# Circular Migration in India in the wake of the Covid crisis

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#### The impacts of Covid on Migration in India

- The current exodus of migrants is the largest we have seen since Partition
- Hundreds of thousands have decided to travel back on foot, tempos, trucks and whatever transport they can find, in terrible conditions
- While they were initially prevented from travelling because of fears related to the spread of Covid, they are now being asked to stay back because of fears of the impact on the economy that depends on cheap migrant labour
- But migrants have made up their minds. They have lost faith in urban administrations, employers and government as hardly any real help has been forthcoming
- Although many came to the cities to escape hardship in rural areas, they are returning because that is where their real social safety net lies
- The government has announced relief packages to the tune of 3500 crore
- But access to these is problematic for migrants with no papers who are invisible to the state

### How did this mess come to pass?

- A few reasons can be offered
  - No systematic understanding of the scale of circular migration
  - Indifference to the plight of the poor
  - Hugely problematic targeting and implementation of any relief effort
  - Also a belief that they are so desperate for work that they will somehow hang on
- Ironically, migrants, who were until now seen as a source of filth, crime and disease are now being begged to stay.
- It is now, that the value of migrants to the economy is becoming evident because of the enormous contribution they make to running the country.

## Circular migration, underestimated and unrecognised

- Just over a decade ago a colleague and I (Deshingkar and Akter, 2009) decided to create debate on this issue by using industry estimates to indicate that the numbers of circular migrants is much larger than official data show.
- We arrived at a figure of 100m circular migrants people who are away from home to work and who intend to return home. Periods vary from a few months to several years.
- These are people in the lowest jobs with no formal contracts and no employer protection.
- They are the docile and perfectly flexible labour force that is holding up India's factories, food processing unit, textile manufacturing units, shops and transport operators. We estimated that they contribute 10% of India's GDP.
- Most are unaware of their rights or do not demand them through collective action and unions for fear of losing their jobs.

However jobs in the informal sector are a lifeline for people who are fleeing agrarian distress and discrimination in rural areas.

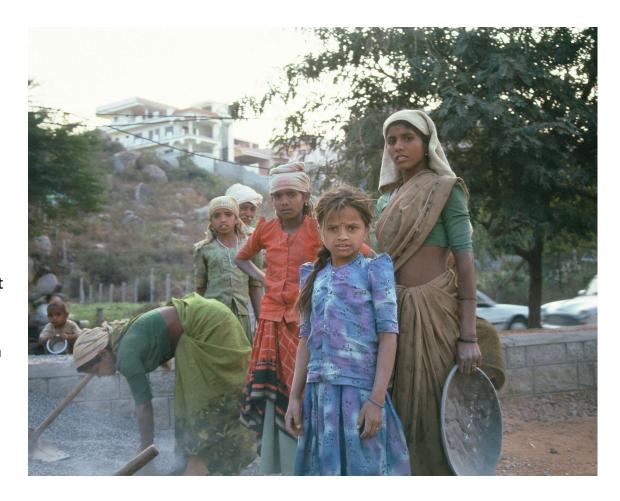
Some have argued that this is just transporting poverty from rural to urban areas

But multiple studies that I and many others have conducted in India and other parts of the Global South show that informal jobs in urban are a stepping-stone to the multiple opportunities offered by cities

For women and girls, migration can bring important connections, resources and work that can help them break out of traditional life trajectories

The remittances sent home by migrants can make a difference, albeit slowly to their standard of living and ability to invest in their children.

Yet the policy rhetoric about migration is often negative and unaware of its contribution the economy and poverty reduction.



#### Next steps



- Government must work closely with NGOs and others to improve the track record on the protection of worker and migrant rights
- They should also work with academics and others to develop more accurate systems of data collection
- In the meantime, relief must be given regardless of identity and domicile status to prevent further suffering and long term impacts on the economy through worsening inequality