

Significance of Rural-Urban migration in India post Liberalisation

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Abstract

Objective: Based on the Census reports this work analyses the significance of Rural-Urban migration in India since 2001. It attempts to show how rural-urban movement is the most important livelihood strategy among all the migration patterns.

Methods: This study uses the migration series data from Census of India to look into the scenario of internal labour mobility in India post liberalisation. Besides data from Census 1991, 2001 and 2011, few NSSO data have also been included in the study. Migrations categorised by distance, by direction and by sex have been studied together to find interrelationships among them. The study broadly categorises migration reasons as economic and non-economic.

Finding: The examined data reveals that since liberalisation, the population of the country has increased by 43.8% and the fraction of migrants has gone up by 10%. Over 37% of the country's population are migrants but figures could be misleading because around half of all migrants move for marital reasons. Rural to rural movements are predominant and only just over 10% of the total migration are employment/business related movements.

Application: It is noticed that people choose to move short distances within the state. Volume of intra and inter district movements is high and most of it is of rural to rural nature. Women mostly migrate short distances largely to and from rural region which primarily are for marital reasons. However whenever people move across state borders most of it are urban bound. Inter-state migrations are also more motivated by economic reasons. Larger fractions of inter-state migrations are of rural-urban nature and directly associated to work/employment/business reasons. In fact rural-urban movements are prominent when migrations for only direct economic reasons are considered.

Keywords: Rural-Urban Migration, post-Liberalisation, Urbanisation, Population, Economic Reasons, Marital Reasons.

1. Introduction

India, being a vast country, not only has the world's second largest population (1.21 billion) [1-4] but also has a reasonably high population density of 382/km² as per Census 2011. According to the estimates of United Nations [5] the Indian population has crossed the 1.3 billion mark and is likely to surpass the Chinese population by 2024. In a country populated with over 1.21 billion people, internal migration is one crucial social and economic phenomenon. The Census 2011 data shows that 453.6 million people i.e. around 37.5% of the total population are migrants. Labour mobility is an indispensable factor since India is a fast growing economy. In a developing country huge labour movements, particularly from rural to urban areas and low productivity/agricultural sector to high productivity/industrial sector, generally supplement its development and growth. However, large migration figures in case of India can be misleading as most of it is of Rural to Rural character and movements for marital reasons. Standard economic theories emphasize on the advantages of free flow of labour. Supply of cheap labour from rural areas is instrumental in establishing capitalist control over labour and that the capitalist production system derives immense benefits from migrant labour [6]. But at the same time surveys suggest short duration migration has declined indicating that the cities have become more hostile towards poor migrants as they lack skills [7]. Globally, with technological change, migration has tended to become more selective, with fewer opportunities for unskilled workers [8]. Besides, for various social/political/economic reasons, Indian cities are unwelcoming towards the in-migrants. The growing competition for limited economic opportunities lead to resistance which can be subtle sometimes but at times can be violent [9].

The increasing movement of labour, from villages to the cities and towns are now perhaps considered harmful and undesirable as the urban areas are reaching a point of saturation where it can no more accommodate unskilled and uneducated labour force. In other words, much of the urban ills are attributed to the rural-spills [10]. Usage of the phrase like “urbanisation of poverty” in economic literature itself points to the fact about how rural-urban migration is being perceived in contemporary times [11].

2. Post Liberalisation phase

The population of the country has increased from over 846.3 million in 1991 to over 1.21 billion in 2011 (a growth of 43.08%), with decadal growth rates of 21.15 % during 1991-2001 and 17.64% during 2001-2011. Migration, as fraction of population, during the same phase has gone up from 27.43% in 1991 to 30.58% in 2001 to 37.48% in 2011 (on the basis of last place of residence). Internal migration has considerably increased in the post liberalisation phase particularly in the last decade. These statistics ought to point towards the increased mobility of labour after the structural change of economy in 1991. Increased mobility of labour must be implying better reallocation of labour force. It would signify rapid industrial development, economic growth based on industrial progress and speedy urbanisation. However the rate of urbanisation in India is significantly low as compared to the other fast developing countries. In the two decades after 1991 India’s urban population has grown only by 5.5% net. During the same period Chinese urban population grew by a staggering 24.87%.

In 1991, 25.7% of the total population lived in urban places. The share of urban residents in total population increased to 27.8% in 2001 and to 31.2% in 2011. It can be mentioned here that the urban population has increased by 57.5% while there has been a rise of 75.5% in rural population, during the same two decades. Thus while it might be apparent that there has been a slight urbanisation progress, in absolute terms population in rural regions has risen far more than that in urban regions. One of the reasons for this is attributed to the dominance of rural to rural migration. Most of the migration taking place in India is found to be rural bound. Rural to rural movement is the major type of direction-wise migration, with almost half of total migration falling into this category. Even though rural to rural movements has come down since liberalisation, 49.8% is still a huge figure (Table 1). Rural-Urban migration is the second most type of migration occurring, nevertheless at 18.2% it is lower than rural-rural migration by quite a margin. Rural-Urban migration has increased by a mere 1% (as a share of total migration) during 1991 to 2011. The classic case of mass Rural-Urban labour migration in fast developing economies does not seem to fit in here. The general classical and neoclassical theories that focus on wage differentials in agricultural and manufacturing sectors seemingly cannot completely explain the migration trends in India. We also find a notable rise in urban to urban movements. This migration could be attributed to the demand for educated and skilled labour in the metropolis. People with education and technical skills move from one/smaller cities to another/larger cities for coveted or higher paying jobs.

Table 1. Post Liberalisation Direction-wise migration

Category (Direction-wise) ↓	1991	2001	2011
Rural-Rural	145,045,231 (62.5%)	171,735,606 (54.6%)	225,825,490 (49.8%)
Rural-Urban	39,909,864 (17.2%)	51,686,356 (16.4%)	82,611,203 (18.2%)
Urban-Rural	13,479,429 (5.8%)	12,999,403 (4.1%)	23,841,175 (5.2%)
Urban-Urban	26,419,838 (11.4%)	36,562,314 (11.6%)	79,318,004 (17.5%)

Source: Census India; 1991, 2001, 2011

Note: J&K is excluded in 1991 census; unclassified migration is included in total

In terms of distance clearly short distance migration (within state) is much more prominent and lesser people move across the state boundaries (long distance). Taking the figures of 2001 census (since distance-wise migration data for 2011 are not available yet) we see over 268 million people had migrated within the state while just over 41 million had crossed state borders (Table 2). This implies that 85.3% of all migrations were taking place within the state and 13.1% were inter-state movements. One simple reason for this is that people generally choose nearer destinations. But besides this language and cultural differences across states is also one factor for smaller inter-state migration. However there has been a slight increment in inter-state movements as in 1991 its share was just 11.5%.

Table 2. Inter and Intra state migrations in 1991 and 2001

Census Year	1991		2001	
	Inter State	Intra state	Inter State	Intra state
RR	7,520,876 28.2%	137,524,355 69%	11,020,974 26.8%	160,714,632 59.9%
RU	8,695,504 32.6%	31,214,360 15.7%	15,340,003 37.5%	36,346,353 13.5%
Total	26,689,595	199,198,251	41,166,265	268,219,260

Source: Census; 1991, 2001

Note: % figures represent share in total Inter/ Intra state movements (column-wise)

What is also noticed here is that as the distance increases, larger numbers of people migrate to urban agglomerations. Intra-state migration is substantially dominated by rural-rural movements but inter-state movements are more rural-urban in nature. Table 2 gives us a clear image about the inner features of Inter-State and Intra-State migrations. Further the share of rural-urban movements in inter-state category has increased (from 32.6% to 37.5%) while that of rural-rural movements has fallen (from 28.2% to 26.8%). It implies whenever migrants move across state boundaries the tendency to choose urban destinations is on the rise.

On categorising by sex, over two third of all migrants are female. Since its women and not men who widely migrate because of marriage, female migration is a huge contributor to overall migrations. A deeper inspection also shows that intra-state (short distance) and rural-rural migrations are mainly contributed by female migrants. However the reason for considerable female dominance in these two categories is commonly marital. As high as 51.1% and 40.5% of all migrations in 1991 and 2011 respectively were attributed to Rural-Rural Female migrants only (Table 3). Correspondingly male migrants outnumber female migrants, by smaller margins though, in inter-state and rural-urban categories.

Table 3. Percentage share of female migrants to total migration since 1991

Migrants↓	Year→	1991	2001	2011
All Female		72.3%	70.3%	68.9%
Rural-Rural Female		51.1%	46.3%	40.5%
Intra-State Female		64.4%	57.3%	---

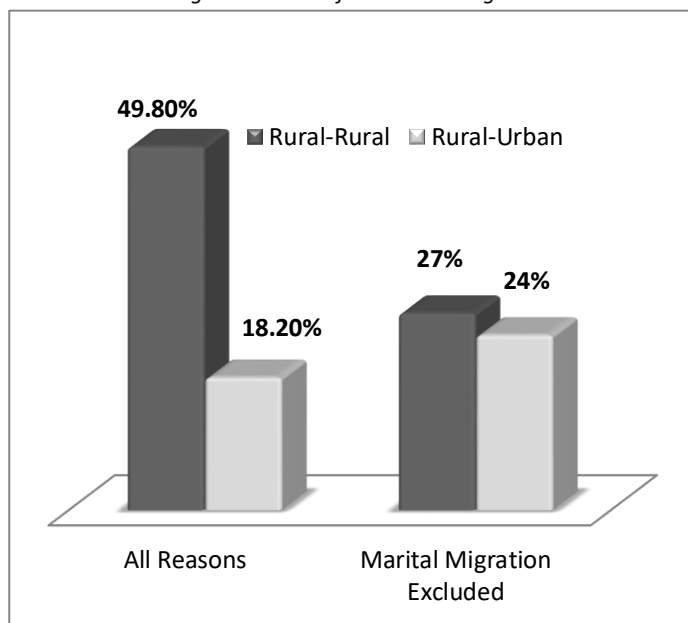
Source: Census; 1991, 2001, 2011

3. Significance of rural-urban migration

Even though mass rural-urban labour movement is not visible, the significance of this migration pattern is quite high when migration is looked upon as a direct income expanding strategy. A bulky size of the total migrations in the country has been taking place for marital reasons, 55.5% in 1991, and 46.7% in 2011. The facts that it is largely women, who migrate for marital reasons in India and that rural-rural movements are hugely dominated by women together, extensively explains one reason for rural-rural migrations being so predominant. Around 98% of migrants moving due to marriage are female.

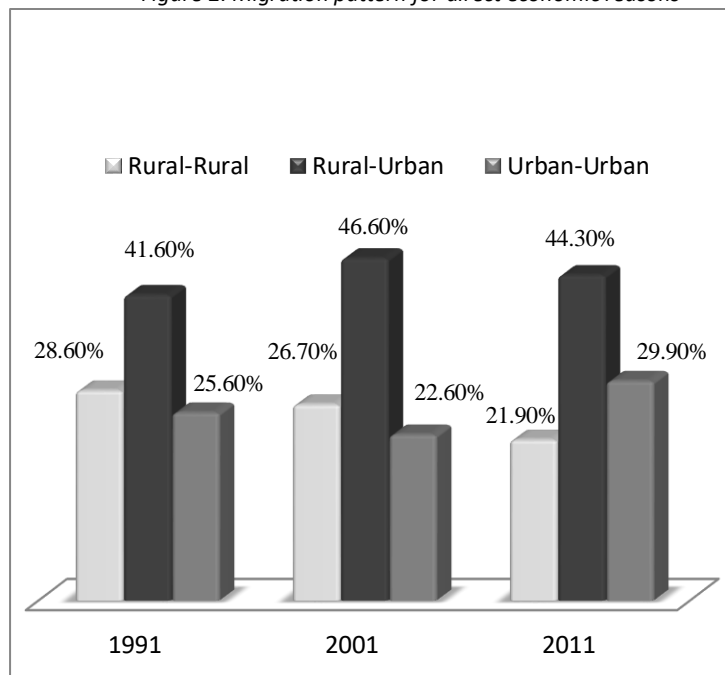
Ideally liberalisation and privatisation should have brought rapid urbanisation and rural-urban labour movement should be its crucial characteristic. The picture in India in this sense is not quite appreciable. Only just over 10% of migrations are taking place for direct economic reasons, which include work/employment and business in the census. There hasn't been any positive change in the proportion of people moving out for direct economic reasons, in the two decades after liberalisation. Ironically a slight fall is noticed. But in absolute terms the number of people moving out for direct economic reasons has risen by 89% since 1991. When migrations for direct economic reasons are taking place it is mostly male members of families who move out. Around 84% of total migrations for direct economic reasons are contributed by men. To state more categorically rural-urban male migration has persistently remained the prevalent kind of labour flow in movements due to direct economic reasons.

Figure 1. Share of RR and RU migration in 2011



Even if we exclude migration due to marital reasons rural-rural still remains the largest type of mobility (Figure 1). Rural-Urban migration however, does relatively grow in size by around 6%. When migrations due to marriage are left out, the fraction of rural-urban migrations rises to 24% from 18.2% (in 2011). Simultaneously rural-rural movement falls by almost 23% but still tops the list. Nevertheless rural-urban labour migration gains more importance if the marital migrations are not taken into consideration.

Figure 2. Migration pattern for direct economic reasons



Further if we analyse the migrations occurring due to direct economic reasons only, i.e. work/employment and business, rural-urban labour flow gains greater significance (Figure 2). When it comes to migration for direct economic reasons urban regions are the most preferred destinations. Around 74% of labour movements in this category are bound to urban agglomerations.

Most of these urban migrants come from rural areas. As high as 44% of people who migrate for direct economic reasons are rural-urban migrants. Over the years rural-rural labour movements has fallen down gradually but still around 22% of income earning migrants from rural areas are getting employed in some other rural area. It is quite significant to note here that whenever migration is an alternative livelihood strategy or a strategy of expansion of income sources, rural-urban movement is the largest pattern of labour flow.

4. Undermining of Rural Urban movements

Urban-urban migration has also climbed up in 2011 taking over rural-rural movements, even though there was a fall in 2001. As stated above one reason for this is presence and/or development of educated and technically skilled individuals in urban areas. Since these are the qualities mostly sought in the modern urban manufacturing and service industries, people with such skills and trainings move from one to another or smaller to bigger cities. This movement from smaller to larger urban areas can be expected to grow further as demand for trained/skilled/educated and technically sound workers are high in urban sectors particularly the service sector. Another reason is the underestimation of rural-urban movements and overestimation of urban to rural movements. This error in data collection can arise due to misreporting by the respondents about their last place of residence or place of birth. People may associate themselves with a nearby town or a city instead of their smaller and possibly backward village. The migrants from villages can misreport intentionally because they do not want to be associated with a rural/backward area or unintentionally because they believe the names of their villages would be unknown to the surveyor [12]. Under such circumstances the numbers of rural-urban migrants can actually be more than what is recorded and this increase takes place at the cost of urban-urban migrants.

Possibility of underestimations of rural-urban (and rural-rural) movements also arises because of large short term seasonal/cyclical migration in the country. Census or surveys, which take place at one particular time in any particular year, may fail to discover seasonal migrations which take place during other times of the year or other years. Seasonal migrations generally take place from rural agricultural sector. People, usually male members of family, migrate generally to urban destinations during the lean agricultural season or in period between sowing and harvesting. In most rural parts of the country agriculture is rain fed and they also lack non-farm sector employments. Seasonal migrations provide a means of securing employment during the slack agricultural periods [13]. The implication is that the seasonal/short duration migrants usually belong to the labour class who are either landless or land poor. Seasonal migrations can be really large, for instance in 2001 in West Bengal, Bardhaman district alone was receiving more than 500,000 seasonal migrants [14]. The 55th round of NSSO in 1999-2000 found that there were 10,872,300 temporary and seasonal workers in the country [15-16].

Another facet of people from rural areas working in urban areas is displayed by daily rural-urban commuters. Though this feature does not fall under migration but there were a total number of 8.05 million workers commuting from rural to urban areas for work in 2009-10, according to the NSSO. Another 4.37 million people were commuting in the opposite direction for work. When people choose to commute in place of moving potential rural-urban migrations are aborted. This provides us with the fact that number of people from rural areas earning livelihood in urban areas are far higher than the figures presented by migration data. Numerous urban insecurities and risks prevalent in Indian cities also discourage rural urban migrations.

5. Conclusion

Rural-urban migrations are of importance because most of it takes for direct economic reasons and more so because poorer households are involved. This type of labour movement could be a distress move or prospect enhancing move depending on the migrants. For most rural poor moving to urban agglomerations is a strategy to expand livelihood sources. For seasonal migrants it's a strategy to remain employed for most part of the year. Migrations for educational reasons are also guided by economic reasons in the long term. Thus rural-urban movements are basically directly associated with the economic activity in the country. However Indian migration pattern poses a dilemma since the rural-urban migrations, as a fraction of total migration, have grown only by 1% over two decades after liberalisation and migrations for direct economic reason has more or less stayed stagnant at a little over 10%. Perhaps this at least partially explains why the urbanisation has occurred at a slow pace in the country. On the other hand on absolute terms migration from rural to urban areas has undoubtedly increased significantly during the same period.

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