INDIA'S URBAN TRANSITION: IDENTIFYING THE CONTOURS OF MIGRATION

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

▌ABSTRACT

This is the second in SPRF's series of issue briefs on India's urban transition. Taking up the process of migration, one of the most important determinants of urbanisation, this brief attempts to understand the prominent trends in the movement of people across India over the last two decades, particularly into cities. It looks at how migrants are defined by census authorities, the issues city-bound migrants face, and identifies the absence of seasonal migrants from available data as a key issue in the framing of development policies focused on employment and urban development.

▌INTRODUCTION

Migration, the temporary or permanent movement of people from one place to another, has been a recurring feature in the growth of human civilisation across millenia. It is also one of the key factors that has a bearing on urbanisation. In fact, rural to urban migration is sometimes considered synonymous with the process of urbanisation (McGranahan & Satterthwaite 2014: 4).

India, witness to some of the world's largest incidents of voluntary and involuntary migration throughout its history, is a unique case study in this context. Unlike the old view of India being a land of thousands of self-sufficient villages with low spatial mobility, most famously posited by Kingsley Davis (1951), available data shows that Indians are highly mobile (Tumbe 2018: 2). In fact, as per the 2011 Census, one in three Indians is a migrant. The share of migrants in India's population has increased substantially over the last three decades, as captured in the respective censuses (27.6% in 1991, 30.5% in 2001, and 37.6% in 2011) coinciding with the rapid urbanisation the country has witnessed during that time frame. As per the Census 2011 numbers, 34.8% of total migrants could be classified as migrating into urban areas, thus being a key driving force behind urbanisation.

Hence, understanding how Indians move across the country's vast geography is crucial to make sense of the process of urbanisation and its various challenges. Additionally, analysing trends in migration is essential to inform urban planning and government policies that are aimed at addressing issues of urban India.

▌TRENDS IN MIGRATION

- Who is a Migrant?

There are two principal ways in which data on migration is collected by the Indian government - Census and NSSO surveys. The most recent NSSO data comes from the agency's 64th round survey conducted in 2007-08 which is on the status of employment in the country. As per the NSSO methodology, anyone who is enumerated at a place different from their usual place of residence (UPR)[1] is considered a migrant.

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[1] The usual place of residence of a person is a place where the person has lived continuously for a period of six months or more.

Comparatively, the census exercise defines migrants in two ways:

1. By place of birth - when a person is enumerated in the census at a place different than their place of birth
2. By place of last residence - when a person is enumerated in the census at a place other than their previous place of residence

The data on migrants by place of last residence gives a better picture of the current migration scenario as it categorises migrants by their duration of stay in their place of enumeration which can be less than one year to more than 10 years. Compared to the NSSO data, the Census 2011 data on migration is more recent, so it is more indicative of the existing trends in migration in the country. According to Census 2011, there were 455.7 million migrants in India, making every third Indian a migrant. This was a jump of 141.2 million people compared to the number of migrants enumerated in the census of 2001 which was 314.5 million. Looking at the migration streams in the country (Figure 1), the share of rural to rural migration is the highest at 215.6 million. However, the share of migrants moving into urban areas is also considerably high at 158.5 million and can be considered a key driving force of the expansion of urban areas in the country.

FIGURE 1: SHARE OF MIGRANTS ACROSS MIGRATION STREAMS

UNCLASSIFIED 11.9%

URBAN - URBAN 17.4%

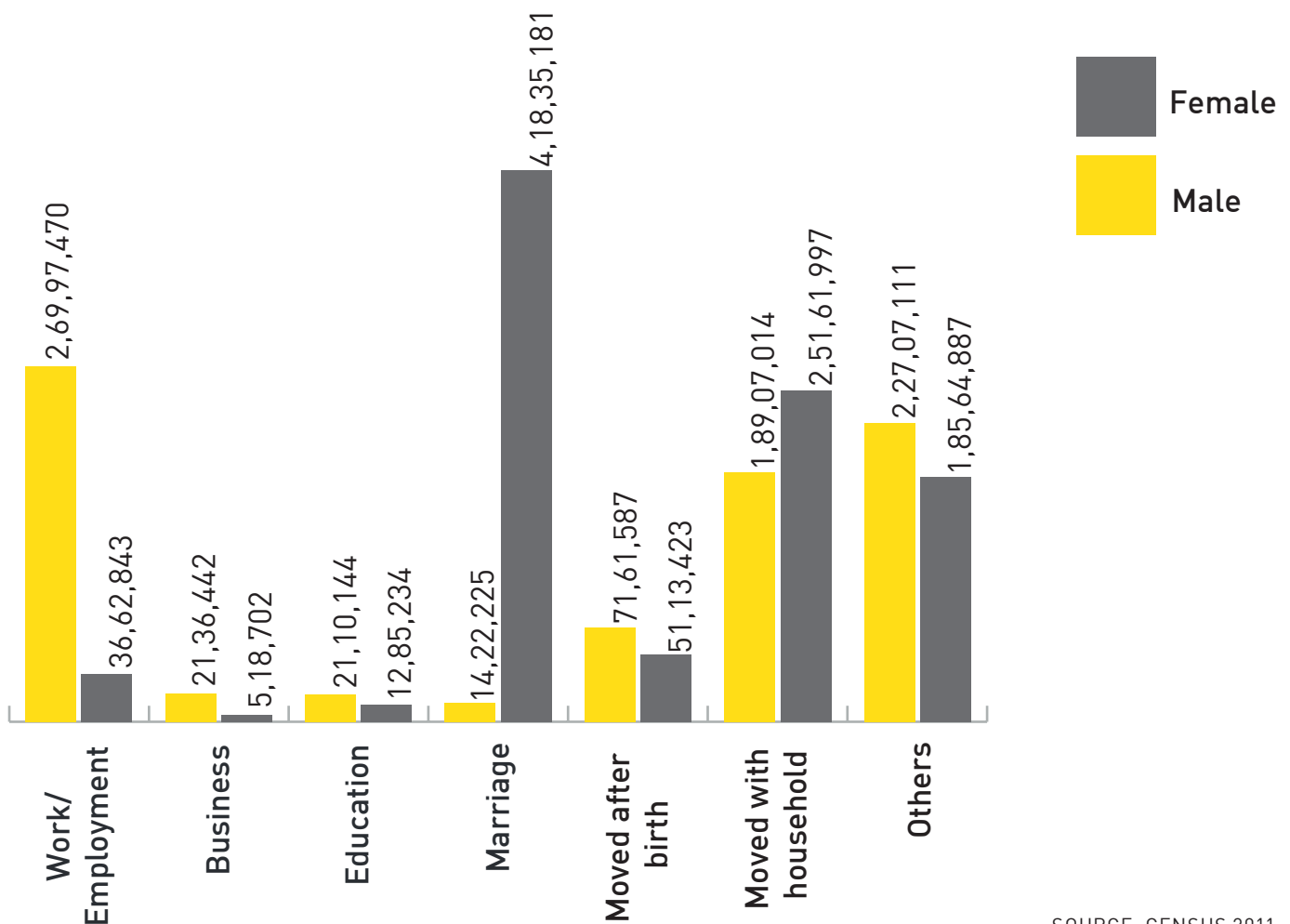URBAN - RURAL 6.0%

RURAL - URBAN 17.4%

RURAL - RURAL 47.3%
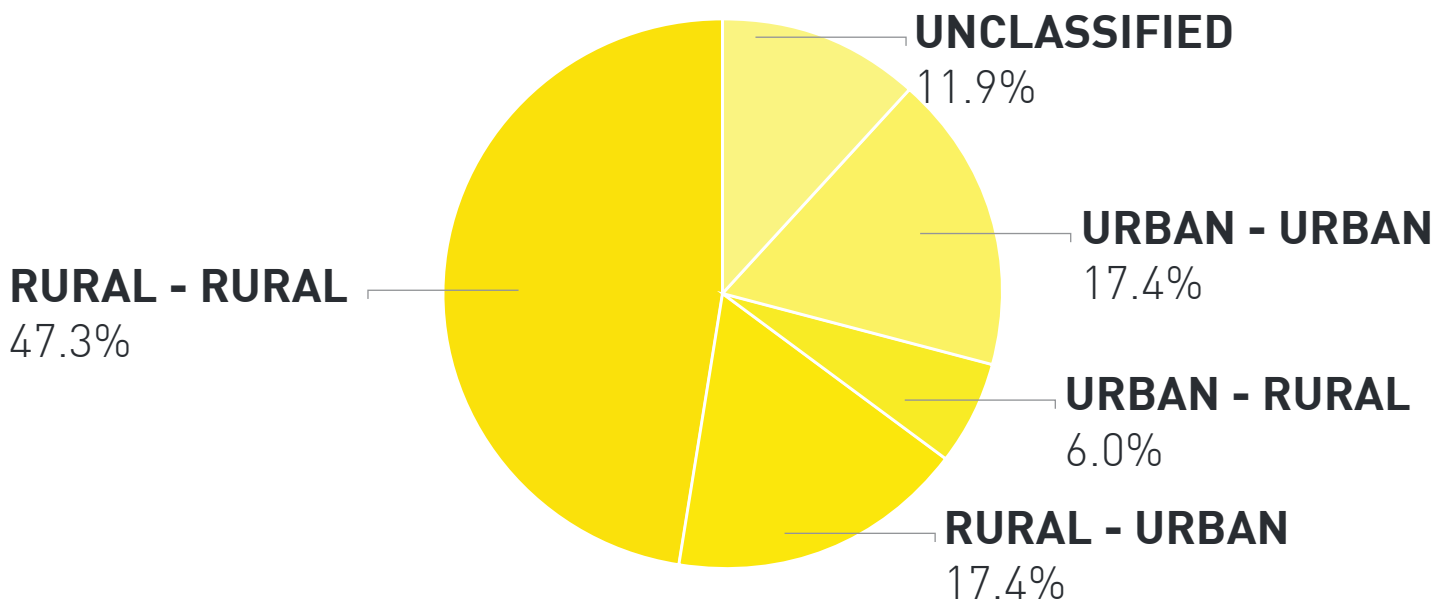
SOURCE: CENSUS 2011

- Why do Indians migrate?

On segregating migration data by sex, we find that there are 309.6 million female migrants in the country, accounting for around 68% of total migrants. Additionally, the data shows that a large number of people (211.1 million) migrate on account of marriage. More women migrate due to marriage (205.8 million) compared to men (5.3 million) indicating the essentially feminine nature of migration in India. The trend of marriage-driven migration follows suit when we look at the data for people migrating into urban areas (Figure 2). More women (41.8 million) than men (1.4 million) migrate due to marriage or other household reasons to urban areas, while more men (26.9 million) migrate due to reasons related to work or

employment as compared to women (3.6 million). This trend has been linked in migration literature to the more masculine nature of urban sex ratios in India compared to rural sex ratios. As more males migrate for employment-related reasons to cities, the economic growth of Indian cities has been characterised by female deficits in aggregate sex ratios throughout contemporary Indian history (Tumbe 2016: 4). Cities like Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata, while seeing rapid growth throughout the 20th century, had appallingly low sex ratios during the same time due to the large influx of males into these cities in search of better work opportunities (ibid.).

FIGURE 2: NUMBER OF MIGRANTS MOVING INTO URBAN AREAS BY REASONS LISTED

Legend:
- Female
- Male

Values shown:
- Work/Employment: Male 2,69,97,470; Female 36,62,843
- Business: Male 21,36,442; Female 5,18,702
- Education: Male 21,10,144; Female 12,85,234
- Marriage: Male 14,22,225; Female 4,18,35,181
- Moved after birth: Male 71,61,587; Female 51,13,423
- Moved with household: Male 1,89,07,014; Female 2,51,61,997
- Others: Male 2,27,07,111; Female 1,85,64,887

SOURCE: CENSUS 2011

It can be inferred from the census data that marriage and employment are the two most important drivers of the influx of people into urban areas. With millions of people migrating to cities and towns, sometimes from far-flung regions of the country, there is immense pressure on existing resources and infrastructure in urban India that throws up a number of challenges for urban policymakers as well as planners.

- What being a Migrant means

As a large chunk of migrants move for work-related reasons, they form a significantly high share in the total urban workforce, as shown in Figure 3. Interestingly, the figure also shows that more female migrant

workers are a part of the urban workforce than male migrants even in sectors such as construction and manufacturing. One could infer that even though most women migrate for marriage, many of them become a part of the urban workforce becoming critical components of a city's economy. The census data doesn't seem to reflect this latency in the reasons listed by migrants and incorrectly depicts female migration occurring for largely non-economic or conventionally 'unproductive' reasons. Dutta and Shaw (2019) have identified the absence of middle-class women's migration to urban areas for work and education in recent migration literature. Using NSSO data on monthly per capita expenditure and analysis of middle-class women's migration during 1983-2008, Dutta and Shaw conclude that the share of economically motivated migration for middle-class women surpasses their family and marriage-related migration during this time period (Dutta & Shaw 2019: 56). The inherent latency in census data regarding female migration has larger implications for urban planning as well, as policies that use census data on migrant workers fail to identify and understand the extent of issues specific to female migrant workers.

Migrants play a key role in driving the urban economy forward. Many migrants come from smaller towns and villages with local economies that do not have sectoral diversification or are agrarian in nature. These could be push-factors for migrants, particularly those coming from agricultural households who are facing farm distress and want to diversify their sources of income, through either a temporary or permanent move out of farming. Yet, whether or not they are able to achieve higher incomes and consequently, a better quality of living, has not been proven empirically. Priya Deshingkar (2010) identifies clear positive socio-economic outcomes for migrants in terms of access to food and ability to spend on housing, education and health, but also lists negative outcomes such as increased competition for available resources and opportunities, poor working conditions and long periods of separation from family that balance out the positives.

FIGURE 3: SHARE OF MIGRANT WORKERS IN TOTAL URBAN WORKERS BY SECTOR (IN %)
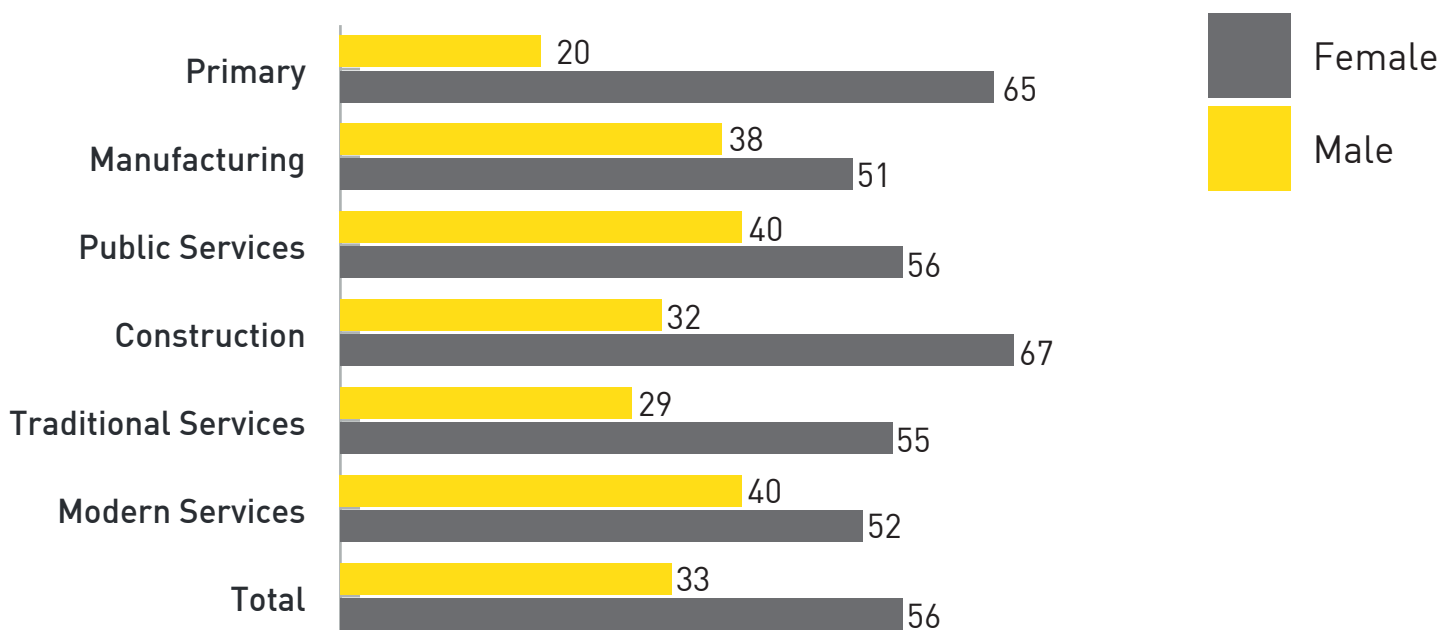
SOURCE: MINISTRY OF HOUSING AND URBAN POVERTY ALLEVIATION, 2017

Increased competition in the labour market could be one contributing factor to the levels of urban unemployment in India. Even though the potential of a major city to generate meaningful employment is considerably higher than a village, urban markets seem ill-equipped to accommodate the constant flow of labour. Constant investments to improve the urban economic structure are required to increase the capacity of a city to absorb migrant labour into the formal workforce, otherwise seasonal labour in the underpaid, unorganised sector becomes predominant, which is happening across many of India's urban spaces. One of the most visible markers of the impact of the regular influx of migrant labour and ill-prepared cities is the existence of slums across major Indian cities. As per available data from 2011, there were 13.7 million slum households in the country and a major chunk of this population (73.5%) resided in major cities (NIUA 2016). A significant share of the migrant population in cities like Delhi, Hyderabad, and Mumbai resides in slums under dehumanizing conditions. Informal settlements usually lack basic infrastructure available in other parts of the city having proper housing, such as a clean water supply, sanitation facilities, access to healthcare, etc. While seasonal migrants may seem visible across slums in cities like Delhi and Mumbai, and even smaller towns, they don't seem to be accounted for in the census data and consequently, city plans.

CIRCULAR OR SEASONAL MIGRATION: IDENTIFYING THE INVISIBLE

- Where are the Seasonal Migrants?

As defined by the NSSO's 64th round survey, seasonal or short-term migrants are people who stay away from their UPR for one to six months during the preceding year for employment or in search of employment (MoHUA 2017: 10). Sometimes called Circular Migrants, such persons are unaccounted for in the census data (the census collects data for a person living at his/her place of enumeration for a duration of one year at least). Also, as the census is a decadal exercise, it misses the year-on-year trends in migration, especially those of seasonal migrants and hence may not provide a more realistic picture of spatial mobility in India. Additionally, most urban planners completely miss out on accounting for seasonal migrant workers when devising solutions for urban issues (Sharma 2017).

Studies have shown that much of the labour migration in India is seasonal in nature which makes it imperative to have a clear statistical picture of these migrants. As per the NSSO's 64th round survey, there were 12.6 million short-term migrants in the country in the survey year of 2007-08. Using the same NSSO data, however, one study estimated that there were about 70 million seasonal migrant workers in India (Mazumdar et al. 2013). The Economic Survey 2016-17 used a cohort-based migration metric to analyse changes in same age cohorts (10-19 year-olds in the baseline census period and 20-29 year-olds in the same area in the next census period) in the census data to conclude that, on average, there were 5-6 million people moving annually across states in India between 2001 and 2011. Additionally, the survey utilised railways data to calculate internal work-related migration for the 2011-2016 time period concluding that, on average, there were 9 million people migrating between states annually (Economic Survey 2017: 265).

- What drives Seasonal Migration?

Most seasonal migrants are engaged in low-paying, informal work in sectors such as construction, manufacturing, services, transportation and domestic work (Sharma 2017). The seasonal mode of migration is said to be the preferred way of moving for work among people who are landless, illiterate and facing extreme poverty, particularly belonging to remote regions afflicted with drought, poor access to credit sources, and high population density (Bird and Deshingkar 2009). Farm distress, as mentioned in the previous section, is also a push-factor for seasonal migrants, primarily resulting from lack of cultivable land, low average landholding sizes, low agricultural productivity, and lack of non-farm opportunities, among other reasons. As wages (whether in farm or non-farm activities) in their source villages are extremely low, seasonal migrants tend to accept underpaid, hazardous jobs, with poor working conditions and at nominal wages. Working class localities and suburbs such as Mumbai's Ghatkopar tend to host seasonal migrants who move annually from drought-prone Marathwada region and live in temporary tenements[2] for a few months, before leaving for their villages after earning significant income in the construction sector (Waghmare 2016).

- Policy Implications

The absence of seasonal migration from the government's official data on migrants in the context of their contribution in the form of cheap labour in infrastructure and services critical to any city's economy, highlights the existing lacunae in development policies and city planning. The much documented accountability and implementation issues in rural employment generation schemes such as MGNREGS could be a push factor for people to move out in search of better wages. Whether newer schemes like Deen Dayal Upadhyay Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDUGKY), that focuses on skill development of rural youth, and urban-focused schemes like the Smart Cities Mission could be reoriented taking into account seasonal migrants, is also a pertinent question. In the absence of reliable data on circular migration, these schemes severely lack critical baseline information about the movement of migrant labourers in and out of cities to be able to frame any clear provisions. The lack of data is particularly problematic when one considers the fact that many seasonal migrants who move from rural areas encounter hindrances while accessing provisions for social protection, legal aid, and public services (MoHUA 2017: 25). One also should not rule out the possibility that the total number of seasonal migrants may be considerably higher than what is estimated as of now by independent studies.

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[2] Small sheds made of plastic, asbestos, logs, straw, etc. typically put up in empty spaces in cities temporarily. These tenements are different from recognised slums that have more permanent structures.

▍CONCLUSION

Migration is a critical component of the process of urbanisation and, considering the logic of cities as engines of growth, of the economic growth of a country. Movement of labour across regions is not only an organic outcome of the geographic spread of the development process, it should be encouraged through conscious government policies. India's transformation from an agrarian economy into a competitive, manufacturing and services-led economy is intrinsically tied to the process of migration (MoHUA 2017: 1). In this context, it is necessary to identify issues affecting migrant populations such as access to civic services, underpaid or unpaid work, social discrimination, housing, health services, etc. It is also crucial to understand the factors that push or encourage people to move towards cities or smaller towns nearby. Recognising the gendered nature of this movement is also necessary and needs to be incorporated into urban development policies. Finally, policies need to be informed by appropriate data on as of yet invisible migration streams like seasonal migrants, who form a major chunk of the urban labour force and do not have access to social protection measures on account of this invisibility.

In the next issue brief in this series, we will look at the process of urban planning in India, key urban development policies and their impact, and the extent to which these policies take into account the realities of urbanisation in India.

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