A 'MAINSTREAMING' APPROACH TO UPLIFTING MIGRANT HOUSEHOLDS

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> *"Most importantly, mainstreaming involves embedding migration into mainstream policies, institutions and structures. This entails a broad-based approach rather than an issue-specific one."*

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The Covid 19 migrant crisis could be seen as a watershed moment for policy in the realm of internal migration. Despite the lack of an omnibus migration policy, several disparate policy initiatives emerged at multiple levels of government, across various sectors leveraging multi-stakeholder collaborations. To stitch these responses together into a more coherent inclusionary policy framework for migrants, policy actors need to recognise the importance of migrants and their agency on the one hand, while seeking to redress their vulnerabilities. Based on a brief analysis of policy responses to the migrant crisis in India, this paper suggests that migration policy in India has already taken the initial steps towards adopting a 'mainstreaming' approach. Taking this momentum further through an enhanced understanding of migration processes, reflexive policy design, an iterative approach towards intervention and a systematic embedding of migration into mainstream policies, institutions and structures, India can contribute significantly towards fulfilling the SDGs and the 'Leave No One Behind' agenda.

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, the large-scale migrant exodus from urban centres to the refuge of their rural homes in the wake of the Covid19 national lockdown was a unique administrative challenge for the Indian states. The crisis highlighted several lacunae in the way interstate migrants were treated in destination states as compared to their source states; whereas the latter saw them as citizens, the former regarded them as workers. While questions over citizenship and inclusion are commonly raised in the context of international migration, the persistent vulnerabilities of internal migrants, who are Constitutionally guaranteed freedom of movement and residence anywhere within India, require closer examination.

For much of human existence, disasters have served as turning points, fostering innovations in technology, policy and politics. Can we hope that, in the years to come, India's Covid19 migrant crisis will also likely be seen as a watershed moment for

migration policy in India? In the spirit of 'Leave No One Behind' (LNOB), a powerful and transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), can this moment trigger the shift towards an inclusive and holistic policy approach that seeks to address multiple vulnerabilities as well as enhance the agency of migrant households? As this paper will outline, the wheels are already turning in migration policy; however, to make decisive strides, we will need to build a policy consensus around migrant inclusion to bring about a change.

THE AGENCY-VULNERABILITY PARADOX

At the outset, such a consensus must recognise the importance of migrants and their existing agency on the one hand, while seeking to redress the vulnerabilities they face on the other. Despite evidence of migrants' economic contribution, policy actors in India perceive migration negatively and see it primarily as a result of 'push' factors related to rural economic distress. This overwhelming 'sedentary bias' blinds policy actors to the existence of aspiration or non-economic reasons for migration (Centre for Policy Research & UNICEF

2021). For instance, young women may be motivated to migrate to seek autonomy from patriarchal restrictions. Laying out this essential paradox between agency and vulnerability is an important first step to disentangling the complex phenomenon of migration.

Migrant workers are crucial to India's economic growth story, powering important sectors like manufacturing and construction and performing low-skilled but essential jobs waste collection essential for the survival of cities. While rural distress is well acknowledged as a driver of migration, migrant households exert their agency through complex migration decisions regarding which members of the household move, where and for how long. As the pandemic demonstrated, they straddle rural and urban contexts to maximise the chances of survival and explore aspirations for social mobility. Migration is an integral aspect of India's demographic, economic and social transformation; as such, policy must support migrants in pursuing safe and viable migration pathways (International Labour Organisation 2020).

Yet, despite Constitutional guarantees of free movement within the country, internal migrants in India face

specific vulnerabilities and exclusions. Deshingkar et al (2022) articulate four interlinked issues that exacerbated the migrant crisis. First, labour market segmentation involving exploitative processes of recruitment, employment and reproduction of social hierarchies and prejudices places migrants at a relative disadvantage to local workers. This is especially accentuated for those disadvantaged in terms of caste, class and gender. Second, exclusionary forms of urbanisation make survival in cities difficult for migrants including struggles for adequate housing, access to social welfare and an over-reliance on social networks owing to poor governance. Third, migrants are unable to meet documentation standards, typically domicile or proof of residence, that make them eligible for social welfare or emergency support. Despite being Indian nationals, their regional identities and associated political citizenships deny them patronage at their employment locations. Fourth, migrants – especially those engaged in circular and seasonal migration – remain invisible in official datasets and are inadequately registered for schemes and benefits. This lack of reliable data exacerbates all the other forms of vulnerability and makes it particularly

challenging to evolve a rational policy response.

MIGRATION AS REFLECTED IN POLICY

Owing to the prevalence of economic framings, migration has been primarily addressed in policy through the lens of labour via legislations like the Interstate Migrant Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979. Migration has been strongly linked to work and was squarely under the purview of the Ministry of Labour and Employment (MoLE). The issue of migration appeared only fleetingly in other areas of policy. For example, the Right to Education Act 2009 mandates schools to admit migrant children and the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme of the Ministry of Women and Child Development is also, in terms of intention, inclusive of migrants. Labour-centric frameworks have dwelt on problems related to informal employment and the challenges of delivering social protection to unorganised workers, with migrants as a subset of this dominant issue.

Owing to contrasting logics of universalisation and eligibility, migrants have uncertain access to social welfare. While the former apply to specific sectors considered critical to human development like education, health and nutrition, most schemes are designed around eligibility requirements owing to fiscal and political considerations. Scheme design and implementation vary across levels of government as well as across rural and urban jurisdictions. While welfare schemes, formulated and funded by the Government of India, tend to be more universal in nature, state policies and schemes almost always include domicile as eligibility criteria (Centre for Policy Research & UNICEF 2021). Sectoral programs like the Building and Construction Workers Board, funded through a cess levied on construction, also – while centrally legislated – remained organised by states, which preferred to register their own residents (Roy et al 2017). The access to the Public Distribution System (PDS) also remained tied to specific locations, with ration cards tagged to specific fair price shops (Government of India 2017). At the same time, a strong sedentary bias and more effective decentralisation in rural contexts have retained the focus on preventing migration through strengthening rural development while migrant inclusion in cities is severely constrained by a lack of capacity and resources (Xiang et al 2022).

In 2016-17, migration briefly received attention in policy circles. In the wake of the UN Habitat's efforts to evolve a New Urban Agenda and a growing conversation around India's efforts at meeting the SDGs, the erstwhile Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, Govt. of India constituted an inter-ministerial Working Group on Migration to "address the impact of migration on housing, infrastructure and livelihoods"[1]. The Working Group submitted its report in 2017 (Government of India 2017); however, the recommendations were not formally addressed at the time. With concerns over India's demographic dividend and economic future looming large, a chapter on internal migration and labour mobility was included in the 2016-17 Economic Survey. It emphasised the need to consider mobility as an important and desirable feature of India's economic landscape. However, these policy efforts did not gain further traction.

Thus, though policy experts and civil society had been raising the issue for some

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1   The Terms of Reference of the Working Group on Migration. Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, Housing Division, letter no O17034/18/2015-H/FTS-12940 dated 28th July 2015.

time and the government's own policy documents recognised the magnitude and complexity of the issue, before the pandemic, the inclusion of migrants was not taken up in a focused way in policy.

HOW THE WHEELS TURNED: RESPONSES TO THE MIGRANT CRISIS

The 2020 migrant crisis did not elicit a cohesive policy response from the government. The NITI Aayog made a promising start by convening a sub-group on the issue of migrant labour and drafting a policy document, but this has not yet been finalised. Instead, the crisis triggered several disparate relief measures and policy reactions located at multiple levels of government and across various sectors, which largely built on existing schemes and frameworks. Without getting into an exhaustive description, here is a brief summarisation under a few broad categories, viz. registration and tracking, portability, facilitation and housing.

Registration and tracking

Registration of migrants is a key feature of the Inter State Migrant Workmen Act (ISMWA) and though the Act has been weakly implemented, the notion that improved state response is contingent on robust systems to register and enumerate

migrants is well-embedded in the policy imagination. Pre-pandemic efforts to register migrants at source through panchayat level registers have now gained traction in several source states. Several state governments also captured data on migrants who returned during the pandemic and conducted skill mapping exercises with the intent of designing better interventions for livelihood support and skill development.

Conversations have also moved beyond the purview of work and employment. For example, in Maharashtra, the Women and Child Development Department has developed a system to enumerate and track women and children who migrate seasonally from vulnerable source areas to their work destinations in order to ensure continuity in the delivery of schemes related to maternal and child health and nutrition.

At the central level, MoLE has set up an E-Shram portal for self-registration of unorganised workers across India, on the behest of the Supreme Court. This is a first-time at-scale attempt to set up a digitally backed database that enables unique links to individual beneficiaries. The portal is expected to smoothen the delivery of welfare, though challenges related to identifying interstate

migrants as a specific subset are still being addressed.

It is also important to note that the unavailability of detailed migration tables from the last decadal Census in 2011, the delay of the 2021 Census and the failure of the National Sample Survey Organisation to regularly collect data on migration present a particular challenge where multiple registries co-exist without a reliable statistical base.

Portability

Advocates for migrant inclusion have, for a long time, highlighted the need for portability, i.e. ensuring that beneficiaries can access welfare regardless of location. In response, the One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC) was floated in 2019 as a key measure to make PDS benefits accessible to seasonal migrants. The distribution of free food grains through the PDS was a key element of the Government of India's pandemic relief package. State governments were urged to hasten the seeding of their ration card databases with Aadhaar information in order to enable portability under the ONORC system. While logistical and fiscal challenges remain in terms of implementation, this is a significant policy step forward in recognising and addressing mobility as a key axis of exclusion.

Facilitation

Prior to the pandemic, civil society organisations working with unorganised workers had already piloted the migrant resource centre (MRC) as a model to support migrants with reliable information and networks. Some state governments (e.g. Odisha) had set up MRCs in destination locations while partnerships between civil society employers and local governments were also operational (e.g. Tirupur). The pandemic has laid greater emphasis on the MRC as a model to address problems of information asymmetry and facilitation. In parallel, common service centres (CSCs) that connect citizens to government services through agents have also started to focus on migrants as a category of customers. For instance, Chalo Network identifies, trains and positions agents in migrant-sending and migrant-receiving communities to deliver services related to documentation and identity, financial inclusion, welfare and healthcare.

Housing

The Ministry of Urban Affairs, Govt. of India responded to the crisis by adding a rental housing component to the Government of India's

flagship housing programme, the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana. The Affordable Rental Housing Complexes (ARHC) scheme, announced in 2020, sought private sector participation to retrofit unoccupied public housing for rental purposes as well as build new affordable rental housing stock. While announced during the pandemic and framed in terms of a response to help the urban poor and facilitate the integration of migrant workers in cities, the scheme addresses a broader need to diversify urban housing supply. At present, as per the scheme's official website[2], nearly 30 retrofitting projects and one greenfield project is in the pipeline.

MAINSTREAMING AS A POLICY APPROACH

Scholars like Scholten (2019) who studied the migration policy responses in the European Union during the refugee crisis a few years ago realised that migration, akin to issues like gender and environment, had become a complex policy problem. Migration takes on many forms in terms of duration, frequency and spatiality. It is no longer sectorally aligned but embedded in almost every facet of development.

Hence, it is no longer possible to propose one-size-fits-all and simplistic policy approaches. Leaning on literature from complexity governance that rejects both overly rational approaches that are unable to address complex policy issues and chaotic approaches that rely on relativism, Scholten (2019) proposed mainstreaming as a middle path. Mainstreaming is a reflexive approach to policymaking, where actors understand the underlying causes and effects of both the policy problem as well as solutions and make adjustments over time. Instead of seeing migration as a stand-alone policy area, it focuses on actor networks and evolving processes to improve responses continually. Most importantly, mainstreaming involves embedding migration into mainstream policies, institutions and structures. This entails a broad-based approach rather than an issue-specific one.

A prima facie analysis of the policy responses described in the previous section indicates that 'mainstreaming' could be a plausible approach to thinking about migration policy in India. First, the responses show that migration as a policy issue is no longer strictly located under the purview of labour

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2   See http://arhc.mohua.gov.in/

and employment. Responses have moved beyond the framing of labour to examine migration as a broader developmental problem with implications for multiple sectors including education, health and food security and various vulnerable groups like women and children.

This indicates a second shift from the migrant worker towards seeing the migrant household as a focus of intervention. The large influx of returning migrants during the pandemic helped policy actors to broaden their perspectives to include migrating households as well as split households with migrant and left-behind members and garnered support for portability in the delivery of social welfare.

Third, the experiences of policy actors engendered an appreciation of how fragmented governance structures currently are and highlighted the role of multiple stakeholders. Providing relief to returning migrants during Covid-19 required bureaucrats to coordinate with counterparts in other state governments and work in collaboration with other departments within the state. This highlighted the need for horizontal convergence across departments and multiple levels of government to effectively include migrants. Many of the successful solutions, for instance, the exercise of organising transport for returning migrants, were possible through complex collaborative arrangements with contributions from multiple stakeholders including state actors, NGOs, citizen volunteers and private corporations.

Fourth, we learn from the portability and registration solutions that policy initiatives are embedded within a broader trend of digital governance, but can only be effective if last mile delivery is optimised and feedback loops put in place. Lastly, responses were largely built on existing policies, whether articulated or in the pipeline. To an extent, solutions were adapted and replicated quickly across jurisdictions, through formal and informal sharing mechanisms. This demonstrates that migration as a policy domain requires to be seen as a contiguous process in which policy actors learn from and improve on previous experiences of their own and others.

While this is a good starting point, it is important to measure the progress of migrant-inclusive policy in empirical ways. One way to do so is through migration indices like DEMIG,[3] Global Migration Barometer,[4] Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX)[5] and MGI[6] that were developed for international migration and used as strategic tools by countries to measure and evaluate policies and practices (Aggarwal et al, 2020). Building on the Migration Policy Integration Index (Huddleston et al., 2015),

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3   DEMIG POLICY tracks more than 6,500 migration policy changes enacted by 45 countries around the world mostly in the 1945-2013 period.

4   Western Union commissioned the Economist Intelligence Unit to compile a migration index that ranks 61 countries by how attractive and accessible they are for migrants (the Global Migration Barometer), with a separate assessment of their need for migrants.

5   The Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) is a unique tool which measures policies to integrate migrants in countries across six continents, including all EU Member States (including the UK), other European countries (Albania, Iceland, North Macedonia, Moldova, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine), Asian countries (China, India, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, United Arab Emirates), North American countries (Canada, Mexico and the US), South American countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile), South Africa, and Australia and New Zealand in Oceania.

6   The Migration Governance Indicators (MGI) is a tool based on policy inputs, which offers insights on policy levers that countries can use to develop their migration governance.

migration data and research organisation India, Migration Now, developed the Interstate Migrant Policy Index (IMPEX) in 2019 as an ex-ante policy evaluation exercise which ranks and compares the states of India (with each other) based on their migrant integration policies from a destination perspective. IMPEX evaluates existing policy measures across eight key welfare policy areas: housing, labour, education, healthcare and nutrition, child rights, political participation, social benefits and identity & registration. Iterative indices like the IMPEX can help track policy responses in the area of internal migration over time with particular attention to migrant integration and mainstreaming. A 2022 edition is awaited, which could help substantiate the prima facie analysis presented in this paper.

WAY FORWARD

While migration has not been a well-articulated policy agenda in India, the Covid19 migrant crisis triggered several disparate policy responses placing migration squarely on the policy radar. These evolving responses represent a moment of opportunity to uplift migrant households from poverty and debt traps by ensuring access to welfare,

empowering them to make informed migration choices and providing pathways for integration into urban economies. The brief analysis provided in this paper points towards mainstreaming as an appropriate policy framework for India to evolve its migration policy agenda. By steering the policy momentum towards an enhanced understanding of migration processes, reflexive policy design and an iterative approach towards intervention, India can contribute to the fulfilment of the SDGs and the LNOB agenda and bring succour to many needy households in a fractured, uncertain post-pandemic world.

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