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CLEAR CUT

SHARP ANALYSIS, CLEAR VOICE

July 2026 Edition

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HOW MIGRATION

Is Redefining Cities, Economies, Families, and the Nation

MAPPING INDIA'S MIGRATION CORRIDORS

A data-backed anatomy of who moves, where they go, what they earn, and how the state is finally learning to see them

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One Nation One Ration Card and Portable Welfare

The Problem of Residence-Locked Entitlements



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Editor's *Note*

Thank you for continuing to read, question, and support Clear Cut. Every edition strengthens our belief that meaningful conversations on social development deserve both evidence and empathy.

This month, we turn our attention to migration, a subject that touches nearly every aspect of India's development story. Behind every journey is a decision that is rarely voluntary. People leave home in search of work, safety, education, or simply a better chance at life. Migration is not merely about movement; it is often a reflection of inequality, opportunity, climate stress, and public policy.

In this edition, we explore migration from multiple perspectives. Our cover story examines how migration is quietly reshaping India's economy and society, while our deep dive maps the country's major migration corridors and their implications.

We revisit Peepli Live, celebrate the extraordinary work of Meera Mahadevan for migrant children, examine portable welfare through One Nation One Ration Card, and reflect on the voices of leaders who have stood for dignity, transparency, and inclusion.

At Clear Cut, we believe development is best understood through the lives of people, not just the language of policies. We hope this edition encourages you to look beyond statistics and see the aspirations, struggles, and resilience that migration represents.

Sharp Analysis. Clear Voice.

Parash Kumar

CLEAR CUT

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M/s M S PAL ENTERPRISES

Vol.1, No.11; Total no of pages - 68

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Declaration

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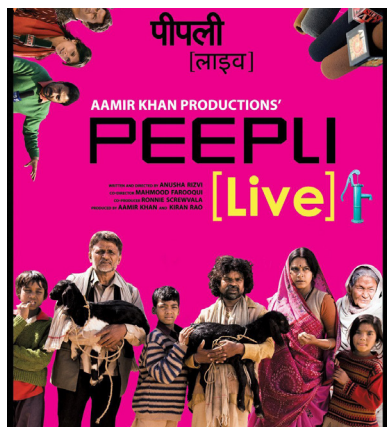




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Zojila Tunnel Breaks Through: Ladakh's Winter Isolation

On June 9, 2026, excavation teams drilling from opposite ends met inside the mountain at Zojila, marking the main breakthrough of India's most strategically critical tunnel. Union Minister Nitin Gadkari was present at the Kargil side for the final blasting. The 14-km bi-directional tunnel on NH-1, connecting Baltal to Meenamarg, will be Asia's longest bi-directional road tunnel upon completion, targeted for February 2028. Project cost exceeds ₹4,500 crore; 10 million safe man-hours logged as of April 2026. The New Austrian Tunnelling Method saved an estimated ₹5,000 crore over conventional approaches.

Zojila Pass, at 3,528 metres, remains snow-blocked 5 to 6 months annually, cutting Ladakh off by road. The tunnel reduces Baltal-Meenamarg travel from 3 hours to 15 minutes, and Srinagar-Leh from 18 hours to 6 hours. Strategically, all-weather connectivity directly strengthens Army logistics on India's western and eastern Ladakh borders. The mountain has been crossed. The work continues.



Re-NEET 2026: A Broken Exam and a Nation Watching

India's NEET-UG 2026, held on May 3, was cancelled just 9 days later on May 12, after a pre-circulated guess paper matched the actual question paper. NTA confirmed the breach; a multi-state CBI probe was launched and 13 people arrested. Over 2.27 million aspirants, many with 3 to 4 years of preparation, were invalidated overnight.

Admit cards were released June 14. No pattern changes, no re-registration; all centres and data remained unchanged. Full fee refunds assured by the Ministry of Education. PIB issued two clarifications debunking fake notices and leak rumours. Not an isolated failure. The 2024 NEET saw 63 students score a perfect 720/720, triggering Supreme Court proceedings. Root causes: organised leak networks, weak security protocols, over-centralisation. Experts demand decentralised testing, digital question randomisation, and real-time leak detection. The provisional answer key followed June 25, drawing close to 10,000 objections before the window closed June 28. With results now confirmed for July 20, the real test of reform lies less in June 21 itself than in whether that transparency holds through results and counselling.

Bharat Innovates 2026: India Takes Its Startup Story to France

On June 14, 2026, PM Narendra Modi and French President Emmanuel Macron jointly inaugurated Bharat Innovates 2026 at the Palais des Expositions de Nice. The 3-day conclave, running through June 16, brings together 120 Indian innovators, 15-plus higher education institutions, and over 500 investors including venture capital firms and global CEOs.

Spanning 13 sectors including semiconductors, space, biotechnology, and clean energy, the event received 3,000-plus deep-tech applications, shortlisting 138 startups through a three-stage process. India enters with 2.16 lakh DPIIT-recognised startups as of February 2026.

The timing carries diplomatic weight. India holds the BRICS Chairship in 2026; France holds the G7 Presidency. Both nations declared 2026 the Year of Innovation, making this conclave its centrepiece. France targets 30,000 Indian students by 2030. PM Modi positioned India as a technology provider, not merely an adopter. The real test now is converting ceremonial momentum into signed partnerships and measurable technology agreements.



MCA Unlocks CSR Funds for Social Enterprises via Stock Exchange Route

On May 27, 2026, the Ministry of Corporate Affairs amended Schedule VII of the Companies Act, 2013, via gazette notifications G.S.R. 415(E) and 416(E), allowing companies to fulfil up to 10% of mandatory CSR obligations through Zero Coupon Zero Principal (ZCZP) instruments listed on BSE and NSE's Social Stock Exchange segments.

ZCZP instruments pay no interest and return no principal; they are pure grants routed through regulated exchanges. The amendment resolves a longstanding deadlock between NPOs awaiting capital and companies lacking legal clarity on ZCZP's CSR validity. New Rule 4A creates a regulatory pipeline potentially directing ₹2,500 to 3,000 crore annually, under SEBI oversight with mandatory compliance reporting. India's total CSR expenditure reached ₹29,986 crore in FY 2023-24, drawn from companies exceeding ₹500 crore net worth, ₹1,000 crore turnover, or ₹5 crore net profit thresholds. This shifts CSR from opaque philanthropy to regulated social investment. Implementation speed, specifically how fast NPOs list and companies adopt this route, will determine real impact.



Hundreds Join 'Yoga for All' Initiative in Dehradun on International Yoga Day

Dehradun, June 21 : Marking International Yoga Day 2026, Clear Cut Magazine, in collaboration with The New Indian Express organised the “Yoga for All” initiative in Dehradun. The event witnessed the participation of hundreds of individuals from diverse backgrounds, reaffirming the growing importance of wellness, mindfulness, and holistic health in contemporary society.

Representing Clear Cut Magazine at the event, Paresh Kumar, the Editor-in-Chief joined participants in observing the occasion through guided yoga sessions and community engagement activities aimed at promoting physical and mental well-being. The “Yoga for All” initiative also highlighted the broader relevance of yoga in addressing contemporary challenges related to lifestyle diseases, mental health concerns, and community well-being. Organizers and participants alike underscored the importance of integrating wellness practices into daily life to build healthier and more resilient societies.

Kavach 4.0 on India's Busiest Corridors: Automation Meets Accountability

As of March 2026, Kavach 4.0, India's indigenous Automatic Train Protection system, covers 1,452 route kilometres across Delhi-Mumbai and Delhi-Howrah corridors, just over 2% of Indian Railways' 68,000-route-kilometre network.

The system operates across three layers: station master consoles, loco pilots, and trackside RFID units. It automatically applies emergency brakes when a train approaches a red signal or another train, removing human error from critical safety moments. It also enables SoS alerts and real-time GPS tracking. Developed under Make in India initiative, it reduces dependence on European and Japanese signalling technology.

Results are visible. Train accidents fell from 135 in 2014-15 to approximately 16 in 2025-26, a 90% reduction. The coverage gap is severe. Indian Railways carries 8 billion passenger journeys annually. The Ministry targets all high-density routes but has yet to define firm kilometre-per-year rollout targets or a transparent mechanism for public progress tracking.





India's BRICS Chairship 2026: Redrawing the Rules of Global Engagement

In 2026, India assumed the BRICS Chairship, leading a bloc representing over 40% of global population and 35% of world GDP in purchasing power parity terms. Following 2024's expansion adding Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, BRICS has grown from five nations into a broader coalition, though internal strain from divergent geopolitical alignments among members is increasing.

India's priorities include institutionalising BRICS processes, advancing local currency trade settlement, and strengthening people-to-people ties. India and Russia, bound by a Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership since 2000, remain closely aligned on BRICS architecture. Russia backed India's Chairship and consistently supports India's permanent UN Security Council bid.

India's core challenge is preventing BRICS from becoming an anti-Western bloc. New Delhi engages the West through G20, Quad, and bilateral alliances, while simultaneously advancing multipolarity through BRICS and SCO. The world's largest democracy, leading the world's most populous economic bloc, must deliver institutional outcomes, not just communiqués.

India's June Heatwave: A Climate Emergency in Slow Motion

In May 2026, IMD issued extended heatwave advisories across Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab, Bihar, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, and Andhra Pradesh through June. Temperatures hit 42 to 45°C across regions; Sri Ganganagar, Rajasthan recorded 44.5°C. In April 2026, 19 of the world's 20 hottest cities were in India, led by Bhagalpur, Talcher, and Asansol.

The health toll is structural. A CEEW (Council on Energy, Environment and Water) study found relative humidity across the Indo-Gangetic Plains rose up to 10% over the last decade, amplifying physiological stress on outdoor workers. Farm labourers, construction workers, and street vendors bear the greatest burden. Rural and peri-urban public health infrastructure remains ill-equipped for large-scale heat casualties. Climate science is unambiguous: heatwaves are becoming more frequent, intense, and prolonged. El Nino-like Pacific conditions risk suppressing southwest monsoon patterns. India has Heat Action Plans. Implementation remains inadequate and uneven. Climate projections are no longer warnings. They are operational schedules.



Namami Gange at a Crossroads: Funds Flow, But Rivers Still Struggle

Namami Gange Programme, launched in 2014 with ₹20,000 crore and extended under Phase II with ₹22,500 crore, has sanctioned 524 projects. Of these, 355 completed, 138 sewage treatment plants with combined capacity of 3,977 MLD have been set up. The Gangetic Dolphin population has increased from 3,000 in 2009 to 6,327 in the 2021-23 census.

The ecological gains are real but the baseline remains grim. India generates 72,368 MLD of sewage daily; only 20,236 MLD is treated, leaving 72% flowing untreated into rivers. In Delhi's 22-km Wazirabad-Okhla Yamuna stretch receives 19 drains carrying 58% of the river's total pollution load, with BOD (Biochemical Oxygen Demands) levels running over 40 times of the safe limit which makes Yamuna biologically dead in summer.

Governance remains fragmented across multiple agencies with no single accountable enforcement authority. Over 118 Ganga-bank towns still discharge raw sewage. ₹42,500 crore invested. Completing projects and running them are two different things. India keeps relearning this.



RISE Conclave 2026: Research, Industry, and Startups in the Same Room

The government announced RISE Conclave 2026 in Bengaluru this June, designed to bridge the gap between laboratory research and market deployment. It follows Bharat Innovates 2026 in France, signalling a coherent domestic and global innovation strategy. India's ecosystem is quantitatively strong: 2.16 lakh DPIIT-recognised startups, the world's third-largest, with growing deep-tech presence in semiconductors, space, drones, and biotech. Yet India ranks among the top five globally in scientific publications while its research-to-patent-to-product conversion rate lags significantly behind the US, China, and Israel.

RISE creates structured accountability forums where industry states needs, research institutions respond with capabilities, and policymakers align funding accordingly. The National Research Foundation, operationalised in 2023 with ₹50,000 crore over five years, provides the financial backbone. RISE is the connective tissue. But conclaves are not policies. The test is whether RISE produces funded multi-year research-industry partnerships, not panel discussions. India's demographic dividend expires within a generation.

PM Research Chair Scheme 2026: Bringing Global Expertise Back to Indian Academia

In June 2026, the Department of Higher Education opened applications for the Prime Minister Research Chair Scheme 2026, inviting distinguished Indian-origin researchers at leading global institutions to take up chair positions at Indian universities and IITs for defined terms. The goal is dual: reverse brain drain in research-intensive disciplines and raise doctoral and post-doctoral supervision quality. The need is urgent. India spends just 0.65% of GDP on research against China's 2.4%, Israel's 5.4%, and the OECD average of 2.7%. Despite producing the world's third-largest STEM graduate pool, India consistently trains talent for global institutions rather than building depth at home.

The scheme is well-conceived. Execution is the risk. Past initiatives have faltered on uncompetitive salaries, inadequate infrastructure, administrative burden, and institutional inertia that erodes returning scholars within years. For PMRC to succeed, chairs need resource authority, institutional backing, and annually reviewed outcome metrics, not end-of-term assessments.



Government e-Marketplace Crosses New Milestones: Public Procurement Goes Digital

Government e-Marketplace has onboarded over as of 13 February 2025, GeM had over 22 lakh sellers and service providers and more than 1.6 lakh government buyers. With MSMEs accounting for over gaining direct government market access previously blocked by intermediaries and tendering complexity.

GeM's transparency dividend is measurable. Dynamic pricing makes government purchase costs visible and benchmarkable, reducing procurement cost inflation and creating supplier accountability. MSMEs, SHGs, and startups structurally disadvantaged in traditional tender systems now have a regulated procurement pathway.

Structural challenges persist. Vendor complaints about delayed payments remain widespread. Grievance redressal timelines are long. The platform is built. The institutional discipline to use it is not. For MSME vendors, a ₹10 lakh order means nothing if payment arrives in 180 days. Payment timeline compliance must become a non-negotiable metric.

MEERA MAHADEVAN

DARING TO CARE—FOR MIGRANT CHILDREN



Dr. Deepti Priya Mehrotra

In March 1969, huge pavilions were being constructed at Gandhi Darshan, for an exhibition honouring Gandhi's birth centenary. A young member of the Centenary Planning Committee, Meera Mahadevan, noted the plight of children at the site. Infants lay in the flying dust, toddlers wandered around cement-mixers and sledgehammers, older children helped their parents fetch and carry, lay bricks. Construction labour families from rural Rajasthan were put up in makeshift jhuggis.

Struck by the irony of the situation,

A refugee, writer, and social reformer, Meera Mahadevan transformed personal loss into a lifelong mission for migrant children, founding Mobile Creches and pioneering child-care systems that continue to impact millions across India.

Meera Mahadevan soon set up a crèche. It was rudimentary, in a tent, with a charpoy, one helper, and some toys. Called Kasturba Shishu Vihar, this became a refuge for children of all ages. They played here, and received a smattering of education.

When construction wound up at Gandhi Darshan, workers moved to another site, and needed a crèche there. Within the year, Meera Mahadevan, joined by educationists Mina Swaminathan, Devika Singh, Kumkum Ghosh, Manju Vaish and their ilk, registered an organization: Mobile Creches.

Mobile Creches is today well-known as a pioneer, its work sustained over the decades. At the start, everything was improvised: cradles of tough cotton fabric tied onto wooden stands; games and toys made from sticks, stones, sand, bricks, wastepaper, old magazines and cartons. Storytelling, songs, counting, and simple nutritious meals were introduced. Systems crystallized. By 1971, ten daycare centres were in place. In 1972, Mobile Creches-Bombay was launched.

Meera Mahadevan and her colleagues lobbied with building contractors, some of whom agreed to meet part-cost of creches. Mobile Creches planted

the idea of daycare in the hard soil of state departments—Ministries of Labour, Education, Health, Housing. The organisation had created a model for high-quality daycare, and they wanted it to be replicated at scale. Influenced by Mobile Creches, the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) was launched in 1975, and currently runs some 14 lakh Anganwadi.

Meera Mahadevan began from scratch, and laid the first bricks. The foundations have stood the test of time. Having volunteered with Mobile Creches, I recall their creches as warm, vibrant and creative; and remain in awe of the crèche “Didis”, who teach,

medicate, feed, soothe, sing, dance, play, sew, sweep, wash, cook, conduct meetings, counsel parents—8 hours a day, 6 days a week. Infants and pre-school children are with them for 8 hours, older children after school hours.

In an art exhibition called “*Building Dreams*,” children showed a beautiful mural made with material from construction sites—bajri, broken tiles and, bits of wood. A visitor noted, ‘Say the word mother and they draw a woman breaking stones—they don’t miss even the nose ring. Ask them where they came from and they draw fields and also show a train.’

Meera Jacob Mahadevan (1929-77)

Meera Mahadevan lurks in every crèche, a friendly ghost. Colleagues knew her as a 'woman of warm responses and rich imagination'. Indeed she was an exceptional person—with an unusual life-story.

Meera Mahadevan's birth-name was Miriam Jacob Mhendekar. A Bene Israeli Jew, she grew up in Karachi, a secure, carefree childhood with several siblings. Her brother Daniel recalls Miriam as a very creative girl who sang, acted and played music. They were part of a close-knit community of 2,500 Jews, migrants from rural Konkan, employed in Karachi in

railways, civil services, oil mills etc. They spoke Urdu and English, celebrated multiple festivals, savored mixed cuisines. With the founding of Israel in 1948, however, a wave of anti-Semitism disrupted their peaceful life. Jews were attacked, their synagogue looted. Miriam's family, like many others, fled to Bombay with few belongings.

Miriam felt disoriented, a refugee. Her parents, Aaron and Shegulla Mhendekar, were unable to find employment. Pulling herself together, she found work to support the family. They debated shifting to Israel. She clearly opted to stay on in India. Then, she fell in love and decided to marry — a Hindu. The consequences were severe—Miriam was excommunicated by the Bene Israel community. Even more traumatic, her family disowned her, cutting off contact forever.

Miriam changed her name, keeping only 'Jacob'—sparingly used. The couple relocated to Delhi. Her husband T.K. Mahadevan was a journalist, Gandhian, and idealistic. Although happy in her new life, memories lurked beneath the surface, gnawed at her heart. She missed familiar faces, and experienced a sense of irreparable loss. Once again she was displaced, a migrant with no possibility of return.

Meera joined B.A. in English Literature at Delhi University, and began writing short stories, and a novel. Her novel *Apna Ghar* was published in 1961, and later translated into English with a different title:

Shulamith (Arnold-Heinneman, 1975). This was the first-ever novel centered on the Bene Israelis. Its theme, storyline and characters were based on people and places she knew intimately. Shulamith's family migrates from Karachi to Bombay; her husband, and later son, migrate to Israel, while she stays back. Shulamith expresses a view that is actually Meera's stance: "The birth of Israel spelt misery to thousands of people. Thousands of Arabs have been forced into becoming refugees. I feel it is not right". Further, 'I can't imagine having to leave this house and this country. I don't want to be a refugee again.' But Shulamith is lonely, depressed and ill; Michael returns, but she dies soon after.

The novel portrays Meera's inner conflicts, as when a Bene Israeli woman married to a Hindu muses: "...there is no complete solution anywhere. You find a husband of your choice outside the community but for this you must renounce your family, your religion and the whole tradition within which you have grown up". Even as Meera grappled with a sense of exile from family and nation, she saw that her existential crisis reflected wider politico-cultural currents. In naming her own pain, she was able to link deeply with others' suffering.

Slowly but surely, Meera Mahadevan moved towards a different way of being, building wider connections with humanity. Often she helped her husband edit the journal "*Gandhi Marg*". She read proofs and compiled the index for a book, published in 1967, with writings of leading scholars on the contemporary relevance of Gandhian thought, non-violence, satyagraha, ahimsa.



Her Life's Work: With Migrant Labour Children

From 1969 onwards, Mobile Creches was Meera's driving passion. The organization expanded rapidly. Launching Mobile Creches in Bombay was an interesting occasion to return to the city—with a new kind of family, a new community, replacing her lost family and community. The same year (1972) she also co-founded Action India, which worked initially with migrant labour in Mehrauli.

Meera was acutely sensitive to the suffering of construction workers. Employment was precarious, payment minimal, housing squalid, with no access to toilets, hospitals, schools. Laws on migratory labour, minimum wages, health facilities, were routinely flouted. She was tempted to begin organizing construction labor to demand their rights. But she and her colleague knew that at any whiff of agitation politics, contractors would throw them out and close down the creches. This they could not risk. Strategically, they began running adult education classes. Workers learned literacy, and discussed concerns such as ration cards, labour laws, women's rights, child marriage, health, alcoholism. Mobile Creches' drama troupe, Lokdoot, staged plays on critical issues for the workers. The community's language, folklore, puppetry, phads (story-scrolls), songs were incorporated, in a culturally rich process.

In the mid-70s, Delhi government demolished lakhs of inner-city jhuggis. Most affected were migrants with casual employment in the informal sector—casual labour, domestic servants, hawkers, weavers, riksha-pullers,

scavengers. Trans-located to remote resettlement colonies, these hard-working people desperately needed daycare facilities for children. Mobile Creches responded, setting up creches in several resettlement colonies.

Meera Mahadevan and her team faced endless challenges. Understanding that childcare is a skilled job, requiring well-trained professional staff, they developed pre-service and in-service training. Funds were strenuously raised, for material costs and dignified salaries, through grants, donations, sale of children's artwork, music programs, film premieres. Although Mobile Creches set the template for India's ICDS program, the state pays its frontline childcare workers a mere "honorarium." The diluted state version runs its centres (Anganwadi) half-day, thus failing to provide daycare, necessary for children of working parents. Mobile Creches continues tirelessly to advocate for full-day Anganwadis, with well-paid staff. Its own high-quality creches in Delhi, Bombay and Pune, still set the standards.

Volunteering with Mobile Creches, off and on during the 1980s, was a marvelous learning experience. I found the space flowing with creative energy and genuine affection. Children—from tough backgrounds—were wonderfully spontaneous, curious, active, and engaged. The staff was outstanding, the systems well-honed.

Meera Mahadevan's memory lurked in the background. I could not meet her in person. For, she had passed away — in 1977. Just 42 years old. She was buried in the Jewish Cemetery at Humayun Road, New Delhi.



A Pillar of Fire

Meera's grand-nephew, 15-year old Benjamin Cohen Jacob, writes about her after searching the net and interviewing his grandfather – Meera's brother Daniel Aaron Jacob Mehndrekar, who moved to Israel long back: '...her special qualities, such as humanity, leadership, perseverance, care for fellowmen, are qualities that move me. I see in her a heroic figure, raw courage and determination. By the force of her personality she served as a pillar of fire for those who followed. She looked between religious differences and saw what others failed to see; pluralism and tolerance. Not only India but the world needs people like Meera like they need air to breathe'.

Benjamin's words, across the oceans, connect threads across generations, helping heal the pain of his ancestors. He adds: 'I believe that every person has the strength to bring about a change. Meera believed in her vision and she a "small woman" was able to influence a large number of good people'.

Shulamith, in Meera Mahadevan's novel, could not bear the thought of leaving her home with its big peepul tree. Meera left home, even though she could hardly bear the loss. She found the strength and wisdom to make new homes, where tens of thousands of children felt welcome through the day. Each daycare center a home away from home, became safe space for her too.

Mobile Creches continues to run its signature daycare centres. It advocates for laws and policies protecting rights of migrant labour and their children, trains ICDS functionaries, and capacitates

various organisations who run daycare centres at workplaces and neighbourhoods. It is active in networks of workers, women workers, creche workers, and alert to the politics of women's unpaid work.

In 1992 Brinda Singh, then chairperson of Mobile Creches, noted, 'It's hard to tell how much good we've done. These women and their children are like nomads. But I think we've probably touched the lives of over 200,000 children.' The cumulative impact made by this one organization is out of all proportion to its size. By 2025-26, Mobile Creches has directly reached over a million children.

Yet the big picture on childcare and child health is still bleak, as detailed in the well-researched report *State of the Young Child in India* (Mobile Creches, 2020). And there are ever-new challenges, like the childcare crisis among women gig workers in Delhi NCR (see *Navigating Work and Care*, Mobile Creches, 2026). In the absence of political will and a responsive policy regime, Meera Mahadevan's vision remains unfulfilled, for millions of children still lack the care they deserve.

About the Author:

Dr Deepti Priya Mehrotra is a political scientist, teacher, and consultant with specialization on gender, education and social issues. She writes in English and Hindi, has authored several books including acclaimed biographies of Irom Sharmila, Gulab Bai, stories of single mothers, and a history of street theatre in India.

Views expressed are personal and do not reflect the official position of Clear Cut Magazine



Skyline & Beyond

Quiet Stories Behind Loud Cities



Sonali Maheshwari

Migration & Urbanisation: Movement, Opportunity and the Search for Belonging

When we hear the words migration and urbanisation, our imagination often moves towards a familiar picture — a worker leaving a village, moving to a city in search of employment, living in an informal settlement, and becoming part of the urban workforce.

This picture is real. It represents the lived reality of

millions. But it is only one dimension of a much larger story. The story of migration and urbanisation is ultimately the story of human ambition.

People move because they imagine a different future. They move because they seek opportunity, education, dignity, safety, stability, and a better quality of life. Cities grow because they absorb these aspirations and transform them into economic activity, cultural diversity, and collective progress.

Yet, as the world becomes increasingly urban, a deeper question emerges: are cities only becoming larger, or are they becoming more inclusive spaces where people can truly belong?



Migration Is Not One Story

Migration is often spoken about as if it is a single phenomenon. But movement of people has many forms, and each carries a different reality. It changes families before it changes cities. We discuss migrant workers, but rarely the families they leave behind. Migration reshapes parenting, caregiving, gender roles, childhood, ageing, and emotional relationships. The biggest migration impact may happen thousands of kilometres away from the city.

A young person moving from a small town to a metropolitan city for a technology job, a construction worker migrating seasonally for livelihood, a student leaving home for education, or a family relocating due to climate pressures are all migrants. Their circumstances are different, but the underlying search has similarities. They are all moving towards a possibility.

Over time, migration has evolved. Today, people move not only because they have to, but also because they aspire to. Students move for education.

Professionals move for specialised opportunities. Families move for better services and quality of life. Entrepreneurs move towards ecosystems that enable innovation.

Migration today includes seasonal migration, circular migration, skilled mobility, climate-related movement, and increasingly, digitally enabled forms of work that allow people to participate in urban economies without always physically relocating. This is why migration cannot only be viewed as a sign of crisis. It is also a strategy of resilience. Families migrate to diversify income, reduce vulnerability, invest in education, and create better opportunities for the next generation.

The difference lies not only in why people move, but in the kind of support systems they carry with them. A highly skilled migrant may struggle with identity, loneliness, and adaptation, while a low-income migrant may face these challenges along with insecure housing, uncertain income, and limited access to essential services. The journey of adjustment may be common, but the ability to navigate it is unequal.



Cities: Where Dreams Meet Systems

Urbanisation has historically been associated with economic transformation. Cities bring together markets, infrastructure, institutions, innovation, and employment opportunities.

According to the United Nations, more than 56% of the world's population currently lives in urban areas, and this share is projected to reach nearly 70% by 2050. India is also undergoing a major urban transition. The World Bank estimates that India's urban population could reach around 50% of the country's population by 2050. This transformation presents immense opportunity. But it also creates a paradox.

If cities are centres of opportunity, why do many people who migrate to cities continue to struggle with poverty and insecurity? The answer lies in the difference

between urban growth and inclusive urbanisation.

The Invisible City Within the City

A city may grow economically while many of its residents remain excluded from the benefits of that growth. Modern cities often contain multiple realities existing together. One city has global connectivity, formal employment, advanced infrastructure, technology, and investment.

Another city exists alongside it, shaped by informal work, insecure housing, limited access to healthcare, and uncertain livelihoods. The people who build cities are often the people who struggle most to access them.

Urbanisation creates a new form of loneliness. We notice the delivery arriving, the building getting constructed, the streets being maintained, and services being provided. But we often do not see the person behind these everyday

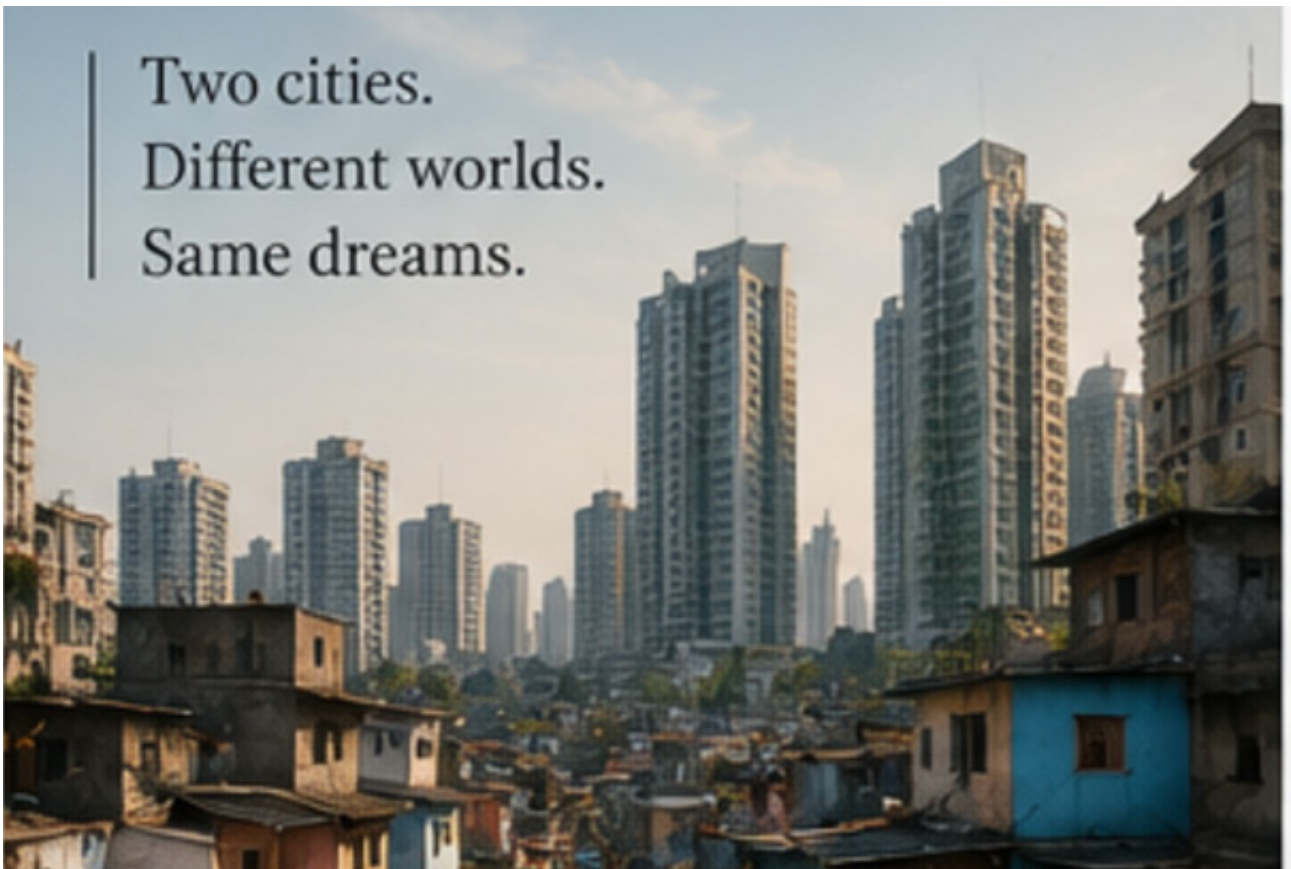
urban functions — where they live, how they manage healthcare, what happens during emergencies, or how their families cope. Physical density may not be the concern, but emotional distance.

Urbanisation therefore carries its own paradox: cities depend on migrants as contributors, but do not always recognise them as citizens. People can be surrounded by millions and still experience isolation.

The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) highlights that a large share of India's workforce continues to remain in informal employment, meaning millions of workers participate in economic activity without stable employment conditions or comprehensive social security.

Urban poverty, therefore, is not always visible poverty. It can exist alongside mobile phones, digital payments, daily wages, and access to markets, while basic security remains uncertain.

Two cities.
Different worlds.
Same dreams.



A moment that changed the migration conversation



Movement Has Visible Gains and Invisible Costs

Migration is often measured through what is visible i.e. increased income, employment opportunities, payments, and economic contribution. However, the transitions beneath it remain harder to measure.

Leaving behind familiar environments means leaving behind social networks, community support, cultural familiarity, and informal systems of care. For many migrants, especially those living away from families, urban life brings not only opportunity but also isolation and uncertainty. For some, migration expands possibilities. For others, it creates a constant negotiation between survival and belonging. The cost of movement is not always captured in economic indicators.

migration but still struggle to feel rooted. A family may gain financial stability but experience emotional distance. A city may gain a workforce but fail to create a sense of inclusion. The real question is not only whether migration improves economic conditions, but whether it enables people to build a meaningful life in the places they move to.

COVID-19: A Moment That Changed the Migration Conversation

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the migration conversation globally. For India, the pandemic was a reminder that migration cannot be understood only through employment numbers. Behind every migrant worker is a person connected to a family, community, and future aspiration.

asked: “How do we manage migration?” During the pandemic, cities were forced to confront another question: “How much do we depend on migration?”

The large-scale movement of migrant workers back to their home regions revealed a reality that was often invisible. Urban economies were deeply dependent on migrant labour, but many migrants lacked security within those cities. The crisis highlighted gaps around housing, social protection, healthcare access, and portability of essential services.

The International Labour Organization estimated that around 1.6 billion informal workers globally were significantly impacted by the economic disruption caused by Covid-19. The pandemic also reinforced that migration is not simply movement from one place to another. It is a relationship between cities and the communities connected to them.

A person may earn more after Before the pandemic, cities often

Technology and the New Geography of Mobility

Technology is reshaping the very nature of mobility. Earlier, opportunity often required physical movement: Move to the city to access work and improve livelihood. Today, digital platforms, remote work, online education, digital payments, and technology-enabled services are creating new possibilities where opportunities can travel without people always needing to relocate.

This is changing the geography of movement. However, technology also creates new questions. Does digital access automatically mean

equal access? Does flexibility always translate into security?

Platform-based work can create new opportunities, but without adequate protections it can also create new forms of vulnerability. The future of mobility may not only be about people moving towards cities. It may also be about ensuring that opportunities reach beyond cities.

What Other Cities Teach Us

Around the world, different approaches show that urbanisation becomes more successful when people remain at the centre of planning. Singapore's urban planning experience demonstrates the importance of integrated

development — connecting housing, transport, infrastructure, and community services. Its lesson is that a city is not only a collection of buildings; it is a system designed around everyday life.

Medellín in Colombia offers another perspective through its social urbanism approach. By investing in public transport, social infrastructure, community spaces, and previously excluded neighbourhoods, it demonstrated that inclusion requires bringing opportunity closer to people.

The common lesson from these examples is simple: Urban development is not only about creating spaces; it is about creating belonging.



India's Urban Future: From Absorption to Inclusion

India has taken important steps towards more inclusive urban systems through affordable housing initiatives, livelihood programmes, public transport expansion, digital service delivery, and portability of social protection.

Initiatives around affordable urban housing, urban livelihoods, street vendor support programmes, and portability of welfare benefits reflect a growing recognition that migrants and informal workers need access to urban citizenship. Yet, significant gaps remain.

The scale of India's urbanisation makes implementation complex. Challenges around rental housing,

informal employment, access to services, and migrant inclusion continue. The gap between policy intent and lived reality remains visible.

The next stage of India's urban journey requires moving beyond the idea of cities as economic engines alone. Cities must become ecosystems where people can participate, contribute, and belong.

The Larger Reflection

Migration is not simply a movement of people; it is a movement of aspirations, skills, and human potential. The challenge is not to stop migration. People will continue to move because societies continue to change. The success of a city is not only reflected in its skyline. It is reflected in the lives of the people who create that skyline.

So, the deeper food for thought lies with:

Can the person who builds the city afford to live in it?
Can a migrant family access opportunity with dignity?
Can a migrant family find not only employment, but belonging?

About The Author:

Sonali Maheshwari is a development sector practitioner and thought contributor with 17 years of experience in designing and advancing programmes at the intersection of policy, systems, and partnerships. Her work centers on bridging policy intent with on-ground impact through evidence-driven programme design and cross-sector collaboration.

Views expressed are personal and do not reflect the official position of Clear Cut Magazine



Aruna Roy:

The Civil Servant Who Walked Out to Build India's Right to Know



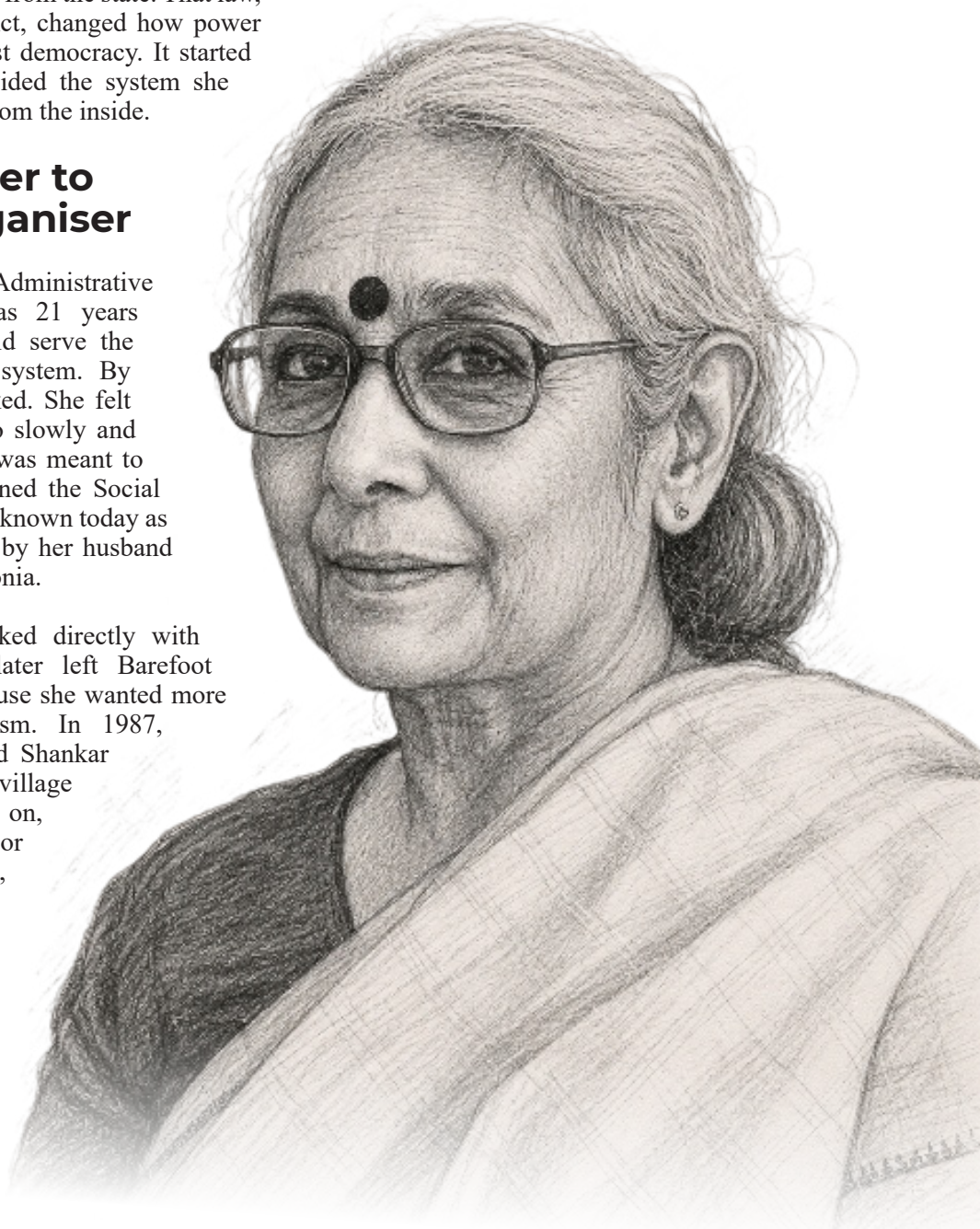
Ayushman Meena

Aruna Roy quit a secure government job in 1975 to live in a mud hut in rural Rajasthan. Three decades later, India had a law that let any citizen demand answers from the state. That law, the Right to Information Act, changed how power works in the world's largest democracy. It started with one woman who decided the system she served could not fix itself from the inside.

From IAS Officer to Grassroots Organiser

Roy joined the Indian Administrative Service in 1968. She was 21 years old and believed she could serve the country from within the system. By 1974, that belief had cracked. She felt the bureaucracy moved too slowly and too far from the people it was meant to help. She resigned and joined the Social Work and Research Centre, known today as Barefoot College, founded by her husband Sanjit "Bunker" Roy in Tilonia.

For nine years, Roy worked directly with rural communities. She later left Barefoot College too, this time because she wanted more room for political activism. In 1987, along with Nikhil Dey and Shankar Singh, she moved to the village of Devdungri. Three years on, the trio founded the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, or MKSS, an organisation built to fight for fair wages and government accountability among rural labourers and farmers.



Building MKSS Without Outside Money

MKSS never registered as a society or a trade union. It had no membership fees and no formal constitution. It ran on contributions from volunteers and supporters alone, and it refused funding from governments or corporations. Roy explained the reasoning behind that choice directly. She pointed out that “a funded movement is limiting” and invoked Gandhi’s principle that anyone fighting their own people must never be open to the charge that their battle is bankrolled by vested interests.

That discipline shaped everything MKSS did next. While investigating unpaid wages for rural workers, the organisation

found gaps and inconsistencies in local government records. In 1994, MKSS began holding public hearings where those records were read aloud and checked against what villagers actually knew to be true. The mismatches were glaring. Out of those hearings came a simple, radical demand: ordinary citizens needed the legal right to see government documents for themselves.

The Road to the RTI Act

That demand grew into a national campaign. Roy described the philosophy behind it in stark terms, saying decisions affecting millions of people get made by a narrow few, often outside Parliament or even the Cabinet, and that MKSS believes the street functions as its

Parliament and its policy room. The campaign pulled in lawyers, journalists, academics and retired judges. Justice PB Sawant, a former Supreme Court judge, helped draft the law itself.

Parliament passed the Right to Information Act in 2005. The law gives Indian citizens the right to request records from public authorities, who must respond within 30 days in most cases. It has since been used to file an estimated eight million applications a year. It has also been credited with exposing major corruption cases, including the 2G spectrum scam and irregularities tied to the Commonwealth Games. Roy served on India’s National Advisory Council in 2004-06 and again in 2010-13, a body that helped shape both the RTI Act and what later became MGNREGA.



MGNREGA and the Right to Work

Roy did not stop at transparency. She and MKSS pushed for a legal guarantee of rural employment, work that fed directly into the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, passed in 2005. The law promises a hundred days of guaranteed unskilled manual work each year to rural households that want it. Roy has been clear that this campaign succeeded only because economists joined the fight alongside activists, noting that figures including Jean Drèze, Jayati Ghosh and Prabhat Patnaik used fiscal arguments to counter the government's repeated claim that there was no money for the scheme.

She extended the same organising model to the “Right to Food” movement and later to the “Pension Parishad”, where she lobbied for a universal pension for India's elderly to be included in the national budget.

A Movement Built on Personal Relationships

Roy often credits the people she organised alongside, not just the laws that resulted. She has spoken at length about Naurti, a Dalit wage worker she met decades ago who became a literacy advocate, a labour leader, a computer operator, and eventually a sarpanch. Their partnership produced a landmark 1983 Supreme Court ruling on minimum wages, *Sanjit Roy vs the Government of Rajasthan*, built on Articles 14 and 23 of the Constitution. Roy has described her as an extremely courageous woman with whom she remains friends and equals to this day.

This emphasis on equality inside the movement was deliberate. Roy has said that participatory structures only work if leaders are willing to listen and accept dissent, and that reaching consensus always requires giving something up.



Recognition and Continuing Work

Roy received the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership in 2000, the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Award for Public Administration in 2010, and a spot on Time magazine's list of the 100 most influential people in the world in 2011. In December 2024, the BBC named her to its 100 Women list. The same year, she published her memoir, "The Personal is Political: An Activist's Memoir," which examines the tension between activism and family life that she has carried for decades.

She remains President Emeritus of the National Federation of Indian Women and continues to work through the School for Democracy, which she co-founded in 2003. She also represented MKSS on the steering committee of the Open Government Partnership, an international coalition of governments and civil society groups, from its founding in 2011 until 2014.

On the question of dissent in Indian democracy today, Roy has not softened her position. She has argued plainly that free speech is the most important right that has eroded over the past several years, and that civil society must keep fighting to protect public space for protest. She has also pointed to a 2018 Supreme Court win, when MKSS successfully filed a public interest litigation to regain access to Jantar Mantar in Delhi, a traditional site for public protest that authorities had shut off. For Roy, that fight was about more than one location. It was about whether ordinary citizens still had a place to be physically heard.

Why Her Work Still Matters

Aruna Roy's career offers a rare example of a policy outcome built entirely from the ground up. The RTI Act and MGNREGA did not begin in a ministry. They began in village hearings in Rajasthan, where ordinary workers read government records aloud in public and asked, simply, why the numbers did not match what they knew to be true. Roy turned that question into a constitutional right that now belongs to over a billion people. For a magazine series on policy champions, her story is a reminder that the most lasting institutional change in India's recent history did not come from the top. It came from a mud hut in Devdungri, and from people who refused to stop asking questions.





One Nation One Ration Card and Portable Welfare

The Problem of Residence-Locked Entitlements



Subhanshu Jaiswal

India's welfare policies have been based on a simple yet incorrect premise that people stay where they're born for decades. Most welfare schemes were designed around fixed residences, and not on a individual citizen. This model

worked in a less mobile society, but is becoming increasingly at odds with today's India, which sees millions of people moving annually for various reasons including employment, education, and improved opportunities.

One of the largest social protection programmes in India is the Public Distribution System (PDS) which best exemplifies this paradox. The National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013, provides for distribution of subsidised food grains under ration cards to almost 80 crore beneficiaries.

But until recently, a Bihar ration card was virtually not accepted in Gujarat, Delhi or Maharashtra. In a country, as India has more than 5.4 crore internal migrants, according to the 2011 Census, the seasonal labourers, construction workers, domestic workers and other non-regular workers who went from one bordering state to another, often found themselves without any access to food security the moment they moved across the state border.

The people who were the most vulnerable to economic insecurity were the least likely to be able to receive welfare services. In August 2019, the government launched the One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC) scheme to fix this structural flaw, and it has been one of the biggest initiatives in India to achieve portable welfare.

How ONORC Works: Making Food Security Portable!

ONORC is based on a straightforward, but powerful principle that welfare should go with the person, not the place. The scheme has 3 technological pillars. Firstly, the Aadhaar seeding makes the beneficiary's biometric identity a unit of entitlement instead of the address, which is the default unit of entitlement. Secondly, the electronic Point of Sale (ePoS) devices at Fair Price Shops (FPS) are used to verify beneficiaries using their fingerprint or iris scan. Thirdly, the Integrated Management of Public Distribution System (IM-PDS) has been designed as connecting state databases to a common national database.

It's easy to do. In India, a migrant worker can go to any

ePoS setup ration shop and can say a word to get the food grains as per his/her entitlements. The transaction is automatically captured and offset with their state of origin's allocation.

Partially portable is one of the most innovative features of ONORC. A migrant worker can pick up his/her portion of food grains at the destination whereas family members who stayed back at the village can go to the ration shop at the village to collect the remaining portion. Such flexibility is important to meet the needs of migrant families in split households.

The government also launched the Mera Ration mobile application in 13 languages to make the application more accessible, giving beneficiaries the ability to find the nearest Fair Price Shops, see their transactions history and entitlements.



Rapid Expansion and Significant Achievements

The implementation of ONORC accelerated dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic. With millions of migrant workers stuck far from home during lockdowns, the need to take a more comprehensive approach to the issue of welfare was clearly made evident.

ONORC started in four pilot states, in August 2019, and spread to all 36 states & UTs by mid-2022, Assam being the last state to join. Today, the programme is implemented with over 20 crores of ration cards and nearly 80 crores beneficiaries in more than five lakhs of Fair Price Shops.

Technological infrastructure of the scheme has also improved a lot. Almost 80 per cent of cards of the NFSA ration cards have been Aadhaar-linked and more than 97 per cent of Fair Price Shops are now having biometric ePoS. Ever since its inception, ONORC has been handling over 124 crore portability transactions, which translates to some 3 crore transactions per month on average.

The effect is more than just in numbers. In the pandemic alone, over 24 crore portability transactions were made possible to get food security to those migrants who were stranded away from their home state. Research carried out by the states with a greater number of early adopters, like Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Rajasthan, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh, showed that beneficiaries welcomed the additional freedom of choice and greater

responsibilities given to the ration dealers.

Note that non-migrant populations also have benefited from ONORC. However, earlier the beneficiaries had to rely on a particular dealer who often was a monopoly in a locality. The element of competition has arisen with portability, allowing people to select the ration shop with the better performance.

Also, digitisation has helped to enhance transparency. Aadhaar authentication and e-keeping the records has minimized duplicate beneficiaries and ghost ration card in PDS leakages.

Why the Scheme Is Still Falling Short

Coverage is not ONORC's problem, its biggest challenge is usage at the immense scale at which it operates. The scheme, which was designed for long-distance inter-state migrants, is still not being used to its full potential by them.

Most of the portability transactions are intra-state, intra-district instead of inter-state, according to researchers. That many migrants still have difficulties accessing the system is a sign that there are still additional obstacles.

One of these is the use of technology. Manual labourers might face problems during biometric authentication as their fingerprint might get damaged after years of working as manual labourer. Often rural ration shops have weak internet connectivity, which is detrimental to a system

which is entirely dependent on real time verification.

The field study highlighted that despite the awareness of ONORC among the migrant workers at brick kilns, only 70 per cent of them had heard of ONORC, 50 per cent had tried to use portability and only 59 per cent had succeeded. This shows a significant awareness / access barrier.

There is also some inconsistencies in awareness. Many migrants simply don't understand that they have other states' ration cards that they can use outside their home state, or that they can ask for an unfamiliar benefit of their local dealers.

Administrative incentives result in yet another issue. Immediate food grains distribution is the responsibility of destination states and reimbursement/reconciliation with source states may take a longer time. This sets a mild discouragement for the local dealers to enjoyably enter the market with the beneficiaries.

There are also new compliance requirements that pose risks. The mandatory e-KYC verification processes of recent years may end up excluding those targeted by ONORC. Excluding a verification deadline can impact benefits and may be a disproportionate effect on mobile and under-documented households.

There has also been concerns due to privacy issues. Technological failures can lead to a loss of access and thus result in deprivation of a fundamental right, for access is greatly dependent on biometric authentication.

Beyond Food Security: Building a Portable Welfare State

The role of ONORC is so much more than distributing rations. It provides a design for rebooting the whole welfare structure in India.

There are already several welfare schemes in operation in India, such as LPG subsidy and health insurance (Ayushman Bharat). Meanwhile the e-Shram portal is building a comprehensive database of workers not in the organised sector which could in the future help with portable pensions, maternity benefits and employment programmes.

However, extending portability to other schemes will not be easy. For instance, MGNREGA provides jobs with gram panchayats and worksites in the area. To make employment portable, tools need to be reworked at the local level, not just simply the databases.

Likewise, verifying pension and disability schemes is a more complicated process than verifying food distribution. The risk is that, while food security portability is a successful experiment, it is challenging to do in other areas.

Making Portability Truly Work

The second step in ONORC should be institutional changes, not technological innovations.

First, it should be clear that destination states will be compensated in a timely fashion, which would prevent the local dealers from having a vested interest in discouraging beneficiaries from coming from elsewhere. Second is that India desperately needs strong backup systems like one-time passwords, offline tokens or manual override registers to those with weak biometrics.

Third, Local awareness creation should be done directly in the labour contractors, railway stations, bus stands and the village panchayats in the migrant population. If the intended beneficiaries are unaware of technology, then it is not going to work for them.

Last, a few more schemes should be incrementally extended to the portability principle. If ONORC is to mark the beginning of a wider process, it will be crucial to implement portable pensions or maternity benefits to determine if this is the case.

One Nation One Ration Card has achieved a big achievement. It's removed a welfare benefit from a certain address and linked that to someone. This signifies a shift in the concept of welfare from living in a house to citizens focused welfare.

The scheme is also a good reminder of one important point, however the solution to social exclusion is not technological. The need for interoperable databases is important, but not enough. Trust, awareness, administrative coordination and institutional flexibility are also vital.

It will not be software systems that will decide the fate of portable welfare of India in the future. It will be based on the ability of the state to establish institutions which acknowledge a simple fact of the twenty first century India – people move and their rights must move too. The concept of a reform of ration distribution may eventually be the basis of a truly mobile welfare state, which moves with citizens, wherever they go.

About the Author:

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SURAT



Tanmay J Urs

A CITY BUILT BY MIGRANTS



Ask most people what Surat is known for, and they will say diamonds, or silk, or perhaps the fact that it is one of India's cleanest cities. Almost nobody will say the real answer: Surat is, more than anything else, a city built entirely by people who came from somewhere else. At various points over the last 5 decades, migrants have made up close to 58 to 60% of the city's total population. It means that for most of Surat's modern history, the majority of people walking its streets were not born there (IIMB, n.d.; The Migration Story, 2026). That is not a side note in Surat's story. It is the story.

The City That Outsiders Built

Surat handles close to 90 to 92% of the world's rough diamond cutting and polishing,

and produces roughly 25 million metres of processed fabric and 30 million metres of raw fabric every day. It supplies to more than 90% of India's polyester (Historyrise, 2025; Scribd, n.d.). Neither industry was built by Surat's original residents. The textile boom traces back to migrants from Calcutta and Rajasthan, who arrived for the city's convenient location between Ahmedabad and Mumbai and built the textile houses that defined the local economy for decades (Historyrise, 2025). The diamond trade followed a similar script. It was largely built and sustained by Saurashtra Patels, a migrant community from the Kathiawad region of Gujarat who arrived from the 1960s onward and turned Surat into the world's diamond-cutting capital (CiteSeerX, n.d.).

At the height of this growth, researchers studying Surat's diamond economy found the city home to roughly 41.76 lakh migrant labourers, drawn from 21 Indian states and 33 districts within Gujarat itself, working across textile manufacturing, dyeing, embroidery, construction, and diamond cutting and polishing (IIMB, n.d.). Around 60% of these workers were contractual labourers or daily wage earners. The city's two signature industries ran, quite literally, on the backs of people with no permanent claim to the place that depended on them (IIMB, n.d.).

A City That Rebuilt Itself After Disaster With Migrant Hands

Surat's reputation today as one of India's cleanest and best-managed cities did not happen by accident. In 1994, the city was struck by a pneumonic plague outbreak that killed at least 50 to 56 people, infected hundreds more and triggered a mass exodus. It is estimated to somewhere between 300,000 and 600,000 residents fled within days, fearing quarantine (Grokikipedia, n.d.). International flights were briefly suspended. Food grain exports from the city were banned. Surat became, for a moment, an international pariah.

The city's recovery is now a well-documented case study in urban governance, credited largely to IAS officer S.R. Rao, who took over as Municipal Commissioner in May 1995. Rao restructured the city into 6 administrative zones, introduced daily accountability reviews, covered open drains, installed pay-and-use toilets in slums, and forced civic officials out of air-conditioned offices and

into the field for at least 2½ hours a day. He literally called this programme "AC to DC". Within 2 years, sanitation coverage rose from 35 to 95 percent and solid waste collection from 40 to 97%, while disease rates fell by 70% (Inspiring Story, 2020). By 1996, Surat had gone from international health scare to India's cleanest city (Architexturez, 2020).

The Forgetting Happens Quietly Until It Cannot

That forgetting becomes visible every time the city faces stress. During the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, more than 324,000 documented migrant workers left Surat through Shramik Special trains, government buses, and private vehicles. An estimated 246,000 undocumented workers left on foot or by bicycle, with no formal record of their departure at all (IIMB, n.d.). The city's textile and diamond industries, dependent on contractual labour with no safety net, were among the worst hit, and workers who had powered Surat's economy for years suddenly had no income and no acknowledgment that they had ever been essential to the city at all (IIMB, n.d.).

That pattern has resurfaced in 2026, for different reasons. Western sanctions on Russian diamond supply chains, falling global exports and new American tariffs have squeezed Surat's diamond industry hard enough that workers are leaving again. Not temporarily this time, but for good. One polisher who had lived in Surat for more than 2 decades told a recent report that after his wages were halved over 5 months. He had no choice but to return to his home village, even knowing it offered "no future" for his children. He now earns

roughly the same modest wage doing manual labour at home, that he once earned in the city that depended on his decades of skilled work.

What Surat Should Actually Be Remembered For

India loves to celebrate Surat as a smart city, a clean city, a Guinness World Record host for its mass yoga gatherings and the diamond capital of the world (Graphsearch EPFL, n.d.). All of that is true and worth celebrating. But none of it would exist without millions of migrant workers who arrived from Rajasthan, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Bihar, and dozens of Gujarat's own districts, built its industries from nothing, rebuilt its sanitation systems after a plague, and are now quietly leaving again because the city's prosperity has once more stopped including them.

A genuinely fair tribute to Surat would not just be another article about diamonds and cleanliness rankings. It would be a serious, funded commitment to migrant worker housing, portable social security that follows a worker between states and labour protections that do not evaporate the moment an industry hits a rough quarter. Surat did not become the Diamond City and the Textile City by accident. It became those things because people who were not born there decided to stay and build something. The least the city owes them is to stop treating that decision as disposable.

PEEPLI LIVE

When Leaving Home Becomes the Only Option



Tanmay J. Urs

There is a scene early in Peepli Live where a farmer named Natha vomits out of a moving vehicle's window. It is played for laughs. But underneath the comedy is a man who has just learned he is about to lose the only thing his family owns: a small plot of land, mortgaged against a loan he cannot repay. Within a few scenes, he

A dark comedy with a painfully real core, Peepli Live exposes how debt, media spectacle, and rural distress push farmers to the edge—making migration not a choice, but a last resort.

and his brother Budhia stumble upon a half-understood rumour about a government compensation scheme for farmers who die by suicide. What follows is a film that manages to be devastatingly funny and unbearably sad in the same breath, a rare balancing act in Indian cinema (Time Out, n.d.; Letterboxd, n.d.).



A Debut Built on Real Reporting

Peepli Live was the directorial debut of Anusha Rizvi, a former journalist with NDTV, produced by Aamir Khan and Kiran Rao and released in August 2010 (Wikipedia, n.d.-b). Rizvi did not write the film from imagination alone. Her years as a TV reporter had put her in direct contact with the machinery the film satirises: a 24-hour news cycle that descends on tragedy, extracts a story, and moves on before the tragedy is actually resolved. That lived knowledge shows in every frame.

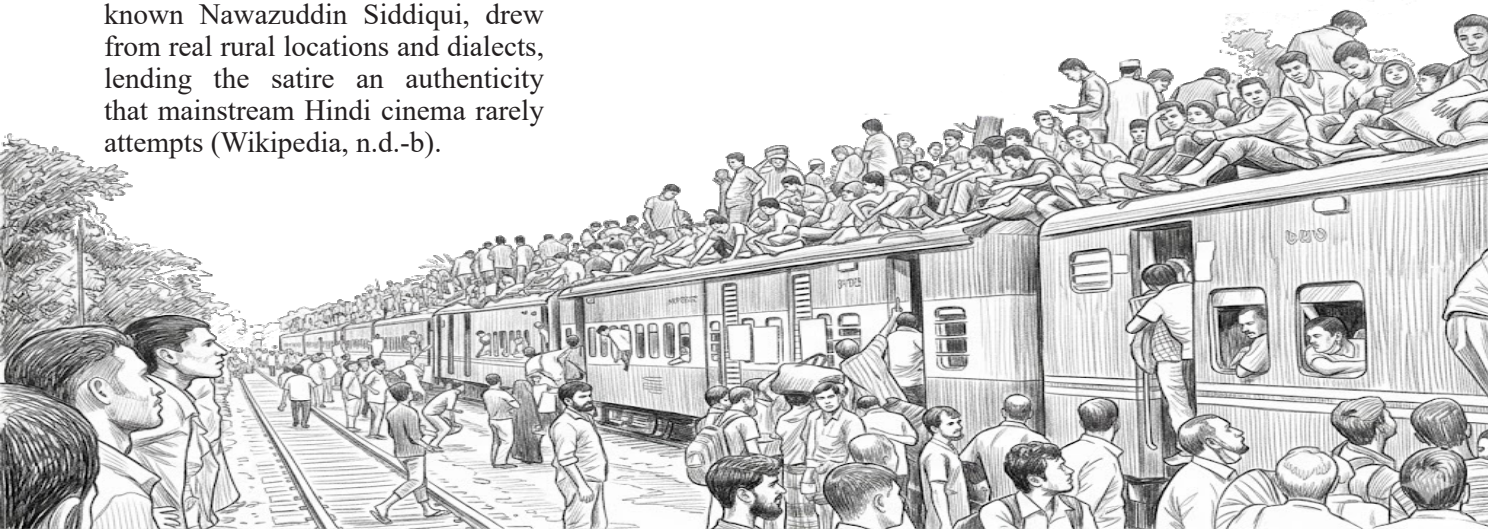
The film does not present farmer suicide as an abstract statistic. It presents it as a slow, grinding administrative process. This is a family negotiating with moneylenders, a local bureaucracy too overwhelmed to respond, and eventually, a national media circus that arrives not to help Natha but to use him (The Federal, 2025; Movie Mahal, n.d.).

The film became the first Indian production to compete at the Sundance Film Festival and was later selected as India's official entry for the Best Foreign Language Film category at the 2011 Academy Awards (The Federal, 2025). Critics at the time praised its refusal to be either purely comic or purely tragic. As one reviewer noted, the film "does not pull its punches" even while staying frequently, sharply funny (Letterboxd, n.d.). The cast including a then little-known Nawazuddin Siddiqui, drew from real rural locations and dialects, lending the satire an authenticity that mainstream Hindi cinema rarely attempts (Wikipedia, n.d.-b).

The Ending Nobody Talks About Enough

Much of the conversation around Peepli Live focuses on its media satire. The cameras, the politicians, the talk-show panels arguing over Natha's fate while he sits silently in the background of his own story. But the film's quietest and most important statement comes at the very end. After surviving the media storm, narrowly escaping death, and losing his land anyway, Natha does not return to some restored version of his old life. He disappears from his village and resurfaces, anonymously, as a labourer on a construction site in the city. It was just another faceless migrant worker among thousands, his identity erased by the very system that briefly made him famous (Movie Mahal, n.d.; The Federal, 2025).

That ending is the film's real argument. It suggests that for India's most distressed farmers, migration is not a choice made in hope. It is the last option left after every other door has closed. The film never spells this out with a speech or a statistic. It simply shows a man walking into anonymity and lets the silence say what words cannot.



The Crisis Beneath the Satire

Fifteen years after its release, the numbers behind Peepli Live's satire have not improved as much as one might hope. According to National Crime Records Bureau data, at least 394,206 farmers and agricultural labourers died by suicide in India between 1995 and 2023. An average of roughly 13,600 deaths every year over that period (Down To Earth, 2025). In 2023 alone, 10,786 people connected to farming died by suicide, including 4,690 cultivators and, for the first time on record, a higher number of agricultural labourers at 6,096 (Down To Earth, 2025; Vajiram & Ravi, 2025). The most recent available figures, released by the NCRB in May 2026, recorded 10,546 such deaths in 2024. It meant that even with a slight year-on-year dip, India still loses roughly 28 people connected to farming to suicide every single day (Down To Earth, 2026).

Maharashtra has remained the epicentre of this crisis for nearly 3 decades, consistently accounting for the largest share of farm-sector suicides in the country 38.5% in 2023 and 36.26% in 2024, driven heavily by drought-prone regions like Vidarbha and Marathwada (Vajiram & Ravi, 2025; Down To Earth, 2026). Researchers at the Centre for Sustainable Agriculture note that the crisis intensified after India's entry into the World Trade Organization in 1995, when reduced subsidies and rising import competition squeezed the incomes of small and marginal farmers in ways that have never fully been reversed (Down To Earth, 2025).

Why a Comedy Still Feels Like a Warning

What makes Peepli Live worth revisiting today is not nostalgia. It is the uncomfortable fact that the film's central mechanism. It is a desperate family treated as a story rather than a household in crisis, till plays out in newsrooms and political rallies whenever agrarian distress makes headlines. The film never asked audiences to feel sorry for Natha. It asked them to notice how quickly his suffering became someone else's entertainment, and how little actually changed for him once the cameras left. Fifteen years on, with one farmer or farm labourer still dying by suicide every hour in India (Down To Earth, 2026), that question remains every bit as urgent as the day the film was released.







Pain Of Lea



aving Home

MIGRATION

The Force Quietly Reshaping India

As the country's demographic centre of gravity shifts toward the young, surplus north, the movement of workers is becoming the quiet engine of the next three decades, and the question is whether India will finally choose to look at it.



**Dr. Sushanta
Kumar Banerjee**



The Invisible Majority

Walk through any Indian metro at dawn and the city that assembles itself belongs to people the data makes invisible. The mason laying brick in a Gurugram high-rise grew up in a village in Bihar. The woman in the apartment kitchen came from a remote corner of eastern Uttar Pradesh or West Bengal and is recorded by the state, if at all, as having moved for marriage. The security guard, the delivery rider, the man mixing cement, person cleaning airport or railway station: they keep the city standing, send a large share of their wages home, and in most official registers do not actually live where they work.

For decades India has told itself a reassuring story, that Indians do not move very much. The census appeared to confirm it. The truth is closer to the opposite. India's internal migration is not a trickle but one of the largest movements of human beings anywhere on earth, and it is about to become the single most important force shaping the country's economy, demography, and culture and the shape of its cities. The force has been quiet only because the country has chosen not to measure it seriously.

What the numbers Miss

The most influential account of this gap is a World Bank study by Gaurav Nayyar and Kyoung Yang Kim (2018), *India's Internal Labor Migration Paradox: The Statistical and the Real*. Official census figures suggested migration for work was low and static: in the five years before the 2001 Census, fewer than 3 percent of Indians had changed state, the lowest in a sample of about eighty countries. Yet the India Human Development Survey, which follows the same households over time, reversed the picture. Labour migrants had risen from roughly 16 million in 2004-05 to 60 million by 2011-12. More striking still, circular or seasonal migrants, who leave home for months of work and return, exceeded 200 million that year, more than ten times the 15 million the national sample survey had captured.

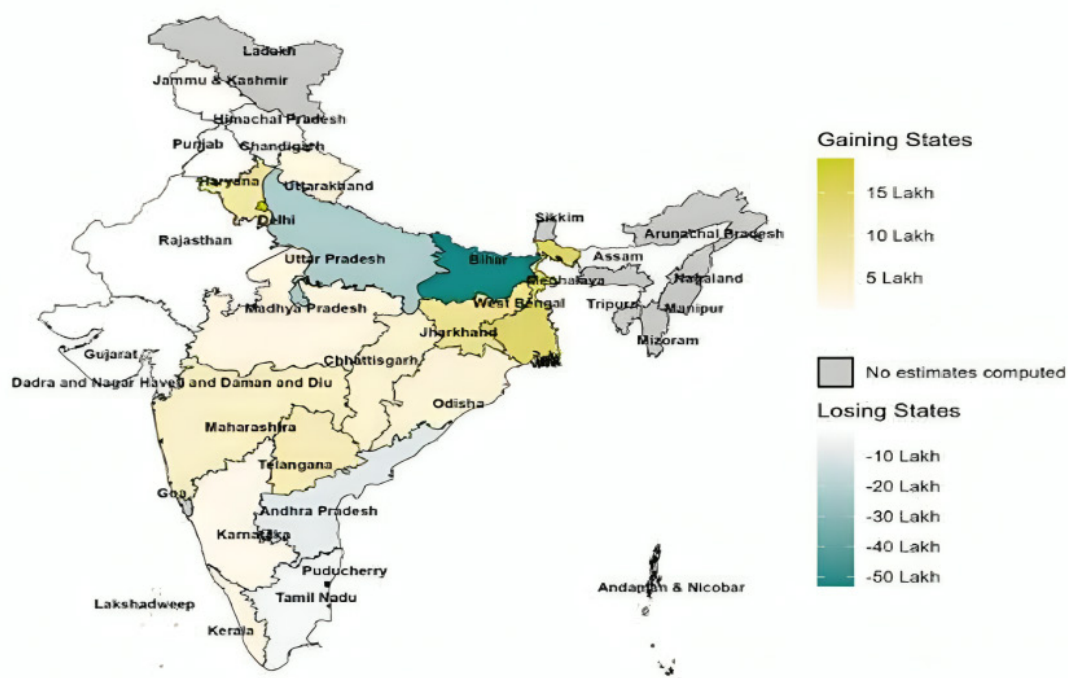
This is not a rounding error. It is the difference between a country that believes its people stay rooted and one whose economy is held together by constant motion. A separate metric, built from railway passenger traffic, put

annual interstate work migration near 9 million, far above what successive censuses implied. The deeper problem, the authors stress, is that the instruments are old and crude. When they wrote, census migration data were public only up to 2001, and the last dedicated migration survey dated to 2007-08 (Nayyar & Kim, 2018). Even the most-quoted current figure, that more than 600 million Indians, roughly 42 percent of a population nearing 1.43 billion, have migrated within the country's borders (The India Forum, 2025), is extrapolated from the 2011 Census, which counted about 454 million internal migrants, some 37 percent of the population then. With the 2021 Census long delayed, no firmer number exists. What a country cannot count, it cannot plan for and cannot protect.

The People Behind the Flow

Behind the numbers is a recognisable person. He is a young man of around thirty with roughly 8-10 years of schooling, from a village in Uttar Pradesh or Bihar. Those two states alone account for close to 60 percent of all Indians who cross a state line. He most likely travels alone, as nearly three-quarters of circular migrants do, and is away for an average of about seven and a half months. He is often recruited through a contractor onto a construction site, which is by some distance the single largest occupation for short-term migrants. Rural-to-urban movement dominates the flow, and about one in five migrants head to a metro city (Nayyar & Kim, 2018).



Fig 1: Net migration across states, PLFS 2021-22 (Source: PFI & IIMAD 2025)

Through remittances, this migratory movement delivers poverty reduction at a scale no welfare scheme can match. In Bihar, money sent home by migrants climbed from under 12 percent of the state's domestic product in 2004-05 to nearly 36 percent by 2011-12 (Nayyar & Kim, 2018). Migrant households, on average, consumed more than households that stayed behind. For India's poorest regions, migration is not a social problem to be managed but a private transfer system that quietly underwrites household survival.

The official story is also gendered in a way that hides as much as it shows. Because the census records only a single principal reason for moving, the millions of women who migrate for marriage and then enter the workforce are filed under marriage, and their labour is rendered statistically invisible. Nayyar and Kim (2018) are explicit that their own data understate women's economic movement for

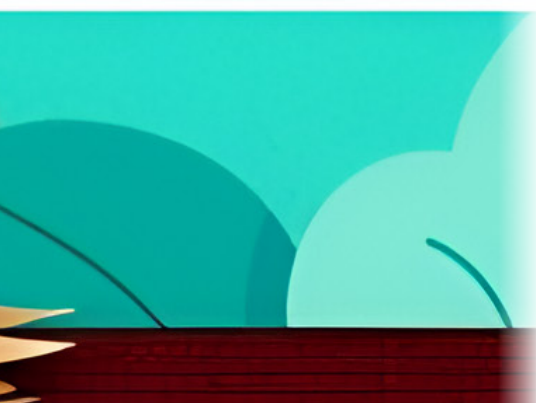
precisely this reason. The result is a national accounting system that systematically undercounts both the seasonal poor and working women, the two groups on whom the urban economy depends significantly.

The Next Three Decades Will See More Migration, Not Less

If the past four decades of migration were driven by the search for higher wages, the next three decades will be driven by "something more structural demography itself". New projections to 2051 map an India pulling apart at different speeds (Rajan & Retnakumar, 2025). The population will keep growing, from about 1.4 billion in 2021 to roughly 1.6 billion by 2051, but the growth is slowing sharply and unevenly spread, with fertility down from two children per woman to 1.67. The

working-age share peaks at 65.8 percent in 2031 and then declines, so the celebrated demographic dividend may begin to close soon. Meanwhile the share of Indians elderly (60+) doubles, from under 10 to more than 20 percent, and the median age climbs from 29 to 40 years (Rajan & Retnakumar, 2025).

The migration story here is a regional one. The southern states, having completed their fertility transition, are projected to start shrinking after 2041, their share of the national total falling from 20 to 17 percent. The centre of demographic gravity moves north: the central belt of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh sees its share climb from 34.6 to 38.8 percent and its working-age population swell toward 65 percent. Within the north, this bloc will hold more than half of the India's population, "becoming in effect, the reservoir" of labour force for the rest of India (Rajan & Retnakumar, 2025).



ONE NATION ONE RATION CARD

By Government Of



The state-level picture sharpens the point. The most recent labour force survey accounts India's migration rate at 28.9 percent (NSO, 2022). Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh remain the great sending states, while Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Punjab and Delhi are the destinations, with in-migration rising fastest in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. This marks a shift from short, neighbour-state moves to long-distance corridors from the northern plains to the southern peninsula, a new geography of labour supply and demand. Bihar alone is projected to grow from about 104 million in 2011 to 170 million by 2051, overtaking Maharashtra for second place, even as the south depopulates from around 2036 (Rajan & Retnakumar, 2025).

The implication of this demographic dynamic is impossible to miss. Workers will move from poor, young, surplus states to richer, ageing, labour-deficit ones: the prosperous south and west will need workers at exactly the moment they run short of their own, while the north and centre hold a surplus of young people just as local jobs fail to keep pace. Migration is the mechanism that will carry India's last reserves of youth to where the economy needs them.

The Citification of a Nation

That redistribution of internal migrants will land in cities. By the 2050s, for the first time in its history, more than half of India's population is projected to live in urban areas, with the rural share dropping below half. The urban share climbs from 31 percent in 2011 to around 40 percent by 2031 and just past half by 2051, while the urban population more than doubles, from 377 million to 828 million, a trajectory broadly in line with the United Nations' estimate of roughly 53 percent by 2050. However, the growth is uneven. A dozen states, among them Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka, Telangana and Delhi, are projected to be majority-urban, with Delhi, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Telangana more than two-thirds urban. Many of these states are ageing fastest and will lean hardest on workers from elsewhere (Rajan & Retnakumar, 2025). The concentration is already extreme: the five largest districts account for roughly 18 percent of national employment, a share that has barely shifted even as the cities at the top of that list have changed (Fernandes & Sharma, 2012).

However, cities are often not designed for the people building them. The workers end up in informal settlements and carry no portable entitlements with them. And these workers are only the first wave. As the population ages with low fertility, a second wave is taking shape. The care workers, domestic staff and health aides who will be needed as one in five Indians passes sixty are a new and rapidly growing stream of urban labour. The urban landscape of 2050 will be shaped less by master plans than by these two flows of people, the young who come to work and the old who need to be cared for, neither of whom the planning system is currently built to absorb.

The Architecture of Exclusion

Migration is, first of all, one of the most effective anti-poverty forces the country has. And yet here lies the uncomfortable core of the story. India's migrants are economically indispensable and institutionally excluded, and the exclusion is structural rather than accidental. Nayyar & Kim (2018) trace the machinery in detail. Much of the social safety net, together with preferential access to higher education and public-sector jobs, has historically been tied to a person's home state and did not travel with them.

A worker who moved risked forfeiting those entitlements at the moment of greatest precarity. The penalty has fallen hardest on the poorest. The same study finds that the people with the least to lose are the most likely to move to another state. Those who depend most on the support tied to their home state are the least likely to move for good, even though they are the ones most often forced into desperate, short-term moves for work. A recent essay in *The India Forum* called this exclusion by design (*The India Forum*, 2025).

Migrant workers and their families are usually counted at origin and rendered invisible at destination: they vote where they came from rather than where they live and work, which strips them of political leverage

in the very cities they sustain. Reforms exist, and the One Nation One Ration Card scheme has begun to make food entitlements portable, but the broader framework of rights still attaches to where a person is from rather than where they are contributing economically.

The same story is written larger

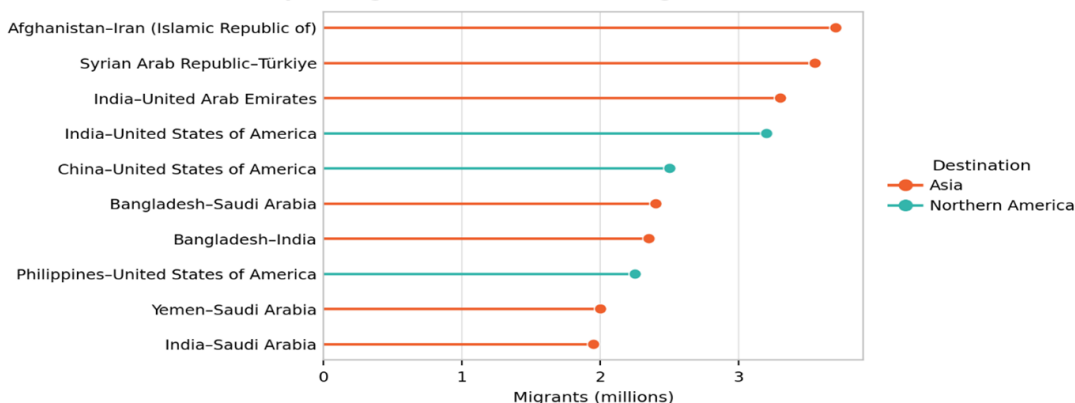
India's internal migration has a near-perfect mirror abroad. The country has the world's largest diaspora, more than 18 million people (United Nations, 2024), and is the world's largest recipient of remittances, taking in around USD 135 billion in 2024-25 and remaining the only nation ever to cross the 100 billion mark (Ministry of Finance, 2026). The Gulf labour corridor reproduces the internal pattern almost exactly.

Roughly 1.7 million workers were cleared for emigration between 2021 and 2025, the largest shares bound for Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait (Indian Council of World Affairs, 2026), most on temporary contracts, predominantly male, separated from their families, their wages flowing home (Banerjee et al., 2002). In several Gulf states migrants make up two-thirds to three-quarters of

the entire population (IOM, 2026). The precarity of a Bihari worker on a Gurugram construction site and an Indian worker on a Dubai one is recognisably the same precarity, simply playing out across a national border instead of a state one.

The composition is shifting, however. The OECD now identifies India as its single largest source of migrants and notes a 75 percent jump in health and care visas issued to Indians (OECD, 2025), a movement of nurses and doctors rather than only labourers. Women, who numbered 2.6 million among Indian migrants in 1990, now exceed 6.6 million and make up more than a third of the total (United Nations, 2024). India is also, increasingly, a destination: it hosts more than 240,000 refugees, mostly from Myanmar and Afghanistan (UNHCR, 2024). In 2025 it consolidated its fragmented colonial-era statutes into a single Immigration and Foreigners Act (Government of India, 2025). The IOM's *World Migration Report 2026* situates all of this inside an Asian region that is now the origin of two in every five of the world's international migrants. India, in other words, mirrors global migration within its own boundaries.

Top 10 migration corridors involving Asian countries, 2024



Source: UN DESA, 2025.



Making the invisible visible

If migration is the force quietly reshaping India, the quiet is largely self-imposed. The 2021 Census was delayed, and the last dedicated migration survey is from 2007-08. The most consequential movement of people in the country has been governed in the dark. That may finally be changing: the government has announced a year-long National Migration Survey beginning in July 2026 (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2026), the first exercise of its kind in nearly two decades.

But counting is only the first step. A survey can make migrants visible; it cannot, on its own, make them matter. The harder task is institutional: to detach entitlements, social protection and political voice from a person's

place of origin, so that rights travel with the worker rather than staying behind. It means building cities that can absorb not one stream of migrants but two, the young who come to work and the growing ranks of care workers an ageing society will lean on. And it reaches beyond the country's borders, to the millions who carry Indian labour into the Gulf under the same precarious terms.

It matters because the stakes are no longer abstract. The demographic dividend begins to lose its momentum around 2031. Whether India captures the last of it will depend on whether young workers in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh can move to where the work is, arrive in cities that will house and protect them, and carry their rights along with them when they go. Get that wrong, and a generational surplus of labour sits idle while ageing states go short. Get it right, and migration becomes the quiet

infrastructure of a richer and more balanced country. The force was there the whole time. The only real question is whether India will at last choose to see it.

About the Author:

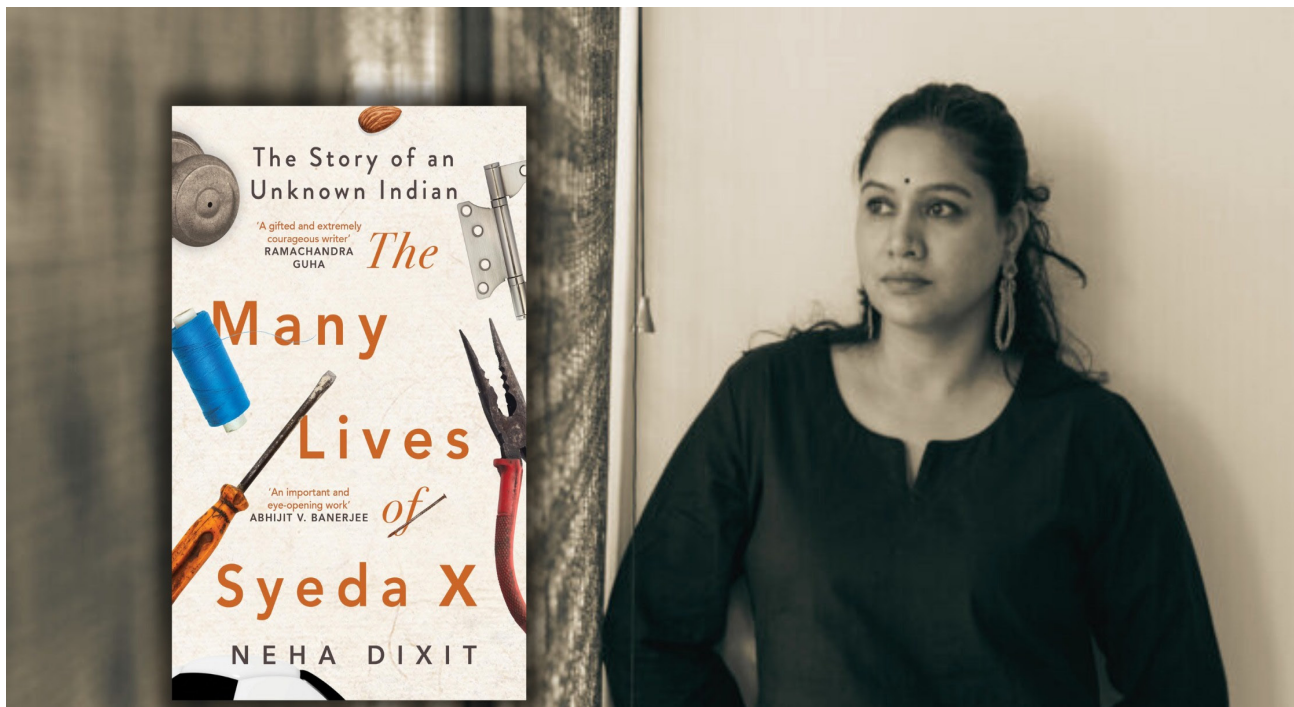
Dr. Sushanta Kumar Banerjee is a public health expert with over three decades of experience spanning research, policy, and programme implementation. He holds a PhD in Demography and a master's degree in Economics, bringing a strong analytical lens to complex development challenges. He recently retired as Chief Technical Officer at Ipsas Development Foundation. Dr. Banerjee has authored multiple research papers in peer-reviewed international journals and UN publications, and has contributed economic analyses to the Economic and Political Weekly (EPW). He is also a contributing author to Clear Cut.

Views expressed are personal and do not reflect the official position of Clear Cut Magazine.



BOOK REVIEW:

THE WOMEN INDIA FORGOT TO COUNT



Neha Dixit's *The Many Lives of Syeda X* is the most important Indian non-fiction debut in years. It is also the kind of book that makes you feel a little guilty for not having noticed sooner. There is a woman who shells your almonds. She trims the loose threads off your jeans, sews the panels of footballs your children kick around, and assembles the connectors on the light fixtures in your ceiling. She has done over fifty different jobs in three decades. She has never, not once, been paid minimum wage. Her name is Syeda, and until August 2024, she did not exist in the Indian literary imagination.

On 14 August 2024, journalist Neha Dixit's debut non-fiction book, *The Many Lives of Syeda X: The Story of an Unknown Indian*, published by Juggernaut Books, was launched in Delhi. The book took nine years to research and write, drawing on interviews with over 900 people. It



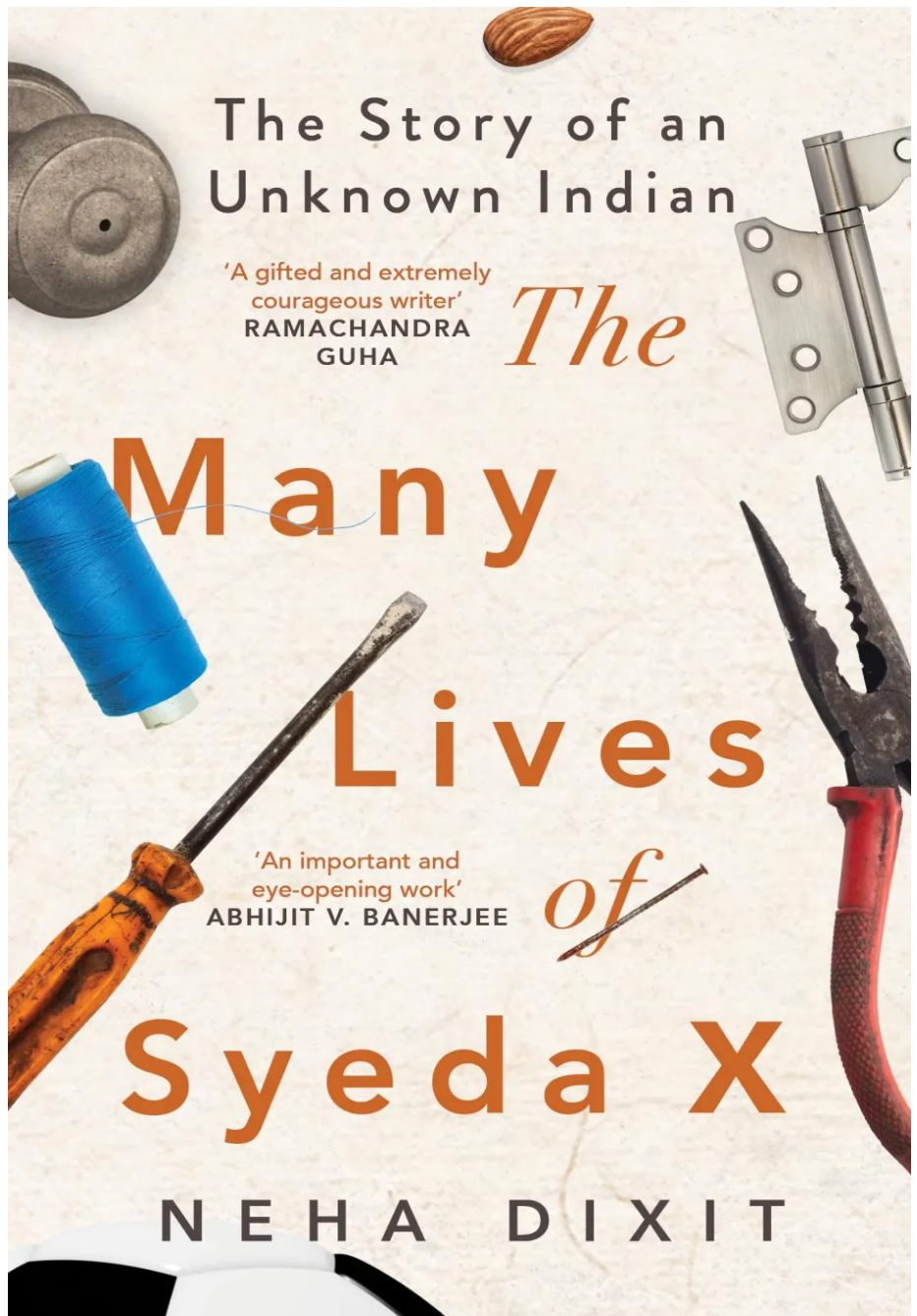
Ayushman Meena

has since been translated into four languages: Hindi, Telugu, Malayalam, and Marathi, and was published in the UK, Ireland, Australia, and other Commonwealth countries in May 2025 by Footnote Press under the subtitle *A People's History of Invisible India*. The book was named Book of the Year 2024 by both *The Hindu* and the *Deccan Herald*. It went on to win the Ramnath Goenka Sahitya Samman for Best Debut and the Kalinga Literary Prize for best non-fiction in 2025, and received an Honorable Mention from the CG Moore Prize for Human Rights Writing in 2026. The scale of the book's reception is unusual for Indian non-fiction. It is not a political memoir. It is not a celebrity tell-all. It is the story of a Muslim migrant woman from Banaras who spent thirty years doing the invisible work that keeps Delhi running, and it has travelled further than most books about the urban poor ever get to go.

The Book

Syeda migrated to Delhi with her husband and three children from Varanasi after the riots of 1992. When she realised that her husband was incapable of providing for the family, she took on the mantle of becoming the primary wage earner. Over the next thirty years, she had over 50 jobs, many seasonal, all exploitative, and none with any security.

What emerges is a picture of a life lived under constant corrosive tension. In Delhi, she settled into the life of a poor migrant, juggling multiple jobs a day, from trimming the loose threads of jeans to cooking namkeen, and from shelling almonds to making tea strainers. Each chapter is named after an industry or commodity, moving through the informal economy the way Syeda herself moved through it: sideways, always sideways, never up. The “X” in the title is not an accident. It is a deliberate act of anonymisation. Dixit withholds Syeda’s surname to protect her identity, but the X does something more than that. It turns one woman into every woman. It is the mark of the unrecorded, the placeholder in official forms, the signature of those who were never taught to write their own name. Syeda becomes Everywoman, one of the roughly 35,000 poor migrants who arrive in Delhi every single day and disappear into its economy without a trace.



A product of interviews with 900 people over a period of nine years, the book is chronologically structured and explores three distinct phases of India’s political and economic transformation, using Syeda’s household as the lens. The Babri Masjid demolition displaces her family. The IT boom changes the nature of her neighbourhood. The Delhi riots of 2020 upend her life again. India’s macro history keeps arriving at Syeda’s door, and she keeps getting back up. We meet an unforgettable cast of characters: a rickshaw driver in Chandni Chowk who ends up tragically dead in a terrorist blast; a doctor who gets arrested for pre-natal sex determination; a gau rakshak whose sister elopes with Syeda’s son; and policemen who delight in beating young Muslim men.

What Critics Said

The book landed hard in literary circles. The Financial Times called it “a trenchant and invaluable people’s history of the bottom of the pyramid in the world’s most populous nation.” Rahul Jacob’s review in the FT, published in September 2024, described it as a vivid chronicle written with courage after almost a decade of reporting. Soutik Biswas of BBC News said the book “shines a spotlight on the invisible lives of India’s neglected female home-based workers.” Priya Ramani, writing for NDTV Profit, called it the book about “invisible India” that everyone must read, describing Modi’s India itself as “a key protagonist alongside the titular character.” In Frontline, journalist Ruben Banerjee described it as a powerful portrait of India’s hapless migrants, noting how it tells the extraordinary story of ordinary people through a single family’s experience.

Countercurrents called it “an essential book,” noting that Dixit masterfully weaves together personal and political narratives to show how economic and communal violence intersect. The jury of the Ramnath Goenka Sahitya Samman described the book as “a work of grave moral attention and disciplined reportage,” noting that Dixit “traces the quiet yet enduring forces of gender, poverty and institutional power that govern contemporary Indian existence” and that the book “restores dignity to a life rendered invisible by neglect and silence.” The CG Moore Prize jury wrote that “Dixit

immersed herself in Syeda’s life for many years while researching the book. The result is an immensely readable work of narrative non-fiction that draws the reader into Syeda’s life and family, as she navigates ingrained hardships that have affected generations.”



The Author Speaks

Dixit has been refreshingly blunt about what drove her to write the book. In an interview with Scroll, she explained that early in

her career, she worked at a television news channel and quickly understood what she did not want to do. “We were constantly told that we had to write about the urban rich, and not to do bleeding-heart stories. Don’t write about poor people. If you want to sell pressure cookers or chimneys or kitchen appliances on prime-time television, then you can’t be talking about malnutrition.” In the book’s author’s note, she writes: “I am not a historian, economist or political scientist. I have used no disciplinary boundaries. As a reporter, the only training I have is to dig out information, corroborate it, analyse it, find the story and tell it. That is what I have done here.”

Speaking to Democracy Now! in May 2026, Dixit said: “Syeda is the person right now who shells all the California almonds, who makes garments for a lot of U.S. global corporations. She’s also the one who’s making exam blue books that are making a return in various universities. These are the people who are from the most socioeconomically marginalised classes in India.” In a conversation with Scroll, she said: “I stuck with Syeda because as she was telling me about her life in a non-

chronological fashion, I realised that it is also the story of India over the last thirty years. An India where we see excruciatingly high levels of urban poverty.” In an interview with The Chakkar, Dixit reflected on what nine years of proximity to Syeda’s life actually felt like: “Imagine, 90 per cent of our population is nowhere represented.” She also recounted the personal cost of writing it. During her research, she was stalked and threatened. Break-in attempts were dismissed by the Delhi Police. When Dixit told Syeda about it, Syeda’s response was simple, almost maternal: ignore it.

Why It Stays With You

The book works because it refuses sentimentality. The writing is understated and never tries to romanticise Syeda’s struggle. The tone is respectful and patient, letting Syeda’s reality speak for itself. What you get is not a tragedy but something more complicated, a woman who organises almond workers, negotiates with landlords, raises children, and keeps showing up.

Dixit first met Syeda at a massive strike organised by almond workers in Delhi for better wages and working conditions. That detail says a lot. Syeda was not a passive subject. She was already in motion. Dixit just followed. India has many books about its poor. It has very few that make you feel like you owe someone a second look and Neha made sure this one does.



Angelina Jolie: Giving a Voice to the Displaced

In 2000, Angelina Jolie was in Cambodia to shoot an action film. She was not there to change her life. But in between for “Lara Croft: Tomb Raider”, she stepped outside the film set and into a country still carrying the scars of war and genocide. What she saw stayed

with her. Within months, she had contacted the “United Nations Refugee Agency” and asked a simple question: “How Can I Help?” That question turned into the longest and most consequential relationship between a Hollywood star and a humanitarian cause in recent memory.

After witnessing the realities of displacement in Cambodia, Angelina Jolie transformed celebrity influence into sustained humanitarian action—championing refugees, education, and vulnerable communities through more than two decades of global advocacy.



Tanmay J. Urs



Goodwill ambassador and a field worker

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, named Jolie a Goodwill Ambassador in 2001. It feels like a title a many celebrities would hold for a photo opportunity and a press release. Not for Jolie. Over the next two decades, she simply lent her name to the cause and went to the camps herself. She carried out more than 60 field missions. This allowed her to travel to nearly 50 countries, to sit vis-à-vis with refugee families in places most people only read about in news bulletins (UNHCR, n.d.-a; UNHCR, n.d.-c). In 2012, the agency promoted her to the role of Special Envoy, an expanded mandate that let her engage directly with

complex emergencies such as the Syrian civil war (UNHCR, n.d.-a).

What set her apart, according to those who worked alongside her was the willingness to actually show up. Be it remote refugee settlements, conflict-adjacent border zones, places without comfortable hotels or press handlers. Her most recent missions before stepping down as Special Envoy in December 2022 took her to Yemen and Burkina Faso, two of the most underfunded and least-covered humanitarian emergencies on the planet (UNHCR, n.d.-b). When she announced her departure from the formal UNHCR role, the agency’s High Commissioner Filippo Grandi said simply that her decades of service had “made a difference for refugees and people forced to flee” (UNHCR, n.d.-b).

Money, law and the architecture of help

Visibility was never the whole story. Jolie built actual infrastructure for the causes she cared about. In 2005, she helped launch the National Centre for Refugee and Immigrant Children in Washington, D.C. This was an organisation that provides free legal aid to children who arrive in the US alone, often as victims of trafficking or family separation (Today.com, 2005). By the time of that launch, she had already personally donated more than USD 3 million toward refugee causes (Today.com, 2005). 3 years later, she co-founded Kids in Need of

Defence, known as KIND, in partnership with Microsoft. Within 5 years, KIND had become the largest provider of pro-bono lawyers for unaccompanied immigrant children in the country (Wikipedia, 2026).

Education was her other consistent focus. In 2007, at the Clinton Global Initiative's annual meeting, she co-founded the Education Partnership for Children of Conflict alongside economist Gene Sperling. In its very first year, 19 partner organisations made a combined financial commitment of 148 million dollars to educate 350,000 out-of-school children in conflict zones and improve schooling for nearly 700,000 more (Look to the Stars, n.d.). Unlike her usual outings, this was not a celebrity gala raising awareness. It was policy-grade funding aimed at a measurable outcome: children back in classrooms.

Her own foundation work followed a similar pattern. The Jolie-Pitt Foundation funded TB and HIV treatment centres for children in Cambodia and Ethiopia. It supported rural development and microcredit programmes and contributed a million dollars toward Hurricane Katrina relief in New Orleans (IKMR, n.d.; YesLondonMagazine, 2024). In Cambodia specifically, where her humanitarian journey began, she established the Maddox Jolie-Pitt Foundation named after her eldest son. It has since expanded from wildlife conservation into agriculture, healthcare, and infrastructure projects for local communities (Oscars.org, n.d.).



Her Story Still Matters

It would be easy to read Jolie's humanitarian record as a long list of donations and trips. The more interesting story is what it reveals about the limits and the possibilities of celebrity influence. Jolie was given a global platform by accident of fame, but she chose to spend that platform on people who have none. They were refugee families with no microphone, no embassy, no headline of their own. In 2020, during the early upheaval of the pandemic, she partnered with the United Kingdom's government. They collaborated to help secure 5.3 million pounds in new aid to pay the salaries of more than 5,500 teachers working in some of the world's poorest refugee-hosting countries such as Chad, South Sudan, and Yemen (UK Government, 2020). It was a budget line that kept classrooms open.

When she stepped down as UNHCR Special Envoy in late 2022, Jolie said she wanted "to work differently, engaging directly with refugees and local organisations" (Gulf News, 2026). It was a telling choice of words. After 2 decades inside the architecture of the UN, she seemed to be choosing the harder, less visible work. It was standing beside people rather than speaking for them from a stage.

It is worth pausing on what this kind of commitment actually costs a person with her level of fame. Field missions to active conflict zones are not safe, comfortable or good for a film career's publicity calendar. Visiting Yemen during one of the world's worst humanitarian emergencies, or sitting with refugee families in Burkina Faso, does not generate the kind of coverage that benefits her box office (UNHCR, n.d.-b). It generates the kind of coverage that benefits the refugees themselves, briefly, before the news cycle moves on.



MIGRATION & LABOUR ECONOMY

MAPPING INDIA'S MIGRATION CORRIDORS

Inside the invisible highways of labour that connect the heartland to the metros a data-backed anatomy of who moves, where they go, what they earn, and how the state is finally learning to see them

”

“Every train that leaves Danapur or Patna Junction after Holi does not carry pilgrims. It carries the Indian economy.”

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Shivangi Misra

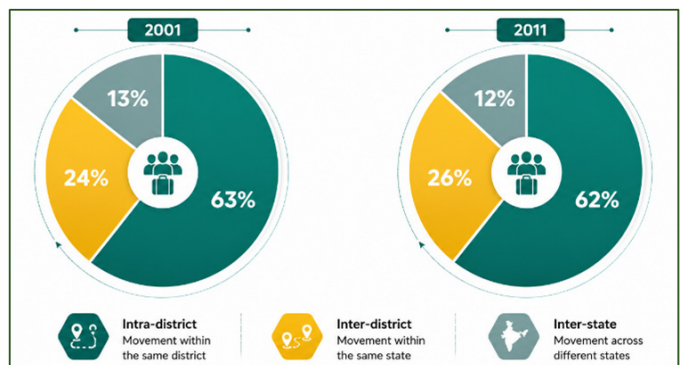
On the morning of 24 March 2020, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a nationwide lockdown with four hours' notice, an estimated eight to twelve crore inter-state migrant workers found themselves marooned in cities not their own, without income, without food and with nowhere to go. Hundreds of thousands walked. Some died on the road home. The crisis was not simply a failure of pandemic management it was the violent exposure of a structural fact that India's policymakers had largely chosen to ignore: that the country's industrial and urban economy

depends, at its foundations, on the continuous flow of labour through a set of well-established inter-state corridors, and that the workers travelling those corridors had, for decades, been largely invisible to the welfare state that was meant to serve them. This article is an attempt to draw that map with the most granular government data available, from the Census of India to the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister's 2024 working paper to the live registration figures of the Ministry of Labour and Employment's e-Shram portal. The map has always existed. This is what it looks like.

The Scale Problem: Why We Have Been Counting Badly

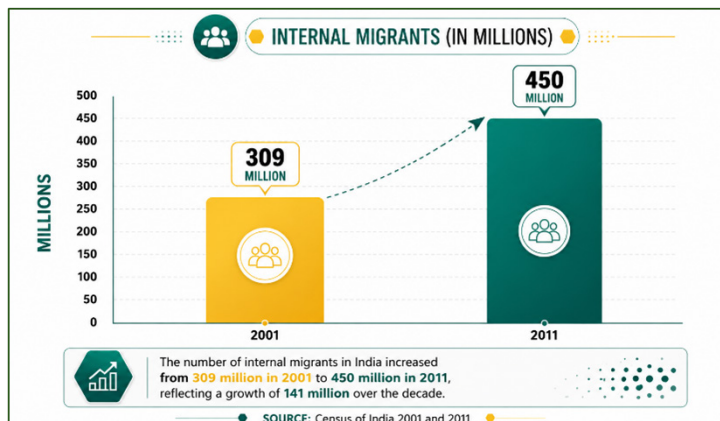
India has the largest internal migrant population of any country on earth, and yet for most of its post-independence history the state has governed as though this population did not move at all. The Census of India 2011 still the most recent full enumeration available as this article goes to press, the 2021 Census having been repeatedly deferred first by the pandemic and then by administrative delay recorded 45.58 Crore of population as internal migrants, defined as individuals whose place of usual residence at the time of enumeration was different from their place of birth or their last place of usual residence. This is 37.6 percent of the population enumerated in 2011. Between the 2001 and 2011 Censuses, the total migrant count grew by 44.9 per cent, nearly two-and-a-half times the 17.6 per cent growth in the overall population over the same period.

Yet these aggregate figures obscure more than they reveal. Of the 45.6 crore internal migrants recorded in 2011, fully 62 per cent had moved within their own district. Another 26 per cent had moved between districts within the same state. Only 12 per cent roughly 5.4 crore people had crossed a state boundary. It is this last category, the inter-state migrants, who constitute the corridors mapped in this article, and whose movement has the deepest structural consequences for the Indian economy and who face the gravest deficits in social protection, legal recognition and welfare access.

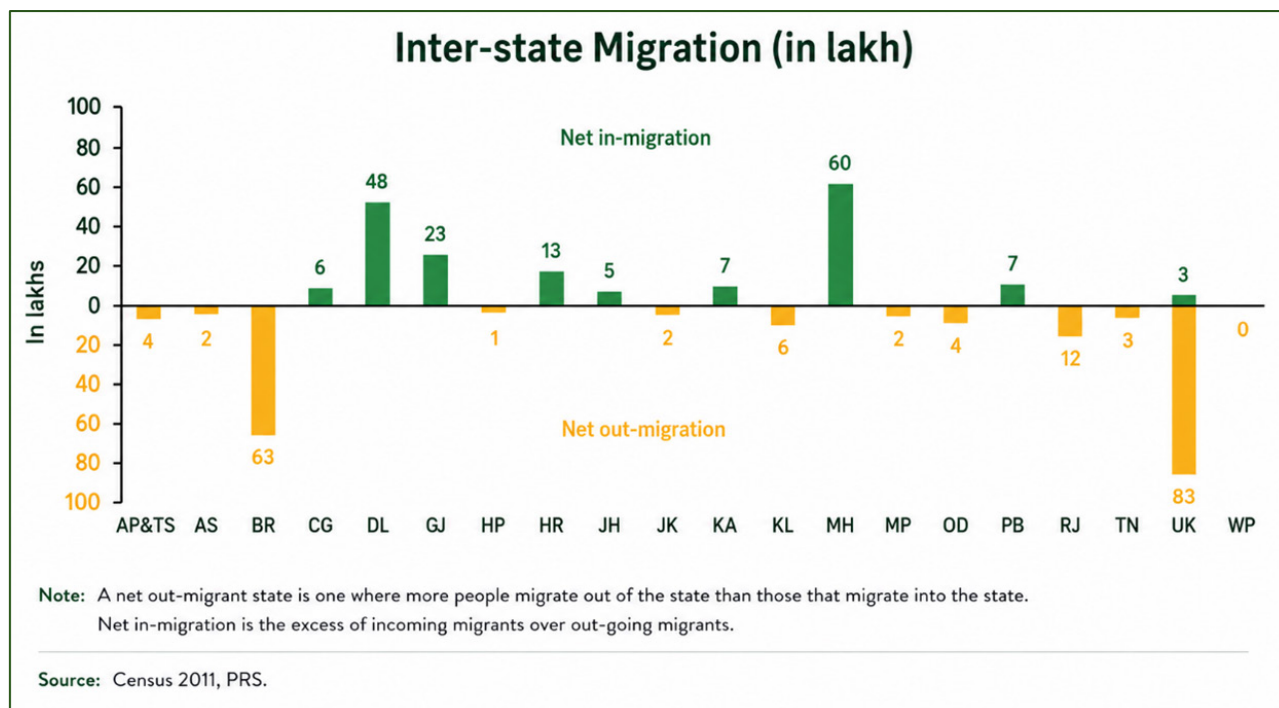


The data gap, however, is real and important. By the time a Census migration table is published, enumerated and analysed, it is typically seven to eight years old. The 2019 release of the D-13 Table from the 2011 Census which for the first time allowed researchers to construct a state-to-state migration matrix based on intercensal migrants with a duration of stay of zero to nine years was the most granular official data release of its kind, and it was describing movement patterns

from a decade before its publication. This is the fundamental measurement problem. It is what drove the Economic Survey 2016-17's pioneering attempt to use unreserved second-class railway passenger traffic as a real-time proxy for labour migration, and it is what motivated the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister's (EAC-PM) December 2024 working paper titled "400 Million Dreams!" to deploy three entirely novel high-frequency datasets: Indian Railways Unreserved Ticketing System (UTS) data with over one billion data points, Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) roaming subscriber data for three major metropolitan telecom circles, and district-level quarterly banking data from the Reserve Bank of India.



The Anatomy of a Corridor: What Makes a Migration Route Persist



A migration corridor is not simply a pair of states between which people happen to move. It is a self-reinforcing social and economic structure. The first movers typically young men seeking wage work in the city establish footholds: they find employers, learn the local language, identify accommodation and develop reputations. They then become the “node” through which the next wave from their village or district is connected to the labour market at the destination. This is what migration scholars call

the network effect, and it is the primary mechanism through which a corridor, once established, tends to deepen rather than disappear even when economic conditions at the destination deteriorate.

The EAC-PM’s high-frequency analysis, drawing on UTS II Class (unreserved) ticket booking data, finds that even within this concentrated pattern, short-distance migration dominates: migration flows are strongly attenuated by distance, consistent

with the gravity model, meaning that the bulk of UP’s out-migration goes to Delhi (close), while Bihar’s, having Delhi already partially occupied, extends further into Maharashtra and Gujarat. The major state-to-state dyads identified by the EAC-PM paper are Uttar Pradesh-Delhi, Gujarat-Maharashtra, Telangana-Andhra Pradesh, and Bihar-Delhi. This corroborates and updates the 2016-17 Economic Survey’s earlier estimate of nine million annual inter-state net flows.

WHY THE GENERAL COMPARTMENT MATTERS FOR DATA

The Economic Survey 2016-17 and the EAC-PM’s 2024 working paper both use the same logical shortcut: that unreserved (“general class”) second-class railway tickets are disproportionately purchased by low-income workers travelling for employment, rather than by tourists or business travellers who use reserved berths or air travel. The Indian Railways issues over eight million unreserved tickets per day through the UTS system, generating more than a billion data points per year. This makes it, according to the EAC-PM authors, “the most granular, high-frequency dataset available to track domestic migration in India.” The model has two important caveats: it captures journeys, not people (so a single worker who returns home for Holi and then travels back counts as two migration “events”), and it captures station-to-station pairs rather than city-to-city pairs, requiring careful geographic aggregation. Within these limits, it is the closest thing India currently has to a real-time migration monitoring system.



Corridor 1: Uttar Pradesh → Delhi-NCR (India's largest single corridor)

dominant destination, capturing a disproportionate share of that flow. Delhi alone received an estimated 4.7 million inter-state migrants by 2011, roughly 13 per cent of the country's total inter-state immigration.¹⁰ The EAC-PM's UTS analysis identifies the Uttar Pradesh–Delhi dyad as the single largest state-to-state movement pair in the country.

railway congestion that is among the most visible manifestations of India's migration system. The EAC-PM working paper's TRAI roaming data for Delhi confirms sharp seasonal troughs in the visiting subscriber count corresponding precisely to these festival periods.



Corridor 2: Bihar and Eastern UP → Maharashtra (Mumbai-Pune belt)

Maharashtra has historically been the largest recipient state of inter-state migrants in India by absolute count. Census 2011 records approximately 60 lakh in-migrants to Maharashtra from other states, representing close to 19 per cent of India's total inter-state in-migrant population. A widespread misconception places Bihar as the primary feeder state for Mumbai. Maharashtra's own economic surveys have consistently corrected this: Uttar Pradesh, not Bihar, is the largest single source state for migrants arriving in Mumbai. Bihar, while certainly a significant source, ranks behind UP in the Maharashtra-bound flow.

The labour markets this corridor feeds are highly diversified: Mumbai's textile mills and informal garment manufacturing (historically the entry point for earlier waves of UP migrants), the Dharavi and Kurla small-industry belts, Pune's automotive and engineering plants, Thane and Navi Mumbai's construction sites, and the hospitality and domestic service economy of the two cities' affluent residential areas. As per NITI Aayog's Multidimensional Poverty Index (2015-16), poverty levels in Bihar (51.9 per cent) and Uttar Pradesh (37.7 per cent) the primary feeders of this corridor are among the highest in the country, underlining the structural economic imperative that drives the flow.

Corridor 3: Odisha, Jharkhand, Bihar → Gujarat (Surat-Ahmedabad belt)

Gujarat's textile, diamond-cutting, pharmaceutical and chemical industrial clusters around Surat, Ahmedabad, Vapi and Ankleshwar have, since the 1990s, drawn

labour from a geographically wide source area: Odisha (particularly the southern and western districts of Koraput, Gajapati, Bolangir and Nuapada), Jharkhand (where the Mining and Industrial Zone has simultaneously created local employment and failed to absorb the population pressure), Bihar, and eastern Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Odisha's e-Shram registration count of 1.36 crore, combined with Jharkhand's 96.37 lakh, reflects large unorganised workforces whose most productive members are frequently absent in Gujarat.

This corridor is the most visibly circulatory of India's major migration flows. Academic studies of Surat's migrant population have found that a significant share of workers in the textile and diamond sectors maintain two residences, one at the destination and one in the village, dividing the year between employment and agricultural seasons. The scale of the reverse-flow was made catastrophically visible in March-April 2020, when images of thousands of Surat's migrant workers converging on railway stations and highways to return to Odisha, Jharkhand and Bihar became the defining humanitarian images of India's pandemic response.

DOMINANT MIGRATION CHARACTERACTER OF TOP STATES

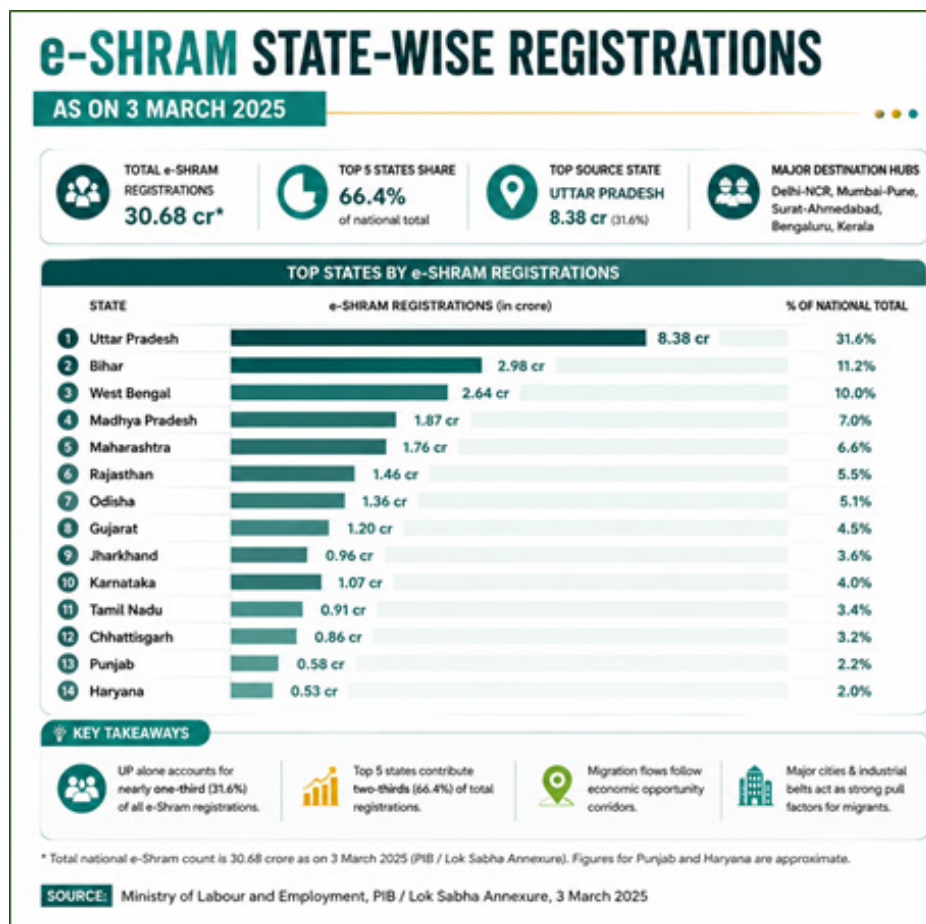
1	Uttar Pradesh	Dominant source: UP → Delhi, UP → Mumbai corridors
2	Bihar	Source: Bihar → Delhi, Bihar → Mumbai, Bihar → Punjab corridors
3	West Bengal	Source & emerging destination: WB → Bengaluru, WB → Kerala, WB → Gujarat
4	Madhya Pradesh	Source: MP → Gujarat, MP → Maharashtra, MP → Delhi
5	Maharashtra	Top destination (Mumbai-Pune); large in-migrant informal workforce

Corridor 4: Bihar → Punjab-Haryana (the agricultural belt)

By Census 2011, Punjab had a net in-migration from Bihar of significant proportions; today, agricultural economists estimate

Corridor 5: West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar → South India (Bengaluru, Chennai, Kerala)

The southward corridor is the youngest of India's major migration flows and the one showing the fastest growth in the EAC-PM's UTS-based analysis. West Bengal, Rajasthan and Karnataka are identified by the EAC-PM working paper as the states showing the maximum growth in percentage share of arriving passengers, with West Bengal emerging as a major new competitor among the top destination states. This reflects several structural changes in the southern economy: the construction boom associated with Bengaluru's tech-corridor expansion and infrastructure spending; Kerala's established and substantial demand for migrant workers (estimated at 5 to 5.5 million by the 2020 Kerala Planning Board study); and the manufacturing and SEZ-driven growth of Chennai's automotive cluster.



This is the oldest of India's inter-state labour corridors, and in some respects the most underappreciated. Agricultural labour migration from Bihar to Punjab and Haryana predates Independence. As the Green Revolution transformed the agricultural economies of Punjab and Haryana from the 1960s onward, creating large commercial farms with strong seasonal labour demand particularly during paddy transplantation in June-July and wheat harvesting in March-April -Bihar's surplus agricultural population, displaced by land fragmentation and the absence of non-farm employment, became the primary source of that labour.

that Punjabi farms could not function at commercial scale without Bihar's seasonal migrant workforce.

Punjab's e-Shram registration count of 57.73 lakh and Haryana's of 53.47 lakh reflect the scale of the unorganised and partly migrant workforce in these states. Notably, both states' Periodic Labour Force Survey data consistently show a wage differential with Bihar of between 40 and 80 per cent for comparable unskilled agricultural tasks precisely the income differential that the Harris-Todaro model identifies as the fundamental driver of rural-urban and inter-regional migration.

Kerala deserves special mention. It is the rare Indian state that is simultaneously a major source of international migrants (to the Gulf) and a major destination of internal migrants from West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar and Assam. As per the Kerala Planning Board's 2020 study, the state has between 5 and 5.5 million inter-state migrant workers many of them concentrated in construction, plantation labour and fish processing making it one of the largest destination states in per-capita terms despite its relatively small geographic size .

What These Corridors Carry: Sector-Wise Anatomy of India's Unorganised Workforce

The e-Shram portal's occupation-wise registration data published by the Ministry of Labour and Employment in a Lok Sabha annexure dated 3 March 2025 provides the most current sector-level snapshot of India's unorganised workforce. The International Labour Organization has estimated that migrant workers in India contribute approximately 10 per cent of national GDP, with their share rising to 15 per cent in Delhi's economy and 12 per cent in Maharashtra's underscoring that the corridors described in this article are not peripheral to the economy but structurally central to it. The table below shows the occupational distribution of e-Shram registrations, which is the closest available proxy for the sectoral distribution of the migrant workforce.

TABLE 1: e-SHRAM OCCUPATION-WISE REGISTRATIONS (3 MARCH 2025) — MIGRANT-RELEVANT SECTORS

Source: Ministry of Labour and Employment, Lok Sabha Annexure, 3 March 2025. Agriculture dominates by volume but the sectors most directly associated with inter-state migration corridors are construction and domestic work.

Sector / occupation	Registrations (absolute)	Share of total (%)	Primary corridor link
Agriculture (incl. allied)	15,99,36,962	52.1%	Intra-state & seasonal; <u>Bihar→Punjab</u> for commercial ag
Domestic & household workers	2,89,04,451	9.4%	WB, Jharkhand, Odisha → metros (Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru)
Construction workers	2,77,31,452	9.0%	UP, Bihar → Delhi-NCR, Mumbai; Odisha → Gujarat
Apparel / textile workers	2,00,36,504	6.5%	UP, Bihar, MP → Surat, Tirupur, Ludhiana
Miscellaneous / unclassified	1,36,65,316	4.5%	Cross-cutting
Automobile & transportation	82,06,116	2.7%	UP, Bihar → Delhi-NCR transport economy
Capital goods / manufacturing	64,21,937	2.1%	UP, Bihar → Pune, Nashik, Surat industrial belts
Leather industry	60,69,527	2.0%	UP (Agra, Kanpur) → local; some to Chennai
Gender breakdown (all sectors)	16.47 cr women (53.7%) vs 14.21 cr men (46.3%)	100%	Women's migration systematically undercounted in Census

A note on the gender data deserves special attention. The Census 2011 records approximately 50 per cent of female migrants as having moved for “marriage,” against only about 5 per cent moving for “employment.” This almost certainly represents a significant undercounting of female labour migration: a woman who follows her husband to a city and subsequently takes up paid domestic or garment work is recorded as a marriage migrant in the Census, not an employment migrant, because the reason recorded is for the move, not for the activity at the destination. The e-Shram portal's 53.7 per cent female registration share suggests that the actual female share of India's unorganised and migrant workforce is substantially higher than Census categories have historically implied.

The Missing Half of the Story: Women and Migration

India's migration discourse has traditionally been dominated by the image of the male migrant worker

travelling to a city for employment. Yet this image obscures the growing importance of women within migration systems.

According to the Census of India 2011, women constituted nearly 70 per cent of all internal migrants in the country. However, most female

migrants were classified as having moved due to marriage (46.1 per cent) or movement with household members, while only around 2.3 crore women approximately 5 per cent of total female migrants were recorded as having migrated primarily for employment.

This classification reflects the reason for movement rather than economic activity after migration. A woman who relocates after marriage and subsequently joins the workforce as a domestic worker, garment worker, home-based producer, caregiver, or informal entrepreneur remains statistically classified as a marriage migrant rather than an employment migrant.

This creates a significant blind spot in official migration statistics. Evidence from the Ministry of Labour and Employment's e-Shram portal suggests a substantially larger economic role for women than Census migration categories imply. As of 3 March 2025, women accounted for approximately 16.47 crore of the portal's 30.68 crore registered unorganised workers (53.7 per cent), exceeding the share of male registrants (46.3 per cent). While e-Shram registrations do not directly measure migration, they indicate that women constitute a far larger share of India's informal workforce than conventional migration narratives acknowledge.

Several migration corridors are increasingly feminised. Domestic workers from West Bengal, Jharkhand, Odisha and Assam are employed across metropolitan centres such as Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru and Hyderabad. Women from eastern India are also heavily represented in garment manufacturing clusters in Bengaluru, Tiruppur and Chennai, food-processing units in western India, tea plantations in Assam and Kerala, and the rapidly expanding care economy in urban centres. Studies by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UN Women have noted a gradual increase in female labour mobility linked to urbanisation, expansion of service-sector employment and changing household livelihood strategies.

Female migration also carries distinct vulnerabilities. Women migrants frequently face insecure housing, limited access to childcare facilities, occupational segregation into low-paid sectors, restricted social protection coverage and a heightened risk of workplace harassment or exploitation. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) consistently shows that women remain concentrated in informal and vulnerable forms of employment, with lower average earnings than male workers across most sectors.

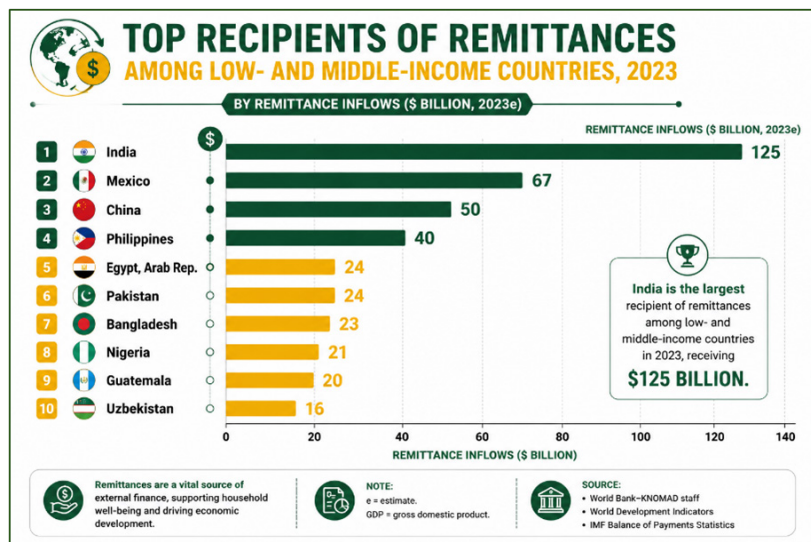
At the same time, migration can significantly expand women's economic agency by increasing access to paid employment, strengthening financial decision-making within households and improving access to education, healthcare and urban opportunities for the next generation.

Any attempt to understand India's migration corridors through a purely male lens therefore captures only part of the story. The future geography of labour mobility in India will be shaped as much by the movement of women workers as by men and the policies designed to support migrant populations must increasingly reflect that reality.

The Return Flow: Remittances and the Economic

Geography of Migration

Migration corridors carry two things: people outward and money inward. The financial dimension of India's internal migration is difficult to measure precisely because domestic remittances do not cross a customs or foreign exchange checkpoint and leave no mandatory paper trail. But the EAC-PM's 2024 working paper deployed an innovative approach: using district-level quarterly banking data published by the Reserve Bank of India, the paper constructed an index to isolate and track the effects of remittances in high-out-migration districts at the source. Its findings are striking: districts in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar with the highest rates of out-migration showed statistically significant surges in bank deposit balances, savings account activity and household credit uptake a financial fingerprint of domestic remittance inflows that tracks precisely with the corridor map. For migration-dependent households, lower remittance costs can translate directly into higher disposable incomes. South Asia's relatively low transfer costs therefore enhance the developmental impact of remittances received by migrant-sending states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Kerala and Rajasthan.



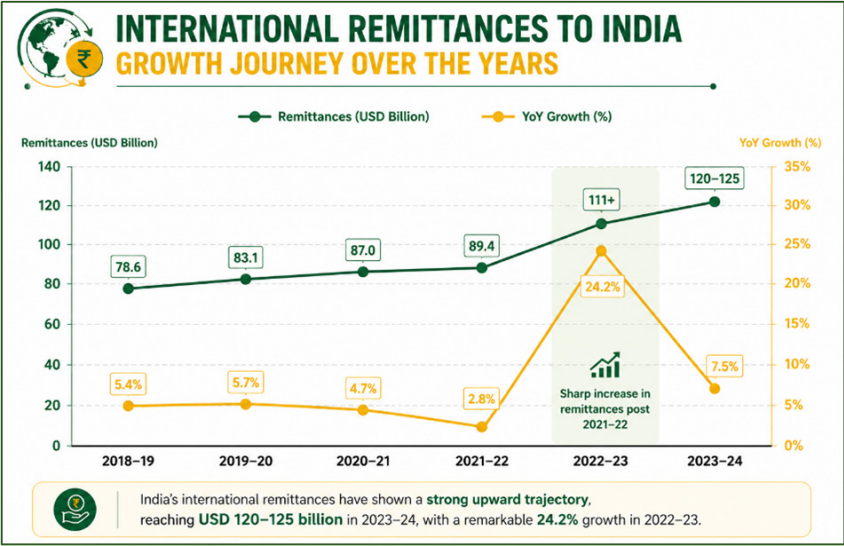
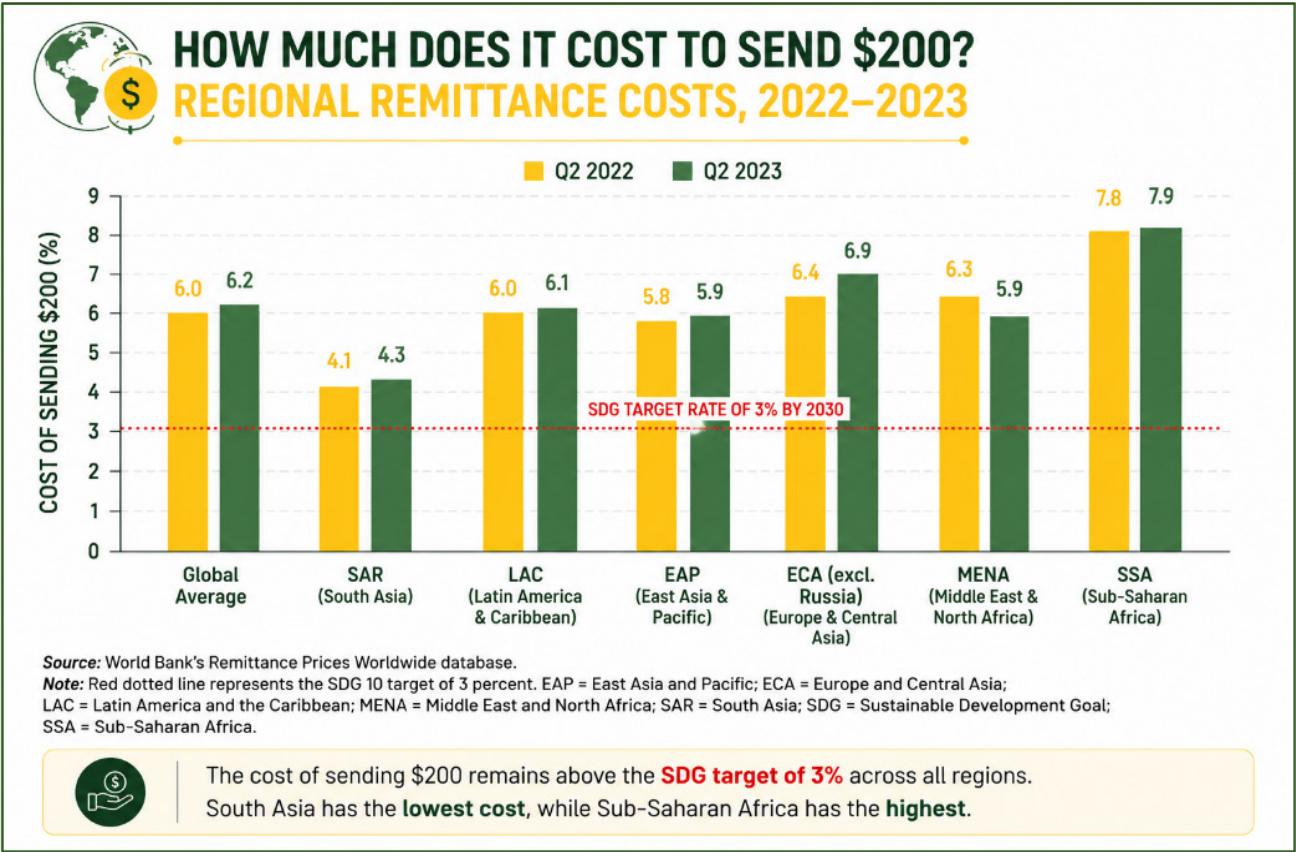


Figure 4 Source : <https://static.pib.gov.in/WriteReadData/specificdocs/documents/2023/dec/doc20231219290501.pdf>

At the international level, India's position is now well established. According to the World Bank's Migration and Development Brief,

India received approximately USD 135 billion in remittances in 2024, retaining its rank as the world's largest recipient for the third consecutive year and the only country to have crossed the USD 100 billion mark in three straight years. While the majority of this figure reflects international remittances from the Gulf, the United States and the United Kingdom, it anchors a broader picture in which the same source states that supply India's internal migration corridors Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Kerala and Rajasthan are also the largest recipients of international remittances, creating a compounding remittance-to-development dynamic in precisely the districts that are most economically marginalised.



Governing the Invisible: ONORC, e-Shram and the Architecture of Portability

For most of independent India's history, its welfare state was built around a fixed, address-based conception of citizenship: ration cards were issued at the home village, voter rolls were maintained at the home constituency, employment guarantee cards were registered at the home panchayat. For the tens of millions of workers whose economic lives span two or more states, this architecture was worse than merely inadequate it was actively exclusionary. The 2020 lockdown made this exclusion catastrophically visible. The policy response, though incomplete, represents the most significant structural reform in how India delivers welfare to its migrant citizens since Independence.

The first and most operationally mature reform is the One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC) scheme, implemented by the

Department of Food and Public Distribution under the Integrated Management of Public Distribution System (IM-PDS). Launched on 9 August 2019, ONORC allows any National Food Security Act (NFSA) beneficiary approximately 80 crore individuals covered under NFSA across 36 states and union territories to draw their entitled monthly foodgrain (rice at Rs. 3 per kg, wheat at Rs. 2 per kg for Priority Household card holders, and 35 kg per household per month for Antyodaya Anna Yojana families) from any ePoS-enabled Fair Price Shop in the country, using biometric or Aadhaar-based authentication, irrespective of the state in which their ration card is registered.

The scheme's uptake data, released through PIB press releases and Lok Sabha replies, is one of the clearest indirect measures available of

the actual volume of migration flowing through India's corridors. A PIB release (PRID 1881527) recorded 93.31 crore cumulative portability transactions under ONORC as of December 2022, within just three years of launch. A separate PIB release (PRID 1847386) noted that approximately 77.88 crore transactions had been recorded by August 2022. The pace of transactions roughly three crore per month as of the most recent available data reflects the depth of the migrant population's actual use of the system. Critically, ONORC's design explicitly accounts for the corridor structure: a migrant worker can draw their own share of the family entitlement at the destination, while the family members remaining at the source can simultaneously draw the balance.

THE MERA RATION APP

In recognition of the digital access challenges faced by low-income migrant workers, the Department of Food and Public Distribution developed the "Mera Ration" app, offering Aadhaar-based login, real-time tracking of foodgrain entitlements, transaction history, and a GPS-based locator for the nearest ePoS-enabled Fair Price Shop. The Mera Ration 2.0 update extended these features with improved language support. The app is designed specifically for the migrant use case: a construction worker in Surat from Odisha who does not know where the local Fair Price Shop is can use the GPS locator to find the nearest one and then authenticate biometrically using their home ration card. Notably, 99.8 per cent of all ration cards in India are now Aadhaar-seeded, making this architecture operational at near-universal scale.

The second major reform is the e-Shram portal the National Database of Unorganised Workers (NDUW) launched and maintained by the Ministry of Labour and Employment. The portal was formally launched in August 2021 and has grown rapidly: as on 3 March 2025, it had recorded 30.68 crore registrations of unorganised workers including inter-state migrant workers. The December 2024 upgrade of the portal, announced

by the Ministry, converted it into a "One-Stop-Solution" integrating thirteen central government schemes Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana, Ayushman Bharat-PMJAY, MGNREGA, PM Awas Yojana (Gramin and Urban), and the National Career Service portal among them so that a registered unorganised worker can access all these entitlements without re-registering at their destination state.

TABLE 2: KEY SCHEMES FOR MIGRANT WORKERS - STATUS AND SCOPE

Source: PIB press releases; Lok Sabha starred and unstarred questions; Ministry of Labour and Employment; Department of Food and Public Distribution.

Scheme	Administering ministry	Migrant relevance	Key metric (as available)
One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC)	Dept. of Food & Public Distribution	Enables foodgrain access at any FPS in India; explicitly designed for migrant workers	93.31 crore+ portability transactions since Aug 2019 (PIB PRID 1881527)
e-Shram / NDUW portal	Ministry of Labour & Employment	National database; integrates 13 welfare schemes for unorganised workers incl. migrants	30.68 crore registrations as on 3 March 2025; 1.23 crore added in 2024 alone
Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana (PMSBY)	Ministry of Finance	Accidental death/disability insurance; Rs. 20 lakh cover at Rs. 20/year premium; integrated with e-Shram	Over 44 crore enrolments nationally as of 2023-24 (MoF data)
PM Ayushman Bharat-PMJAY	Ministry of Health	Rs. 5 lakh health cover per family per year; portable; migrants can use at destination	~55 crore beneficiaries; portability across empanelled hospitals
MGNREGA	Ministry of Rural Development	Provides guaranteed employment at source, acting as a safety valve during destination downturns	Average 5-7 crore households employed annually; critical for returning migrants
PM Awas Yojana - Gramin (PMAY-G)	Ministry of Rural Development	Housing for the rural poor including returning migrants; not portable by design	2.95 crore houses sanctioned as of 2024
Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act, 1979	Ministry of Labour & Employment	Registration of contractors; welfare provisions for inter-state workers	Largely unenforced; under review for replacement/strengthening

A Map That Is Redrawing Itself: Three Structural Shifts to Watch

The corridor map described in this article is not static. Three structural forces visible in the datasets already cited are in the process of redrawing it in ways that will significantly affect both the scale and geography of Indian internal migration over the next decade.

1. The De-concentration of Migration: Tier-2 Cities as Emerging Destinations

The most striking finding of the EAC-PM's 2024 working paper is the 11.78 per cent decline in total estimated migrant numbers from 45.57 crore in Census 2011 to approximately 40.2 crore in 2023 alongside a drop in the migration rate from 37.6 per cent to 28.88 per cent of the population. The authors attribute this primarily to improved economic opportunities in smaller towns and Tier-2 cities, which are

absorbing labour that previously had to travel to the metros. This is consistent with evidence from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data and with the establishment of industrial clusters under schemes such as Sagarmala, PM MITRA (textile parks) and State Investment Regions in states such as UP, Bihar, Odisha and Jharkhand.

If this trend continues, the next Census may show a migration map significantly more dispersed than the one documented in 2011. The mega-corridors: UP-to-Delhi, Bihar-to-Mumbai are unlikely to disappear, but their dominance within the total inter-state flow may decline as shorter, inter-district corridors to emerging industrial hubs absorb an increasing share of workers who would previously have made the longer journey.

2. Climate Stress as a New Push Factor

Several of India's major migrant-source states are simultaneously among the most climate-

vulnerable in the country. Drawn from the Department of Science and Technology's 2020 National Climate Vulnerability Assessment Jharkhand (VI 0.67), Odisha (VI 0.63), Bihar (VI 0.62) and Assam (VI 0.61) rank among the eight most climate-vulnerable states in India. The primary drivers of vulnerability in these states include heavy dependence on rainfed agriculture, lack of crop insurance coverage, poor health infrastructure and a high poverty incidence all of which translate directly into push factors for out-migration when monsoon failures, floods or heatwaves reduce agricultural income. In effect, climate stress is acting as an accelerant to economic push factors that already exist, strengthening the very corridors documented in this article even as economic convergence in Tier-2 cities tries to moderate them.

3. The Gig Economy and Platform Migration: A New Corridor Layer

In December 2024, the Ministry of Labour and Employment launched a Platform Aggregator Module on e-Shram, onboarding Zomato, Swiggy, Blinkit, Uber, Ola, Rapido and Amazon as the first cohort of platforms required to register their gig workers on the national database. This represents an official recognition that a significant and growing share of migrant labour now flows into metropolitan cities not through traditional construction or domestic

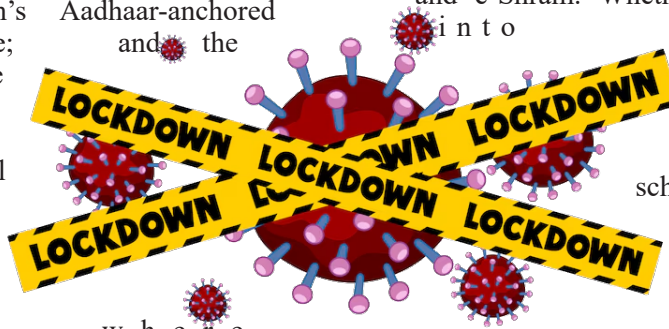
work contractor chains but through app-based gig platforms. The occupational and geographic profile of this new layer of migration is significantly different: younger, more educated, often urban-to-urban rather than rural-to-urban, and far more likely to exercise exit (leaving a city) quickly when conditions change.

India's next Census, whenever it is conducted, will need to capture this layer. So will the e-Shram portal's analytics. Until it does, a growing and economically significant slice of the corridor system will remain invisible in official data.

"A USD 5 trillion economy built on climate-vulnerable, welfare-invisible migrant labour is not a USD 5 trillion economy. It is a USD 5 trillion liability."

The Map Exists. The Question Is What We Do with It.

India has, for the first time in its history, the technical ingredients for a comprehensive and near-real-time system of migration monitoring and welfare portability: the Census's structural baseline; the EAC-PM's UTS and TRAI data models for high-frequency flow estimation; the e-Shram portal's growing registration database; the ONORC system's Aadhaar-anchored portability infrastructure; and the PLFS's labour force surveys. What it has lacked, and still largely lacks, is the institutional coordination to integrate these datasets into a single policy-facing picture of who is moving, where they are going, what they are earning and what protection they are entitled to.



that has been discussed since the Labour Code consolidations of 2019–2020 has not yet produced a regime that addresses these gaps adequately.

The 2020 lockdown cost India an immeasurable amount in economic output, human suffering and long-term labour market disruption. Its deepest structural lesson that an economy of India's scale and complexity cannot afford to govern its largest workforce as though it does not exist has been partially absorbed in the form of ONORC and e-Shram. Whether that lesson translates to the deeper institutional reforms, real-time migration data, portable entitlements across all social security schemes, and a rights-based framework for migrant workers that the scale of India's corridor system demands is the central policy question of the next decade of Indian labour governance.

The corridors have always been there. The trains have always run. It is the state's gaze that is, at last, slowly turning toward them.

About the Author:

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END-OF-WASTE

Beginning of Life: Resilience and Dignity in Anand's Raviwari Bazar

“solid waste” means and includes solid or semi-solid domestic waste, sanitary waste, commercial waste, institutional waste, catering and market waste and other non residential wastes, street sweepings, silt removed or collected from the surface drains, horticulture waste, agriculture and dairy waste, treated bio-medical waste excluding industrial waste, bio-medical waste and e-waste, battery waste, radio-active waste generated in the area under the local authorities and other entities mentioned in rule 2;” [Rule 3.46 of Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016.]



**Dr. Ram
Manohar Vikas**

Despite this comprehensive definition of “Solid Waste,” Indian law remains silent on a simpler, more foundational question: What constitutes “Waste” itself?

Article 3(1) of the European Parliament’s Directive 2008/98/EC, which defines it elegantly: “‘waste’ means any substance or object which the holder discards or intends or is required to discard.”

Evidently, waste is not defined by its inherent properties or lack of financial value; it is defined entirely by the holder’s intent to abandon it. Furthermore, under this Directive, the status of waste is fluid. Controlled by the principle of “End-of-waste” status, Article 6(1) notes that certain waste ceases to be waste once it undergoes recovery or recycling and meets specific criteria. Crucially, one of those conditions is simple: a market or demand must exist for such a substance.

The Raviwari Market (Sunday Market) of Anand is the living example of this “End-of-waste” status loop.

Every Sunday, near Borsad Chowkdi, a sprawling informal bazaar materializes out of thin air. It begins assembling at 8:00 AM, and by 4:00 PM, it vanishes completely, leaving behind no trace of its existence. I have visited this market since 2014. While teaching the famous essay “The Bazaar Economy: Information and Search in Peasant Marketing” by anthropologist

Clifford Geertz, published in *The American Economic Review* (1978)—who studied the intricate relational dynamics of traditional Moroccan bazaars—I realized that the Raviwari Bazar is built on a similar, if not more complex, web of territory, mutual dependence, and social contracts.



“I was the first one to establish this market here,” Yunusbhai, a senior vendor, told me when describing its history. “Previously, it was held in Gamdi—the oldest settlement of Anand—under the ancient banyan tree (popularly called Gamdibad). But as the city expanded, the space shrank, and the surging traffic posed a massive challenge. We

approached the Municipality, met with the officers, and they told us to choose a new location. We chose this place. It has been fifteen years since. This place has also undergone changes. There was no flyover and this market was held on both sides of the main road. Now, as you see it is held only on one side of the road.”

I had met Yunusbhai purely by accident a few months ago. I was cycling toward the vegetable market when I noticed a diminutive, elderly man in his seventies riding a bicycle painted a striking, hand-brushed golden color. Tied securely to the horizontal rod of his cycle was a manual hand pump.

As I overtook him, curiosity got the better of me. “Why do you carry the hand pump?” I asked.



He smiled warmly, exposing toothless jaws. “You never know when you might need it.”

I nodded in agreement. Cycle repair shops are a rarity in Anand, and for a simple top-up of air, they demand ten rupees for a pair of tires—a steep price for a working man. We pulled over under the shade of an Ashoka tree near the Gurudwara Chowkdi to talk.

“What do you do for a living?” I asked.

“I collect *bhangar* (scrap) and sell it,” he said, using the Gujarati term that encompasses everything from broken plastic chairs to outdated electronics, and added, “I cycle through the lanes of Vallabh Vidya Nagar, collecting discarded household objects from families, and then I sell them at the Raviwari Market.”

Intrigued, I asked for his mobile number so I could find him on Sunday.

“I am a poor man. I cannot afford a mobile phone,” he said with that same innocent smile. He added, “I am always at the Raviwari. Look for the big Peepal tree on the road that leads to the old Sundar Cinema

Hall. I sit right under it.”

“Do you live in Anand?”

“No. I live in a nearby village,” he said, and mentioned name of the village.

“It is quite far from here,” I said.

“Yes. For livelihood one has to work hard,” he said.

“Since how long are you in this?”

“Around 15 years,” he said.

“Who all are in your family?”

“I, my younger brother and my sister,” he said.

“What about your children?”

“I did not marry.”

“Your brother?”

“He also did not marry,” he said.

“I had an elder brother. He died while he was young. My brother-in-law also died. Due to these setbacks we did not recover. We never married. My sister also did not remarry. We live together,” he said.

“You Hindi is very good,” I could not stop myself from mentioning it. “Yes, I was in Mumbai for three years. I was assisting my Seth in his business,” he said.

“You could have stayed in the same job,” I said.

“I got any opportunity to work in Saudi Arabia. I told my Seth about it. He happily agreed and allowed me to go. I was in Saudi Arabia for eight years,” he said.

“Did you not save money?”

“The Iraq war started and I could not visit Saudi Arabia again. Whatever money I saved it was spent in the marriage of my sister. Unfortunately, my brother-in-law died. To go abroad we took loan. We had to sell the house, repay the loan and migrate,” said Yunusbhai. I was listening.

“We are Syeds. My father was a religious guru and many people came to meet him. If he blessed someone the person benefited. He died. There was nothing left in the city. From a village near Lunawada we migrated to Borsad and from there to our present place of living,” he said.

I was not keen to stop the conversation but I was also conscious of the fact that Yunusbhai might get late.

“Yunusbhai, let us meet in the Raviwari Market,” I said.

“Yes, please come to the Peepul tree,” he said with his usual smile.

I visited Yunusbhai in the Raviwari market. He was squatting on a plastic sheet spread on the ground. He welcomed me with his contagious smile and introduced me to his brother Irfanbhai. It was not difficult to locate Yunusbhai in the crowded market. The golden cycle was standing to demarcate boundary of his ‘shop’. In front the edge of the black top of the road was the boundary and on the rear side stood the tall boundary wall of the Hindu cremation ground. The fourth side of the boundary of Yunusbhai’s shop was the scooter of his neighbour.

Most of the vendors sit on the ground. The vendors selling old and used clothes display their wares on plastic-woven steel-tube frame cots. The majority, around 60-70% of the total number of shops are old clothes shops. Almost all the old clothes shops are owned by the caste Devipujak.

A small number of shops deal in new items, such as plastic ware, iron wares, wristwatches, electronic items, and wooden craft items prepared by the caste Suthar. There are carts selling vegetables at cheap rates. There are peripatetic vendors selling eatables such as samosa and ice gola. Near railway track a large area is occupied by vendors selling wooden furniture.

I sat in Yunusbhai's shop and observed how people were buying things. A school boy came and asked price of LED light.

"Rs 20/-," said Irfanbhai.

"Rs 10/-," said the boy.

"Ok," said Irfanbhai.

The boy indicated towards an Integrated Circuit (IC) board and asked its price.

"Rs 60/-," said Irfanbhai.

"Rs 20/-," said the boy.

"No," said Irfanbhai.

"Rs 30/-," said the boy.

Irfanbhai once again rejected the offer.

"What would you do with it?" I

asked the boy.

"I will harvest capacitors and diodes for my summer project. It would reduce the cost of my project," he said.

"You are in which class?"

"Class XII," he said, and named the school. He also mentioned he was preparing for engineering entrance examination.

After the boy left I asked Irfanbhai, "How do you price IC boards?"

"Previously, they were very cheap but now all of a sudden the prices have increased. They say that silver is being harvested from the IC boards. Did you notice how the price of silver has increased?"

"Who all come and buy things here?" I asked Yunusbhai.

"All types of people come here. Mostly people of the working class come here," he said.

While we were talking a person came on scooter and started shouting at Yunusbhai in Gujarati. Yunusbhai responded calmly in Gujarati. The situation settled down after Yunusbhai gave a one-hundred rupee note to the person.

I asked Yunusbhai, "Who is this person?"

"He is a Patel. He lives in London and comes to India intermittently. He gave some old used household goods to sell," said Yunusbhai and indicated towards a lot of old clothes and some electronic goods.

I looked towards the goods.

"The clothes are of big size. He is a foreigner with enough food to

consume. You see most of the people who come here are workers with thin bodies. How can they fit into his clothes? The clothes did not sell. He is shouting for it. I gave him money for the goods I was able to sell. In this market nothing is certain. If a customer comes and buys, only then can I give money to him. You see so many people come and negotiate but they do not buy," said Yunusbhai and added, "He is an NRI and came all the way to collect Rs 100/-."

"What is the norm here?" I asked.

"People we know call us and ask us to collect goods and sell them here. We ask what price they expect. For example, you see that new stove with a pressure cooker. The combined price quoted by the client is Rs 2,000/-. I cannot sell one item even though many customers were seeking only the pressure cooker. In case I sell the pressure cooker and the stove does not sell I have to pay Rs 2,000/- to the client. This is the second time I have brought the stove and cooker to this market in case it does not sell today I will ask the owner to decrease the price to Rs 1,500/- or take back the items," said Yunusbhai.



"How much money would you make?"

"I am asking Rs 2,500/- for the two," he said.

"How much money do you earn in a month?"

"Rs 3,000/-," he said.

"Only Rs 3,000/- in a month!," I exclaimed.

He smiled innocently.

While I was looking at his face a young person came to the shop holding cordless earbuds.

"How much would you pay me for these?" he said showing the white-colored earbuds.

"Rs 50/-," said Yunusbhai.

"My asking price is Rs 200/- . It is completely new," he said.

"Rs50/-," replied Yunusbhai.

"Ok, let us settle the deal at Rs 150/-," said the boy.

Yunusbhai did not budge.

"At least pay me Rs 100/- so that I can buy a litre of petrol. I purchased this last week. My motorbike has no petrol. I have no money to buy petrol and therefore I am selling it," said the boy.

Yunusbhai said, "Rs 50/- and I will also need a receipt."

The boy went.

"How could I ascertain whether he owned the product or was trying to sell stolen product. One has to be very cautious in this market. There are police in plain clothes. They keep any eye on things. One cannot take a risk for earning Rs10/-," said Yunusbhai looking at me.

"Did I not tell you about my elder brother? He died. He was the pupil of our eyes. You come to my house I will show his photographs to you. For six months I was like a mad person. I had lost my senses. I was regularly losing money in the fruit business. I was unable to walk. I sold fruit on a hand cart. There was no energy in my legs. I was unable to move the cart. I always saw him in front of the cart. It was he who got us the carts. I stopped selling fruits," he said.

"Please tell me how you joined Raviwari at the very beginning," I said.

"When I left selling fruit and did not work it was getting tough. The God instructed me to start collecting scrap. He is the one who decides who should do what. I started collecting scrap from the college hostels of Vallabh Vidya Nagar. I also collected scrap from the colleges. I sold the old notebooks and packaging items to the wholesaler. Some items, such as old electronic items were sold in the Raviwari market. The Municipality started door to door collection of scrap. We shifted solely to the Raviwari market," said Yunusbhai.





It was 2 PM and the market crowd was getting thinner every minute.

“How do three people manage in Rs 3,000/- a month?” I was curious.

“There is no debt on me. I am the happiest person. There is an NGO that provides two packets of dinner every day. There is a mess that provides cheap food. I buy two packets from there. We manage,” he said.

“This market is held only once in a week. What do you do on other days?”

“On other days I collect items and on some days I work for a caterer. For three-four hours of a catering job he pays me Rs 150/- and the food is free. I do not wash utensils. I only serve food,” said Yunusbhai. “Isn’t it too hot?”

“Yes. The poor get acclimatized to

adversities,” he said and smiled.

“At least a big umbrella for shade?” I said looking at the colorful long-handled umbrellas over many shops.

Yunusbhai looked at the sky casually and said, “There are clouds but no rain.”

“What happens during the monsoon?”

“It is difficult. Many times we do not come here if it rains. On other days we bring plastic to cover everything. This place gets wet and soggy. We rent cots. They are available at Rs 20/- per day,” he said.

“Do people fight for places here?”

“No. Everybody knows his place. I am sitting at this spot for the last 15 years,” he said.

“What would happen if there is a newcomer?”

“He has to find a place,” he said.

“Is there any committee or any body to run this market?”

“No, nothing,” he said.

“You do not have to pay any rent for putting up a shop, either directly or indirectly,” I asked.

“No. Municipal corporation does not seek any rent. Police do not collect any money,” he said and then added,

“Yes, till two years back Hijras (transgenders) troubled us a lot. They collected thousands of rupees from this market. There may be around 600 shops here. From every shop they collected a minimum Rs 10/-. They misbehaved with us. They forced us to pay. Two years back a situation arose and I

went to the police station and with folded hands I narrated everything to the police. The police came. The shopkeepers were afraid. They all mentioned that it was I who complained. The police came to me and asked questions. I once again narrated everything with folded hands. Since then, no Hijra has visited this place seeking money.”

“What if people owning spot sell their spot?”

“I received a proposal from a person. He said he will pay me Rs 500/- for three hours. I refused. This kind of thing is not allowed and nothing like that has happened here. It is illegal. How can you sell the spot when you got it free,” said Yunusbhai.

“What happened during Corona (COVID)?”

“It was really tough time due to the lockdown. All movement was put on hold. There was no Raviwari market. The police were beating anyone who went out of the house. There was no food. I put a mask and came out of the house and told the police personnel about the difficulty. He was a kind person. He asked me to collect food from the camp. Slowly the restrictions were relaxed and things came to normal,” said Yunusbhai. I listened.

“Nothing happened to me. I am 72 and I come here cycling one and a half hours each way,” he said and smiled.

About the Writer:

Dr. Ram Manohar Vikas is a Gujarat-based researcher, studies bazaar, livelihoods, work, and culture.

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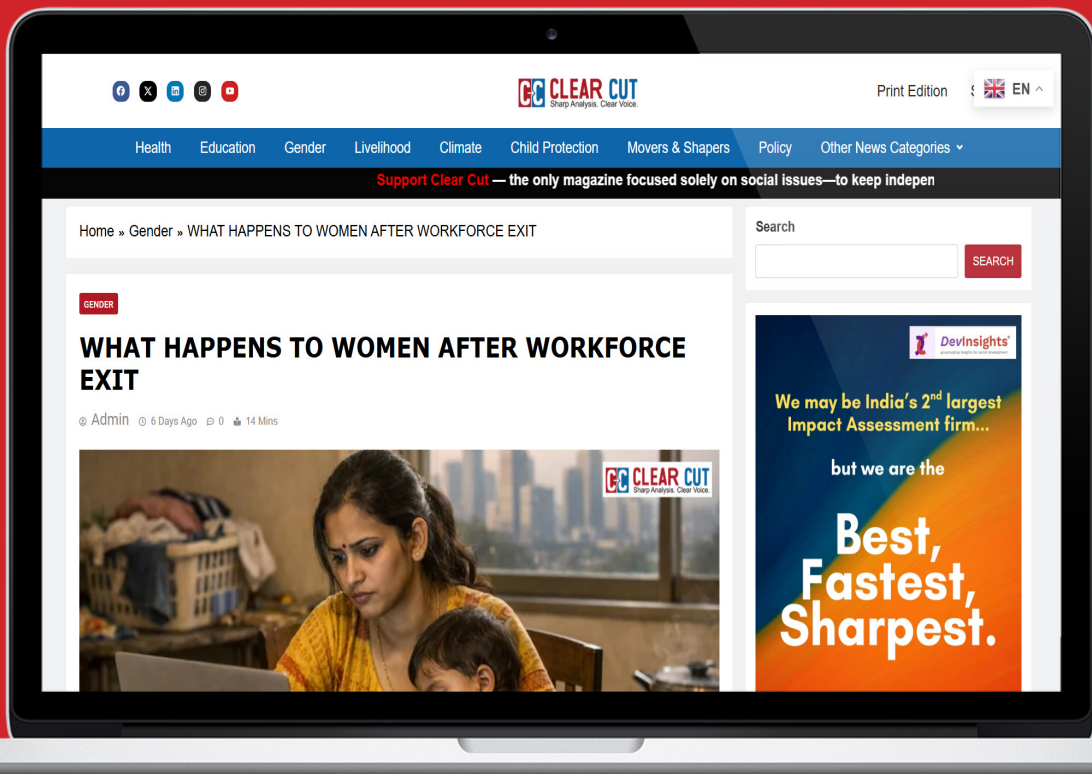
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