y. Kanugo & R. Bond 2003 Agriculture or livelihoods? Experiences of practitioners and beneficiaries of the DFID-funded Western India Rainfed Farming Project. Paper presented at Tropical Agriculture Association Seminar, University of Bath, 3 July.
- Wandschneider, T. and P. Mishra. (2003) 'The role of small rural towns in Bolangir District, India: A village-level perspective NRI Report No: 2750', DFID-World Bank Collaborative Research Project on the Rural Non-Farm Economy and Livelihood Enhancement
- Wiggins, S., and Deshingkar, P. (2007) Rural employment and migration: In search of decent work. ODI Briefing Paper, No 27. October 2007.
http://www.odi.org.uk/publications/briefing/bp_rural_employment_oct07.pdf