

Challenges and Opportunities before Local Governments: Covid-19 and State of Affairs for Migrants

Abstract

Given the rapid pace with which the world is urbanizing, understanding the coping mechanism of contemporary urbanism becomes significant. While the national and the international policies are indeed important, it is equally crucial to acknowledge that migration governance policies involve various actors that are engaged at local levels in the entire process. Various international and multi-lateral organizations have acknowledged the migrant workers as being at the heart of urban economies and contributing socially and culturally towards the urban life. However, cities have been largely exclusionary in nature when it comes to sharing the urban prosperity with these rural poor. The RU migration is a complex phenomenon that not only requires integrative policies but also calls for huge sensitization on part of the general urban populace.

Keywords: Local governments, migrants, cities, administration, urban planning

Introduction

The Third United Nations (UN) Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) in October 2016, adopted the *New Urban Agenda* wherein, it stressed on the international community's commitment to-

“ensure the full respect for human rights and humane treatment of refugees, internally displaced persons, and migrants, regardless of migration status, and support their host cities in the spirit of international cooperation, taking into account national circumstances, and recognizing that, although the movement of large populations into towns and cities poses a variety of challenges, it can also bring significant social, economic, and cultural contributions to urban life.” (para 28)

As per the World Urbanization Prospects (2014), by the year 2050, two thirds of the planet will live in urban areas. The variation in the population growth is varied throughout, largely depending on the prevalent urban agenda of the cities. However, there are seldom any cases wherein a large urban agglomeration would have reported a decrease in urbanization. There exists substantial indications of positive linkages between urban areas and economic development. With just 58 percent of the world's population, cities around the world contribute over 80 percent of global GDP (World Bank, 2015).

During 1950, our world had the first and only 'mega-city' in New York, which had a population of over 10 million. Now we have over 30 mega-cities all around the world, six of which are in India alone, i.e. Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Bengaluru, Chennai, and Hyderabad.

The urban mavens and population experts are suggestive that by the year 2025, some of these mega-cities would attain the status of meta-cities, with population rising over 20 million. India's urban population has increased from 222 million in 1990 to around 460 million in 2019. As per global projections, India alone is projected to add 416 million urban dwellers and would be home to about 54 per cent of the total global population.

However overwhelming these statistics maybe, these large cities are occupied by merely 4 percent of world's total population. And, it has been proved that small and intermediate cities shall gradually become home to a larger number of urban population, globally. Hence, albeit urbanization is considered to be led by large cities because of their economic significance and infrastructural advancements; the fastest pace of urbanization can be witnessed in small and medium sized cities. Rapidly growing Indian cities like Ahmedabad, Pune, Surat etc are prime cases, in this regard. Unfortunately though, the focus of urban planning experts have mostly been on the betterment of large urban areas or the metropolitan cities, which makes the big cities seems more glamorous and its promises appear to be enticing.

As per the World Cities Report (WCR) (2016), the ratio of the share of income in urban areas and the share of population, is greater for cities in developing countries, when compared to those of developed countries. This factor is an indication of the sheer force of urbanization that appears to be greater in developing countries. Also, the transformative nature of urban areas render extensive opportunities for people seeking both formal and informal employment and foster considerable amount of jobs. Such is the power of urbanization that it has important implications for rural areas, as well. Prosperous cities act as magnets for rural migration which, is driven largely because of the better opportunities that a city offers. According to WCR (2016), the key driver of urbanization is the rural-to-urban (RU) migration. In India too, it has been established by experts that internal migration is essentially contributing towards the growth of Indian cities (Bhagat, 2018). Another aspect of expanding interconnectedness between urban and rural, is the actual proliferation of large urban areas which creates city extensions into peri-urban areas that become a transitional zone, further strengthening the rural-urban linkages and allowing free flow of people.

Cities and Migrants

Migration as a phenomenon is not something new or unique. Migratory movements have been a part of our society from time immemorial. People have been crossing borders in search of livelihood or for better quality of life or for varied other reasons. The Constitution of India through Article 19, guarantees freedom of movement and freedom to settle within the territory of India as a fundamental right of all citizens. It is a known fact that migration has not just political or socio-economic but also cultural and demographic implications at both the places of origin and destination (Thompson & Lewis, 1976).

Theorists have propounded a number of models for explaining migration and the most prominent among them is the 'Push-Pull Theory' given by Lee (1996). According to the theory, certain 'push factors' compel people to move beyond their native place of origin

which could result from poverty, famine, religious and socio-political conflicts, instability, etc. While 'pull factors' are the one that attract people to move out in search for better opportunities or a promise of fulfilling life, that might include financial stability, better health, educational opportunities, political and religious freedom, or sheer urban glamour and a sense of security. Another theory of Human Capital Model holds that a person's decision to move out of a place rests largely on the hope of finding a better living condition at a different geographical location as compared to the existing circumstances at their place of origin. They make a comparison of potential future benefit with the current cost of migration and, if the balance favours the former, they decide to migrate (Davanzo, 1980). However, all sorts of migration in today's era take place due to industrialisation, infrastructural and technological advancements, and other changes. Therefore, it is safe to say that different variables, including economic, social, political, cultural, demographic etc affect the extent and patterns of migration (Narayan & Singh, 2015).

In light of the above, crucial assumption of this research enquiry is that while discussing migration, conventionally our focus has remained confined to policies and programs on national and international level and the local governance remains ignored. While the national and the international policies are indeed important, it is equally crucial to acknowledge that migration governance policies involve various actors that are engaged at local levels in the entire process. This process is not just about the national or international actors but, about subnational, regional and local stakeholders as well. Cities continue to suffer from an imbalance of political power and insufficient inclusiveness and participation which is mostly because the national development agendas and inhabitants' needs on the ground have a vast gap left uncovered (UNHABITAT III, 2016).

At the local level, governance of urban migration poses significant administrative challenges. Inequalities latent in form of absence of basic services, lack of decent housing, financial insecurities- shape 'spatially fragmented' and 'socially segmented' urban areas. The New Urban Agenda (2016), recognizes that "*although the movement of large populations into towns and cities poses a variety of challenges, it can also bring significant social, economic, and cultural contributions to urban life.*" Also, the Sustainable Development Goals precisely talks about facilitating "*orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies*" (SDG 10.7).

Nevertheless, these RU migrants, many a time, experience pitiful conditions. Living in shanties, with abysmal sanitary conditions on meagre wages, they often experience challenges that are huge. Mostly looked down upon as burdens and almost always as outsiders, these forced migrants are at the very heart of the urban economies. This has been truly acknowledged by international organizations. This hidden phenomenon became blatantly evident as India declared a three weeks lockdown (25 March, 2020 onwards) due to covid-19 pandemic. And what followed was a disturbing scenarios where the 'highways across the country were pedestrianised' (Mukhopadhyay and Naik, 2020).

At the root of this mayhem has been invisibility of migrants. 'Invisible' because they are forced to float around in search of livelihoods. The cities have been generally exclusionary in nature when it comes to sharing the urban prosperity with these rural poor and their various acts of betrayal have led to the disturbing imageries that came forth in time of this pandemic. International Labour Organization estimated that at least 400 million informal workers were at the risk of falling further deep into the black hole of poverty during the lockdown restrictions imposed by various countries as a measure to counter the spread of coronavirus. Needless to say, it left millions without work, drained the large metro cities of labourers and completely cut off the flows of internal remittances that are supposed to be a lifeline for the rural communitiesⁱ.

Now that the lockdown restrictions are being lifted and cities are slowly dwindling back to life, the migrants who travelled back home are planning to return. Most of them are reluctant to do so but, have no other choice left with them due to the absence of employment opportunities in villages. Studies showⁱⁱ that 80 percent of the migrants who returned to their villages are engaged mainly in labour work which, represents lack of work opportunities in rural areas. Along with this, there cases of migrants' children being pulled out of schools or are trading off their livestock to face the severe financial woesⁱⁱⁱ.

Indian Urbanisation and its Pandemic Potentiality

We have established that people tend to migrate wherever they feel they can achieve a better livelihood and provide support for their family. However, once an abrupt lockdown was imposed in India, the immediate response of most of the cities was ad hoc in nature. Prominent global attestations hint towards the vulnerabilities of the urban areas around the world in context of the sweeping infection. If the pattern of spread of covid-19 was to be observed, it would be difficult to deny that cities across the globe have been the kingpin in unfurling the virus. Be it New York, Lombardy, Madrid, London, Berlin, or Mumbai or New Delhi; some of the most dense urban and semi-urban areas have suffered the worst hit. This tells us that the challenges that lie before urban local governments in India, in wake of the rife of this pandemic, are no less. Not to mention that, the lockdowns never proved to be of utmost help and exposed some of the darkest aspect of urban India. Hundreds of thousands of migrant labourers who have become an integral part of our cities, were left stranded. Also, the condition of migrants living in urban slums is already dreadful with shanty housings and cheek-by-jowl spaces for living, along with limited access to water, low level sanitation and poverty - to add to the gruesome picture. In these circumstances, the concept of social distancing, self-isolation, frequent handwashing, and other quarantine protocols appears to be a mockery. Inequalities that permeate in Indian urban society have added a further layer of complexity in responding to the pandemic.

Living in shanties, with abysmal sanitary conditions on meagre wages, the migrants often experience challenges that are huge. Covid-19 has completely smashed the economy which was already facing a serious slowdown and, has brought forth the plight of ones who play a major role in pulling our urban economy i.e. the seasonal migrants. According to Chinmay

Tumbe (2018), these ‘long-distance commuters’ generally are engaged as daily wages workers and they work without any contracts. Amidst the total lockdown situation, majority of these migrants were left without any income and were stranded between this chaos where the only way to home is by foot, crossing state borders with children, luggage, no money and extremely limited access to food and water. With no support from the government, they headed home to rural and remote areas where, they possibly carried the virus themselves. And, in the process of reverse migration, many of them succumbed not to covid-19 but to hunger, diarrhoea or cholera. Our mainstream media largely failed to cover the extremity of these seasonal, internal, RU migrants.

Problems and Priorities

Clearly there was lack of foresight on behalf of the government but, there is also a severe lack of preparedness at the regional and local levels. Apart from the various ‘push and pull’ factors involved, the real *elephant* here is the poorly engaged local authorities. When policies and plan are framed with regard to the local communities, the local level administration is seldomly kept in perspective. A nation would be prepared to handle pan(epi)demics, only if the local authorities are prepared with a well-rounded plan of action. And, most likely, the wild spread of coronavirus is going to change the way cities have been managed; since in practice, governance systems have thus far proved inept of fighting such predicaments (Khurshid, 2020).

By far, the underlining problem as appears is- the density of Indian population. Albeit, as mentioned above, practicing the protocols of quarantine is almost impossible, especially in places such as Dharavi^{iv} (Mumbai), with a population density of at least 200,000 people per square kilometre! But, it has a lot to do with infrastructural deficits in such neighbourhoods which are serving as a platform for the virus to spread further. Families living in slums, informal settlements and shanty towns of our cities, lack basic sanitation facilities to protect themselves and are dependent on poorly maintained community toilets and have limited access to water that too from shared community taps. Also, the government-built slum rehabilitation projects^v have poorly ventilated housing structure which might also promote the risk of spread of the virus. This has led to a palpable fear amongst the middle and upperclass urban dwellers living in adjacent localities of slum settlements.

According to Deshinkar and Sandi (2012) there is untapped potential for human development if the positive impacts of migration can be harnessed properly but, this requires accompanying changes in attitude and institutional structures. Internal migration has higher magnitude than international migration and they play a dominant role in shaping, sustaining and cementing India’s economy. However, the contribution of migrant workers in strengthening overall economy remains unrecognized because of the lack of data. Local administration can come forward and take up the responsibility of collecting and updating reliable migrant data. This would not only help the local authorities to address several forms of discrimination faced by the migrant community but also, enable them to establish a dialogue framework that could lead to strong RU linkages.

A truly decentralized approach is need of the hour. Collaboration and cooperation at all levels of government is pertinent. Biased perception and limited civic engagements on part of migrant community tends to go against them. It is important that a clearly defined strong set of policies illustrating the rights of migrants in a city be introduced that would pave way for more inclusive urban planning which is responsive and action oriented.

SARS cov-2 has also foregrounded challenges in the sector of health governance. In a shocking incident in Varanasi, a man was rushed to the hospital because he had liver cirrhosis (a condition where a patient's liver is filled with excessive amount of fluid) and was facing difficulty in breathing. The hospitals were quick to assume the case to be of covid-19 and denied admission on the grounds that they are not authorized to admit any covid-19 patients and referred the patient to Sir Sundarlal Hospital, BHU which, is taking care of the corona cases in Varanasi. Upon being rushed to the hospital in BHU, the patient was immediately sent to isolation wards and by the time doctors could actually figure out his case, he succumbed to death. Public health concerns in slum areas are striking. Covid-19 is spreading across in all social categories and communities and hence the 'pandemic-cum-lockdown' might be 'class or caste neutral' but, the existing health care responses are not. On an ordinary day, the urban poor have extremely limited access to health care provisions and, the availability of the same is limited by their ability to pay for the services. And, hence, they are more likely to die out of general sickness or hunger, much before they come under the influence of covid-19.

The Onus is on Our Cities

It is indeed a significant try-out of the way in which our cities are being managed, planned, and lived in. Local governments are grappling with all the pressures discussed and more, while they continue to execute their limited powers, very limited data- in terms of migrant population, geospatial coverage, GIS based tools to detect the land use changes etc- and the challenges of connectivity amidst closing borders. All the flagship mission programs, including Smart Cities Mission, AMRUT, PMAY, HRIDAY etc., launched for the advancement of urban India, have come to a complete halt as not much is making sense in these times. If anything, this has given us enough evidence that it is essential that apart from city-centric programs, the central government also devolves the three crucial F's to local governments, i.e. funds, functions and functionaries- which has already been mandated in the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act but, has never truly been realized. Given the state of affairs, it has become fundamental for all three tiers of governments to come to terms with the 'urban experimentations' happening about currently and learn from the 'ad hoc measures' that perhaps hold the capacity to teach us about various possibilities of urban reforms.

In light of the above discussions, it is pertinent that our governments, both national and state level, rethink the allocation of powers. The 'Team India'^{vi} of our Prime Minister Modi should

not just be the confluence of centre and the states but also the local governments. Greater devolution of powers to cities from the upper tier of governments would ensure that. Having said that, it is important that the governance of Indian cities should be a local issue and not national. In addition to this, state specific municipal laws need to be reconsidered with the aim of empowering local governments. Through the 12th schedule of Indian Constitution, a list of 18 functions have been assigned to the municipal bodies; however there exists a lot of variation across different states as far as their execution is concerned. Some states have added additional functions to the list of original 18 functions, some have marked a few of these functions as mandatory and others as discretionary, some states have taken over few of the functions or have assigned them to separate state/parastatal agencies. In such a scenario, an introduction of another constitutional amendment could be worth considering some crucial subjects, especially for the local governments functioning in million plus cities, which cannot be encroached by central or state governments.

If the objectives of a truly fulfilled urban centres are to be achieved, pumping more money through various flagship programs is going to be of little effect unless more autonomy is devolved to the local governments that would actually help them confront predicaments. Communication, coordination and cooperation are the three crucial Cs that require attention when higher levels of governments are dealing with local governance and issues pertaining thereof. The essence of democracy starts from the locals and the crisis has also made it clear that it is important that we keep this essence intact by engaging citizens in city administration. The involvement needs to be done at the planning level where the urban dwellers could be engaged in various stages of planning. This would not only lead to a better and more citizen-centric agenda but, would also ensure their ownership in the process of implementation. Also, it cannot be stressed enough that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach is not going to work. Taking strong measures would be possible only if the local governments have reliable and granular database consisting of information related to poverty, slums, housing, infrastructure, land use patterns, among other things. This would help the urban planners and policy makers to devise demography specific programs to serve the urban populace in a better way and draft strategies to overcome any unforeseen crisis that could ravage the urban living conditions.

Cities are considered as the 'engines' of economic growth for a nation. It is essential that these *engines* are sturdy enough to contribute towards their purpose of economic advancement. "Governance refers to the process whereby elements in society wield power and authority, and influence and enact policies and decisions concerning public life, and economic and social development. Governance is a broader notion than government. Governance involves interaction between these formal institutions and those of civil society" (The Governance Working Group of the International Institute of Administrative Sciences 1996). Urban governance consists of a set of institutions, guidelines, regulatory and management mechanisms in which local governments are the key elements. Setting up a structure of robust urban local governments with requisite autonomy and devolution could be a head start. The Committee of Experts in Public Administration noted that executing the

principle of 'leaving no one behind' requires strong empowerment of local governments, since they possess the best knowledge of conditions that affect local communities^{vii}.

Our aim should be to create a city which is, as Richard Sennett (1970) describes- "user friendly". It might appear to be an idealistic idea, especially in the times of such crisis, transforming it into reality should be one of the most significant social and economic goals of our national planning. To attain this, planning and policies should not be for the city but, with the city. Successful implementation of the principles of 'good urban governance' is decentralized and incorporates the bottom-up approach.

Way Forward

Advancement of urban areas is vital not because the urban areas of the world are expected to absorb almost all future population growth, but because they concentrate economic activities and influence social change and possess the ability to create system based solutions to structural issues (ESDN, 2014). The wrath that the pandemic brought with itself has left us aghast. The picture isn't looking very good and the government has told us to 'learn to live with the virus'. It is now high time that our urban centres undergo a radical paradigm shift where the cities are reimagined beyond infrastructures and plush architecture.

Cities are the foundation of a resilient society and strong economy. It was critically highlighted by our Prime Minister Modi in his recent address to nation that, it is time that we get 'vocal for local' – which underlines the significance of a strong core in form of our local areas. Local level institutional mechanisms, be it advanced public health systems, mechanism for monitoring of migrant movements, resilience mechanism in unprecedented time- are needed to address the challenges of urban India. The key is to be more inclusive and integrative. Sensitization of the general city populace would also play a critical role in assimilation of migrants. There is an urgent need for issuance of universally recognized proof of identity that could help the migrants to access social security programs across the country. Pressure should also be created on employers to take initiatives and even the civil society and NGOs could be engaged for this. There should be in place a dedicated grievance handling mechanism to provide them with proper counselling and educate them about their rights. Another very important aspect is the provision for food security for which the public distribution system (PDS) could be remodelled in a way to include migrant population. And, most importantly, health care interventions should be strengthened so as to tackle the stigmatization of migrant workers as bearers of diseases and infections (UNESCO, 2013).

Urbanization holds transformative powers and thus, cities act as magnets for rural migration. The RU migration is a complex phenomenon. Instead of looking down upon them as 'outsiders' and burden on the civic systems and other resources, it would be beneficial if the local governments are sensitized and encouraged to put migrants and their needs in the mainstream. It is high time that we put an end to the exclusionary urban growth in India and move towards sustainable urban development with more inclusive cities based on cultural diversity, social cohesion and human rights.

The outbreak of covid-19 has brought out the inadequacies of our urban management mechanisms but, at the same time it has also given us an opportunity to step back and rethink and perhaps, redesign our urban agenda. Marty Chen (2020) rightly observes, if we will “heed these lessons? When the alternative is empty streets, quarantined urban dwellers, locked-down cities, a stalled economy, and most devastatingly of all, the loss of life, I argue we can no longer afford not to.”

Endnotes:

- ⁱ <https://www.ft.com/content/5426436b-193b-4e27-a86e-7f9154654a11>
- ⁱⁱ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/two-thirds-of-migrant-workers-have-returned-to-cities-or-wish-to-do-so-survey/articleshow/77328525.cms>
- ⁱⁱⁱ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/policy/migrants-look-to-return-to-urban-pockets-for-employment/articleshow/77545407.cms?from=mdr>
- ^{iv} <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/mumbai-dharavi-reports-30-new-covid-19-cases-area-s-tally-reaches-168-1669118-2020-04-20>
- ^v <https://india.mongabay.com/2020/04/staying-indoors-in-heat-vulnerable-low-income-neighbourhoods/>
- ^{vi} <https://www.hindustantimes.com/editorials/narendra-modi-s-vision-of-cooperative-federalism/story-bRgIHKuf2nw9Xkc0jygy0L.html>
- ^{vii} <http://workspace.unpan.org/sites/Internet/Documents/UNPAN97291.pdf>

References:

- Bakshi, P M. (2014). *Commentary on the Constitution of India*. New Delhi: Universal Law Publishing.
- Bhagat, R B. (2018). “Development Impacts of Migration and Urbanization”. *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. 53 (48), pp. 19-22.
- Chen, Marty. 2020. “To die from hunger or the virus: An all too real dilemma for the poor in India (and elsewhere)”. WIEGO. 3 April 2020.
https://www.wiego.org/blog/die-hunger-or-virus-all-too-real-dilemma-poor-india-and-elsewhere?utm_source=WIEGO&utm_campaign=ad63799c8bEMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_03_30_03_33+ENG&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_8ef746a546-ad63799c8b-330771597
- Davanzo, J. (1980). *Repeat Migration: International Costs and Location-Specific Capital*. The Rand Corporation, California.
- Deshingkar, Priya & Matteo Sandi. (2012). “Migration and Human Development in India: New Challenges and Opportunities”. National Workshop on Internal Migration and Human Development in India. Workshop Compendium. New Delhi.
- European Sustainable Development Network. 2014. “A Renewed Policy Framework for Sustainable Development”. Conference Proceedings. Vienna, Austria. Accessed at-

https://www.sdnetwork.eu/pdf/conferences/2014_rome/ESDN%20Conference%20%202014_%20Conference%20Proceedings_final.pdf

- Khurshid, Nadeem. 2020. “Assaying Urban Governance amid Covid-19 Pandemic”. Business Recorder. 7 April 2020.
<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/04/07/586841/assaying-urban-governance-amid-covid-19-pandemic/>
- Lee, Everett (1966). A Theory of Migration. *Demography*, pp. 47-57.
- Mukhopadhyay, Partha and Mukta Naik. 2020. “Migrant workers distrust a state that does not take them into account”. Indian Express. 31 March 2020.
- Narayan R & S K Singh. (2015). “Differentials and Determinants of Out Migration in Eastern Uttar Pradesh”. *Social Science Spectrum*. Vol. 1 (4), pp. 279-294.
- Sennett, R. 1970. *The Users of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life*. New Haven, CT. Yale University Press.
- Thompson, W E & Lewis, D T. (1976). *Population Problem*. New Delhi. Tata Mcgraw-Hill, pp. 58-59.
- Tumble, Chinmay. 2018. *India Moving: A History of Migration*. Penguin India, New Delhi.
- UN-Habitat. 2006/07. *State of World’s Cities*. Nairobi, Kenya.
 - 2016. *Urbanization and Development: Emerging Futures*. World Cities Report. Nairobi, Kenya.
- UN-Habitat III. 2016. *Urban Governance, Capacity and Institutional Development*. Policy Paper. Quito.
- UNESCO. 2013. *Internal Migration in India Initiative*. Policy Brief. New Delhi.
- United Nations. 2017. “Migrants and Cities: A Public Administration Perspective on Local Governance and Service Delivery”. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. New York.
 - 2015. *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. United Nations.
<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf>
 - 2014. *World Urbanization Prospect*. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. New York.
- World Bank. 2015. *Urban Development: Overview*. Accessed at-
<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/urbandevelopment>