The Social Science Review A Multidisciplinary Journal. July-August, 2025. Vol. 3. Issue 4. 168-177

Published by: Pather Dabi Educational Trust, (Regn No: IV-1402-00064/2023), Under Govt. of West Bengal, India

The Social Science Review
A Multidisciplinary Journal
ISSN: 2584-0789
(Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Bi-Monthly, International e-Journal)
Homepage: www.tssreview.in

FROM HOME TO HELL: REFLECTING ON THE LIVES OF MIGRANT WORKERS FROM WEST BENGAL

Joydeep Sarkar

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Author Details:
Doctoral Researcher,
Department of Political Science,
Rabindra Bharati University,
Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Corresponding Author:
Joydeep Sarkar

DOI:
https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.250304026

Abstract

The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) released a report in 2021 based on the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2020-21, which revealed that the overall migration rate in India was reported as 28.9%, with a specific rate of 26.5% noted in rural areas, indicating a matter of significant concern. Furthermore, according to the Census of India in 2011, West Bengal was identified as the fourth largest source of migrant workers in the country, with an estimated 580,000 individuals migrating from the state between 2001 and 2011. The focus is now on internal out-migration from the state of West Bengal to other states in India, more in relation to informal workers, where an apparently growing trend has been recorded in the last decade. The figure of 580,000 workers illustrates a gendered social stratification, with males predominantly engaged in construction and industrial roles, while females are largely employed as helpers on construction sites and urban caregivers, often vulnerable to sexual trafficking. This paper aims to investigate the fundamental causes of labour migration, intentionally setting aside social dimensions to focus on the labour force as a cohesive unit. Among the notable factors fuelling this migration are both push factors, like economic hardship and pull factors, which can be attributed to superior job opportunities elsewhere. Furthermore, it has been evidently known that the power of capitalist production can often go hand in hand with cases of human rights violation providing a theoretical framework to reflect on the politics of precarity engendered by extractive capitalism. The present paper is an attempt to closely look into and analyse the experiences and issues of 'footloose' workers in the contemporary context of West Bengal. Mostly relying on secondary and some primary ethnographic data it will try to get a proper understanding of the extent to which their conditions can be equated with any modern subjectification, ranging through a systematic analysis of vulnerabilities, rights, violations, and exploitations. The main thrust has been to learn about the miserable living conditions of migrants and the historical course of exploitation taken by the system.

Keywords: *Migration, Labour, West Bengal, Precarity, Exploitation*

"The path is same, walking barefoot on the scorching-searing road, melting in the heat of the sun carrying their bundle of hunger and thirst, they have been walking like this for centuries, both burning alike from the fire in their bellies. Now, both have realised, there are only two castes in the world: Rich and Poor, all else are lies". [i]

– Javed Akhtar Recite His Poem on the Plight of Migrant Labourers, The Wire, YouTube, 19.21, June 21, 2020,

Migration, an intricate process of human displacement, is certainly one of the most grave global concerns today, characterised by a diverse and substantial movement of people. "Migrant- an umbrella term, not defined under international law, reflecting the common lay understanding of a person who moves away from his or her habitual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons. The term also includes several well-defined legal categories of people, such as migrant workers; persons whose particular types of movements are legally defined, such as smuggled migrants; as well as those whose status or means of movement are not specifically defined under international law, such as international students".[ii] The above definition highlights the different typologies of migration. This paper will primarily delve into understanding inter-state migration focusing on internal out-migration from the state of West Bengal to other states in India, more in relation to informal workers, where an apparently growing trend has been recorded in the last decade. In 2011, the Census of India ranked West Bengal as the fourth largest source of migrant workers in the country, with around 5,80,000 people migrating from the state between 2001 and 2011.[iii] The figure of 5,80,000 workers illustrates a gendered social stratification, with males predominantly engaged in construction and industrial roles, while females are largely employed as helpers on construction sites and urban caregivers, often vulnerable to sexual trafficking. This paper aims to investigate the

fundamental causes of labour migration, intentionally setting aside social dimensions to focus on the labour force as a cohesive unit. Among the notable factors fuelling this migration are both push factors, like economic hardship and pull factors, which can be attributed to superior job opportunities elsewhere. Furthermore, it has been known that the power of capitalist production can often go hand in hand with cases of human rights violation providing a theoretical framework to reflect on the politics of precarity engendered by extractive capitalism. This study aims to investigate the vulnerabilities, rights, violations, and exploitations faced by individuals, with a particular emphasis on the harsh living conditions of migrants and the historical patterns of exploitation embedded in the system. It examines the experiences and challenges encountered by 'footloose' workers from West Bengal, drawing on secondary ethnographic data to gain insights into their interactions with modern forms of subjectification.

West Bengal: The way Reversed

The process of internal or interstate migration entails the relocation of individuals from a less developed region to a more developed one, with the former termed as the place of origin and the latter as the place of destination. In the specific case of West Bengal, there is a notable exodus of individuals to other states within the union. There has been a notable shift in the migration dynamics of West Bengal. While it was previously characterized by inward internal migration, there is now a significant outflow of migrant labourers from the state. The historical context of migration to West Bengal dates back to the 19th century when the process of urbanization began in Eastern India, centred around Kolkata. As a port city and the seat of colonial administration and trade, Kolkata facilitated major labour movements from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Orissa to the tea gardens in Assam and plantations in Africa.[iv] The industrial growth in the vicinity of Calcutta, with its river transport and port facilities, further augmented the city's prominence in attracting populations from neighbouring hinterlands and other parts of the country. While West Bengal historically experienced a surge in inward migration, the scenario has evolved significantly over the years. Very soon within the conjuncture of independence, partition and new economic designs West Bengal started reversing its position in employment-related workforce management. According to Harold Lubell's 1974 ILO city study on Kolkata, of the two major industries that endured in Bengal, the Hooghly jute mills predominantly employed migrant workers from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, while the Howrah engineering works relied more on the local Bengali workforce.[v] The migration pattern of seasonal workers between the agricultural and industrial sectors, as well as the strong rural link of migrant labour in large-scale industries like textile in Mumbai and jute in Kolkata, did not escape the notice of labour historians.[vi] Having experienced phases of industrialisation and de-industrialization, Kolkata witnessed a shift in financial capital. With the onset of a new economic era, many working sectors are being outsourced, resulting in a significant scarcity of labour opportunities in West Bengal. This outsourcing has led to a shift in the working sectors, once localised but now characterised by substantial investment capacities in distant lands. As a consequence of outsourced finance capitalism and the resulting irregularity of work at home, peri-urban informal workers have been compelled to migrate to further distant areas to earn a livelihood.

The extraordinary exodus

There is now a greater trend of people migrating to other states, even those located far away. This change is reflected in the decreased net migration rate, which dropped from 1.28 in 1991 to 1.01 in 2001.[vii] Specifically, there was a noticeable decline in male net migration, which decreased from 1.86 in 1991 to 1.44 in 2001.[viii] This decrease in net migration rate is attributed to a higher number of individuals migrating out of West Bengal to other states between 1991 and 2001.[ix] These convoluted sensations can be due to diverse causes such as economic opportunities, job options, more suitable habitation essentials, education, etc. Lee has indicated that the efficiency of the migration stream alters with the economic conditions, being high in prosperous times and low in times of depression.[x] Zelinsky's hypothesis of mobility transition also supports this relationship that in different economic development levels in society, migration changes accordingly.[xi] Clark also concluded that population mobility has increased with technical and economic progress.[xii] Out-migration from peri-urban districts of the state is becoming a significant trend for the skilled and semi-skilled workers of the informal sector for whom short-term migration is an alternative source of earning against income risks arising from irregular employment at home.[xiii] It has been observed that industrialization and economic development attract large-scale movements of people from the countryside to town and from town to city.[xiv] It is genuine that both the elements of push and pull action in a parallel approach lead to human displacement from the state of origin to the destination. In this matter, it is the possibility of employment, which the state of West Bengal is incapable of producing as of now, functioning as a push factor, and the active possibilities of the distant states are working as a pull factor.

The migrant labourers in the distant states lack regular employment opportunities and low-wage rates in rural as well as urban West Bengal are the dominant reasons for their migration. Hostile social environment and increasing earning uncertainties in their homeland along with higher rates in distant North and south India are reasons for the migrant workers shifting to various destinations. The continuous inflow of migrant workers from western India is now a challenge for the incumbent Bengali migrant workers in North South India; however, the majority of them are not willing to return to West Bengal in future.

Migrant life

"kaje gechhe" (went for work) the phrase colloquially used by the migrant family members in peri-urban west Bengal resonates with a profound sense of yearning for reunification, despite the evident hardship of separation. Migrant workers willingly leave their families behind to pursue opportunities in distant lands, enabling them to provide financial support. This enduring sacrifice reflects their unwavering hope for a future reunion with their loved ones. The abode of Nawabs, Murshidabad, (once the capital of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa) a district in West Bengal, this aspiration is palpable as families dream of welcoming back their

fathers, brothers, husbands, mothers, and sisters from their arduous journeys. Despite its rich history, the district is now labelled as 'backward'.[xv] The absence of ample employment opportunities has led to socio-economic lag. While one part of the district relies on agriculture, the other depends on migrant labour, forcing many workers to seek opportunities in other states.[xvi] Murshidabad has the highest percentage of workers from Bengal employed in various parts of India, including Maharashtra, Kerala, Odisha, Rajasthan, Karnataka, Haryana, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Delhi, Assam, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and others.[xvii]

Regrettably, there have been several unfortunate incidences of workers losing their lives in accidents while working in other states. The majority of these tragic events have been attributed to train accidents, electrocution, or falls from buildings.[xviii] Jesmina Bibi, Nurbul's wife, expressed her despair, saying,

"My husband is no more. What will become of us? What does the future hold for our children?" Meanwhile, Nurbul's mother, Manuara Bibi, is inconsolable, stating, "The only property my son owned was this house. He went abroad to support us. Now, he has left us." [xix]

On January 20th, Sinarul Islam, a resident of Fakirabad Purbapara in Domkal, travelled to Kerala for employment to provide financial support for his son's education and his sister's wedding. Neither he nor his family had anticipated the calamity that would befall him. Tragically, Sinarul succumbed to a fatal accident resulting from contact with a high-voltage wire.[xx] The incidents involving Nurbul Seikh and Sinarul Islam, who had been residing away from their hometowns for over 15 years, serve as a stark reminder of the urgent need for improved safety measures in workplaces.[xxi] The unfortunate events, such as Nurbul's fatal fall from a high-rise in Mumbai and Samirul's accident, highlight the critical importance of enhancing social safety and security protocols.

It is essential for governing bodies to take proactive measures in addressing these issues to avert comparable tragedies in the future. Furthermore, the prioritization of worker welfare is crucial, as social security represents a fundamental labour right that is legally protected for all individuals engaged in employment who may face temporary or permanent disabilities.[xxii] The origins of social security can be traced back to the French Revolution, marked by the proclamation of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, which served as a precursor to the French Constitution of 1793.[xxiii] This document asserted that public assistance is a sacred obligation.[xxiv] Furthermore, Article 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms that every individual is entitled to social security. The International Labour Organization's declaration on fundamental principles and rights at work represents a significant advancement in this area. Development should aim to enhance the living conditions of individuals, ensuring the fulfilment of basic human needs for all.[xxv] Additionally, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights established by the United Nations further reinforces the economic, social, and cultural rights of workers, enabling them to exercise self-determination and pursue their economic, social, and cultural development freely.[xxvi]

Exodus Phenomenon and the sinister nexus

The experience of being a migrant labourer in a distant land is undeniably challenging. Destinations are characterised as much more culturally diverse than Bengal. These labourers are driven to migrate out of necessity rather than choice, showcasing their desperation as they struggle to find space on overcrowded trains. The distressing sight of labourers packed into unreserved train compartments, some even sitting on the floor or in the lavatories, illustrates the harsh reality they face. Various reports have shed light on the difficult experiences of these migrants, with one report titled "Aboard the Karmabhumi Express: A Glimpse into the Dreams of Outbound Migrants from Bengal" [xxvii] drawing attention to their plight and the obstacles they confront. The report reads,

"It is 10.28 pm at north Bengal's Alipurduar Junction and the crowd has swollen to its peak. This is when the Karmabhumi Express appears at the station. It is bound for Mumbai. Finding a seat on it is close to impossible. It is always chock full and there are always hundreds struggling to get a spot in the unreserved general compartment. This train is commonly recognised as the lifeline connecting the northeastern and eastern states of Assam, West Bengal, Jharkhand, and Odisha to the country's financial hub" [xxviii] *– (Joydeep Sarkar, "Aboard the Karmabhumi Express: A Glimpse into the Dreams of Outbound Migrants from Bengal," The wire, September 23, 2023)*

A revamped reporting method that documents the repatriation of migrants from their destination to their origin for polling purposes captures similar empathetic journey conditions,

"The Ernakulam Junction- Howrah Junction Antyodaya express breaks with a heavy grunt as if it has forgotten something or someone before it lumbers along its tedious 2,238-kilometre cross-country run. The platform, where multitudes had assembled, is now deserted. There is no one to see them off, to wave goodbye or stifle a tear. The train has swallowed the multitudes –the nameless, faceless men who are part of Kerala's 34 lakh interstate workforce and who are now on a journey back home for a price of Rs 575. It's a journey back to the familiar". [xxix] *– (Ghosh Sandip, "A night on the migrant express," The Indian Express, May 12, 2024).*

The 22512 Kamakhya – LTTE Karmabhumi and the 22878 Antyodaya Express- a metaphor symbolizing the acute employment crisis in Bengal, forcing people to endure challenging journeys for their survival. It's crucial to understand that these journeys are just part of an exploitative system. To truly comprehend their struggles, we must delve into the social mobility process. This can be of diverse process depending upon the skill of the labourers. Migrants often rely on social networks, seeking guidance from relatives and friends who have migrated before. In the case of unskilled workers, the aarkathi or thekedar (brokers and contractors) also play a significant role in shaping their journey, often luring them with false promises. In this cutthroat world,

individuals fall victim to these traps. Reports reveal that migrants are often exploited, receiving lower wages than promised, with the middlemen pocketing the difference. This creates a sinister nexus with the "jobber gang boss" [xxx], perpetuating the cycle of exploitation.

The majority of individuals in gang boss positions within their respective fields have previously worked in informal sector roles from a young age. Their ambition to take on leadership roles later in life often stems from their desire to oversee production and manage migrant workers from various origins and destinations, thus influencing their income. Managers of these sectors often rely on the gang boss to handle these responsibilities, knowing that the boss will manage migrant workers who may have limited negotiation power and are obligated to contribute significant labour to the production process.[xxxi] Additionally, the gang boss must maintain a positive relationship with the workers, ensuring that they work in a manner that satisfies the employer without causing any animosity.[xxxii] This requires a delicate balance of communication, persuasion, and motivation methods.[xxxiii] To truly grasp the workings of the vicious nexus, we need only consider a field note by Prof. Jan Breman. In his account, he narrates...

"Vallabh Kikhabha, a Dhodhiya Patel in Chikhligam, is one of these. He brings no less than 450 seasonal migrants to a brickfield in Rander, close to Surat. Jobbing has made him a rich man. He is one of the few members of his caste to own a mango orchard in the village. In it is also a large bungalow of the same type as those owned by Anavil Brahmins. But this is not all. V.K. is now the owner of four lorries and has had a house built in the taluka town for one of his sons. It is all the result of the faithful service that he has shown for more than a quarter of a century to his patron who has grown together with him. He no longer calls himself Mukadam but uses the English term 'labour contractor'. V.K. continues to use the village as his base of operations. Like a spider in its web, he organizes the recruitment during the wet seasons, assisted in his work by some dozens of touts who work for him as sub-agents".[xxxiv] – (Jan Breman, *Footloose Labour* 95)

The intermediary's role in coordinating the collective migration of skilled labour is relatively restrained.[xxxv] The traditional practice of labour mobilization, wherein the aarkathi or thekedar assumed responsibility for labour provisioning, typically through the debt-bondage system, is not pervasive in the case of skilled contract labour migrating for employment in the export market.[xxxvi] Presently, recruitment primarily occurs through skilled and experienced workers, with the travel expenses being shouldered by the migrant family.

Labour in formalisation and casualization

The lives of internal migrants are deeply impacted by prejudice and exploitation. Upon entering the labour market, they become ensnared in a vicious cycle. The in-formalization and casualization of labour, characteristic of the neoliberal economic structure, reduce them to a form of basic, disposable labour. This exploitative design lessens them to *'bare body wedge labour'*.[xxxvii] Despite constitutional guarantees, employers in the informal sector flagrantly violate these rights, resulting in widespread exploitation of labourers. Wages for these workers vary significantly based on gender and age, with men, women, and children being unfairly compensated for identical work. The migrant workforce, which makes up the majority of the informal sector, is often required to work continuously throughout their employment period.

For the affected households, this form of employment constitutes a significant portion of their total income. Wage disparities exist not just between businesses within the same industry, but also among workers performing identical tasks for the same employer.[xxxviii] Employers in the sector determine wages based on their preferences, offering slightly higher wages to favoured employees without justifying others. Workers lack the courage to voice concerns regarding this unfair treatment due to their inability to negotiate. This lack of negotiation power stems from two main factors: the migration of individuals from West Bengal to other parts of the country to send remittances back home, and the absence of adequate protection from the state. Moreover, these workers incur significant expenses in securing employment and often send money back to support their families even before they start working. This money sent back home represents not savings, but advance payments for future labour, as demanded by employers or their agents.[xxxix] Many recruiting agents use this advance payment tactic to lure migrants away from their homes and subsequently bind them to the worksite for as long as required, essentially subjecting them to the will of the employer. This perpetuates a cycle of subjugation, where contracted labourers are denied the freedom to negotiate terms. Their precarious situation is further reinforced by the informal nature of their work, which creates the illusion of self-employment,[xl] contributing to their exploitation within the informal sector economy.

Working hours are an unknown luxury for most people who rely on the informal labour market for their livelihood, and standardised working hours are an unknown fantasy. The casual use of physical power is characterised by indecision as to when the working hour begins and finishes. For these tapped people, the calculation of working hours founded on certain standardisation is just a luxury, for having worked at any point to make sure some pay gets developed is of immediate concern. Casual labourers bear to traipse restlessly each day seeking work and trying to link with employers who will pay them a wage.[xli] Actually, in numerous models or events, these labourers do not get employment regularly. The work regime has since become more capitalist. The workers do not belong to the identical caste anymore and the tight relationship between capital and labour that earlier existed has been cut.[xlii] For illustration, if we examine factory workers we could be able to comprehend the pessimistic sensation more seemingly. These workers have to perform almost for twelve hours a day and that too till the worker of the following shift reaches and assumes control. Although the Factories Act expressly stipulates a working day of no more than eight hours [xliii], nearly all have no choice but to work as the employer demands. In line with the law of self-exploitation, they make use of every opportunity to maximise their income. They are rigorously exploited from economic as well as social facets beneath the projection of being self-exploited. These workers are also bound to perform inhuman miserable essentials to maintain their

livelihood. The sources of employment in which the toiling mass at the bottom of the economy is imprisoned not only provide inferior earnings but also cause damage to health in ways that are linked to offensive work conditions.[xliv]

From Overlooked to Overexposed

It's remarkable how the internal migrant crisis in India has reached such staggering proportions that it now dominates the headlines of daily newspapers. Just a few years ago, despite facing a crisis of comparable scale, these individuals were largely overlooked and relegated to the fringes of society. It took the coronavirus pandemic and its widespread repercussions to bring their plight to the forefront, offering a sobering reminder of the economy's heavy reliance on migrant labour. It's during this pandemic that people, who had previously nothing to do with migrant labour, probably did not even think they existed, suddenly found them coming out [xlv]. The country currently houses an estimated 139 million migrants, as the World Economic Forum confirmed.[xlvi] The International Labour Organization (ILO) has projected that a staggering 400 million workers are at risk of falling into poverty due to the pandemic and lockdown measures.[xlvii] Indian migrant workers have bravely confronted numerous adversities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The closure of factories and workplaces as a result of the nationwide lockdown has forced millions of migrant workers into financial hardship, food scarcity, and an uncertain future. This challenging situation has left many workers and their families struggling with hunger. As a result, many of them embarked on the lengthy journey back to their hometowns on foot, facing transportation limitations due to the lockdown measures.[xlviii] In the context of rising unemployment and financial difficulties, exacerbated by lockdown restrictions that suspended public transportation, a significant number of migrant workers were seen making their way back to their home villages on foot or by bicycle, covering distances that ranged from hundreds to over a thousand kilometres, often with their families in tow.[xlix] Many of these individuals undertook this arduous journey while grappling with hunger. For these migrants, adhering to social distancing guidelines proved impractical as they travelled in large groups.[l] Some expressed a willingness to contract the virus in their home villages rather than endure starvation resulting from unemployment in urban areas.[li] The crisis has not escaped the scrutiny of the authorities, resulting in a humanitarian crisis in urban areas. It has brought to light the issue of defining identity and legal status, which has become increasingly pressing. Numerous individuals were apprehended for breaching lockdown regulations, having been discovered at inter-state borders, in forests straddling state lines, and even aboard boats attempting to navigate rivers.[lii] Some migrants succumbed to exhaustion,[liii] while others lost their lives in road accidents after either walking long distances or concealing themselves in vehicles. Regrettably, 198 migrant workers lost their lives due to the lockdown, with road accidents cited as the primary cause.[liv] Research reveals that during the initial wave of COVID-19 lockdowns, approximately 43.3 million interstate migrants made the arduous journey back home, with around 35 million individuals opting for walking or employing unconventional modes of transportation. Moreover, migrant workers who chose to remain in their locations during the mass departure encountered hostility from their neighbours, who alleged that they were carriers of the coronavirus. Consequently, these individuals were unable to leave their residences to procure food. Additionally, many experienced police violence if they attempted to go outside.[lv] Upon their return to their native towns and villages, they were often met with either apprehension or a form of class bias, with some being subjected to disinfection procedures involving sprays of disinfectants or soap solutions.[lvi] This treatment stemmed from fears that they might be bringing the virus from the urban areas where they had been working. A significant number of migrant workers have articulated concerns regarding the prospect of resuming their previous employment in urban areas, particularly in light of the unemployment they experienced during the lockdown period.[lvii] Concurrently, businesses have indicated a shortage of labour beginning in mid-April. The considerable demand for labour in remote markets, coupled with the scarcity of employment opportunities in their native areas such as West Bengal, has prompted these mobile individuals to migrate once more, often without a thorough comprehension of the implications, leading to narratives of reverse migration. Furthermore, another element affecting labourers' decision to return is the limited savings typically held by economically disadvantaged households. Upon their arrival back in their villages, these savings are frequently depleted within just a few days. Research carried out between April and May revealed that 77% of migrant workers expressed a willingness to return to urban areas for employment.[lviii] The anticipated influx of these workers into cities is projected to significantly revitalise the economy, which has experienced considerable disruption.[lix] Even in support of this transition, several employers facilitated the transportation of migrants back to their jobs, utilising various modes of travel such as taxis, trains, and even flights.[lx]

The formulation of initiatives to support migrant workers, as well as the determination of budgetary allocations, relies heavily on information, which is essential for crafting effective governmental responses.[lxi] However, there exists a significant deficiency in the available data concerning the population of transient individuals who are often overlooked, which contributes to their ongoing marginalisation. Neither the West Bengal state government nor the central authorities have established any comprehensive database to account for the substantial number of individuals migrating in search of livelihood opportunities. It is important to note that before the lockdown was announced, the Ministry of Labour and Employment disclosed no comprehensive register for migrant workers. Furthermore, the data available for this group is significantly outdated; estimates from the Ministry, based on the 2011 census, suggested that the migrant workforce was approximately 100 million in 2016, likely to have increased by 2020.[lxii]

The central government also acknowledged that a proposal was made to provide rations to migrants without ration cards, but admitted that it lacks accurate data on the current and projected number of migrant workers across the country.[lxiii] The most recent National Sample Survey that concentrated on migration was conducted over a decade ago, specifically in 2007-08, with the results released in 2010. Additionally, the migration statistics from the 2011 census are inadequate, as only a fraction of the data was disclosed in 2020.[lxiv] The Economic Survey for the fiscal year 2020-21 also highlights this concern, noting, *"Due to*

the limited data on inter-state migration and employment in informal sectors, it is challenging to ascertain the number of migrants who lost their jobs and housing during the pandemic and subsequently returned to their home regions".[lxv] The plight of these individuals has consistently been neglected by relevant authorities, who have failed to consider their circumstances. Had there been adequate data on migrant workers prior to the pandemic-induced lockdowns, the ensuing crisis could have been significantly mitigated, allowing for the implementation of crucial measures. The deplorable conditions faced by migrants are well-documented, many were left stranded, subjected to inhumane treatment, and even forcibly detained at state borders, effectively creating internal divisions through the borders of the pandemic that delineated insiders from outsiders.

In this context, it is highly important to gather up-to-date information about migrant workers, taking into account their demographic characteristics, income and spending habits, and access to social security benefits, to facilitate meaningful national interventions. The creation of a thorough database at both national and state levels is of utmost importance for developing effective policy initiatives. On June 28, 2020, the Hon'ble Supreme Court issued a pivotal ruling concerning the challenges faced by migrant labourers during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Court took *suo motu* notice of the delays in the implementation of the *"One Nation One Card"* initiative, which had left millions of migrant workers without essential access to welfare programs. The Supreme Court characterized the government's approach as one of *"apathy and lackadaisical attitude"* regarding the establishment of a national database for unorganised workers. The bench mandated that states yet to compile this database must complete the task by July 31, 2021. It is also important to note that in a prior ruling in May 2020, the apex Court had instructed the Union Ministry of Labour and Employment to initiate the creation of a National Database of Unorganised Workers (NDUW).[lxvi] Moreover, the role of data in facilitating effective interventions for public welfare was emphasized in an International Labour Organisation report on migrant workers in India.[lxvii] Moreover, the report emphasized that reliable databases at all levels of governance are essential for establishing an interface between migrant workers and public systems and services.

In response to various directives and pressures, both central and state governments have commenced efforts to document migrant populations. However, as of 2024, no comprehensive data collection initiative has been implemented. The Government of India has introduced certain measures, such as the e-Shram online registration program aimed at enhancing the safety of migrant workers. Nonetheless, significant progress remains necessary. Additionally, state governments, including West Bengal, have established multiple platforms, such as *Karmasathi* (*Parijayee Shramik*), and are actively working to develop a precise database. Currently, the data portal indicates that 2,168,343[lxviii] individuals are registered; however, the information remains inconsistent compared to other available data. There is still considerable work to create a reliable database encompassing workers migrating for livelihood purposes, ensuring they are included in social security measures. The responsibility for managing the registration process should not solely rest with higher levels of administration; rather, it should be delegated to grassroots governance in rural areas, which are the primary sources of migration from West Bengal. Furthermore, grassroots initiatives should focus on educating unregistered labourers about the benefits of registration, thereby reinforcing the social security frameworks available to these mobile workers.

Final Thoughts

The phenomenon of interstate migration could be understood through the dual concepts of push and pull factors, where push factors were associated with the individual's place of origin and pull factors were linked to the destination. This research primarily examined the key factors that drove individuals to depart from the state of West Bengal. In addressing the pull factors, the discussion inevitably encompassed this aspect as well. Furthermore, both push and pull factors operated concurrently, driving individuals to migrate from West Bengal in search of better opportunities elsewhere in the country. It is essential to recognize that this movement should not be simplistically categorized as voluntary or self-initiated employment, as often suggested by employers. Instead, two primary reasons substantiated this assertion. Firstly, individuals were compelled to leave their familiar surroundings in pursuit of their destination due to the necessity of sustaining their livelihoods, as there were limited economic opportunities available in their home regions. Secondly, they were adversely affected by the neoliberal economic paradigm, which had engendered a new type of individual whose consumption patterns had been significantly altered to fit a competitive framework. The economy had subtly begun to dictate our practices and beliefs. The escalating demands to compete had driven these labourers to seek higher wages, prompting them to abandon low-paying jobs in their home states in favour of employment in other regions, thereby enabling them and their families to aspire to a better quality of life. Currently, the notion of a good life is increasingly defined by the principles of neoliberal capitalism. The governmental response to this issue remains largely inadequate. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the needs of this demographic were largely overlooked by authorities. Even in the aftermath of the pandemic, efforts to enhance the database have not yielded a well-organized system, leaving these workers exposed to insufficient social security protections. The deficiencies in data are evident throughout this paper, as varying amounts of information are presented at different points. Furthermore, the conditions faced by labourers at their destinations are far from satisfactory; they are ensnared in a troubling and exploitative system that takes advantage of their labour. The circumstances of their journeys further illustrate the dire conditions they endure. The absence of social protection measures raises significant concerns for this population.

This analysis prompts a significant question regarding the degree to which these individuals are becoming new subjects of the nation. The notion of citizenship entails certain commitments from the government, which extend beyond mere electoral documentation; it encompasses a set of rights that should be accessible to recognized citizens. The Indian Constitution outlines citizenship rights in Part II, which are considered fundamental as they are essential for individuals to realize their full intellectual, moral, and spiritual potential.[lxix] The protection of basic rights in the workplace enables individuals to claim and secure a fair

share of economic resources.[lxx] This assurance is crucial for converting economic growth into social equity, thus aligning development with the ideals of holistic progress.[lxxi] The Directive Principles of State Policy in the Indian Constitution requires the state to ensure that all citizens, irrespective of gender, have access to sufficient means of livelihood, equal pay for equal work, and protection against exploitation and abuse in the workplace.[lxxii] Additionally, it highlights the necessity of safeguarding the health and well-being of workers, providing children with opportunities for healthy development in an environment of freedom and dignity, and protecting youth from exploitation and neglect. The state is also responsible for ensuring equal justice and free legal aid, establishing effective measures for the right to work, education, and public assistance in times of need, guaranteeing humane working conditions and maternity benefits, and securing a living wage and a decent quality of life while encouraging worker participation in industrial management [lxxiii]. In addition, a range of labour legislation exists, including the Trade Union Act of 1926, the Minimum Wages Act of 1948, the Employees State Insurance Act of 1948, the Industrial Disputes Act of 1949, the Industrial Disputes Decision Act of 1955, the Payment of Bonus Act of 1955, the Personal Injuries (Compensation Insurance) Act of 1963, the Maternity Benefits Act of 1967, the Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act of the 1970s, the Bonded Labour Systems (Abolition) Act of 1976, the Equal Remuneration Act of 1976, the Interstate Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act of 1979, and the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act of 1986, among others [lxxiv] . The International Labour Organization (ILO) has also been instrumental in advancing International Labour Standards (ILS).[lxxv] Through a series of conferences, the ILO has developed these international labour standards too.[lxxvi] Nevertheless, it is important to note that these labour laws and policies primarily apply to workers within the organized sector then what about people engaged in the informal sector? However, despite the global compacts and domestic constitutional measures, these individuals remained marginalized, with a substantial risk of further marginalization in the future. The pandemic and successive rounds of lockdowns in destination and home states have made it more evident that not only their income has fallen, but getting a job and moving across different destination locations has become uncertain too. They have now hardly any resources to cope with this continuing uncertainty.[lxxvii]

Enhancing labour laws and their enforcement mechanisms to safeguard the rights of migrants is crucial for the process of democratization. This focus on rights emphasizes the necessity of formal protections provided by the state, which are obtained through a structured process of claim-making. For such claims to be effectively articulated, a well-organized procedure is essential. Migrant labourers, particularly those from West Bengal and within the informal sectors, are significantly disorganized, and opportunities for organisation are systematically diminished. They are often ensnared in the complexities of neo-liberalism, which positions them precariously within the capitalist framework. To democratize this sector, it is vital to empower migrant workers to participate in decision-making processes. Through collective organization, these workers can advocate for their rights, secure negotiation power, and hold employers and policymakers accountable. Education plays a pivotal role in this empowerment, and vocational training programs in West Bengal could be instrumental in facilitating democratization. Additionally, access to healthcare at the destination is a fundamental component of democratizing the informal sector. Many migrant workers face significant barriers to adequate healthcare services, resulting in poor health outcomes and heightened susceptibility to illness. Establishing healthcare facilities in areas with high concentrations of migrants and providing health insurance can significantly enhance their well-being. Financial inclusion is another critical factor in democratizing the informal sector, as workers often endure harsh conditions that require immense resilience to navigate. Their inability to express dissatisfaction with their working conditions leads to a build-up of frustration, which must ultimately find a means of expression.

Note: This work has been developed under module E (Refugee and Migrant Labour, Precarious Forms and Globalisation) and presented in the Ninth Annual Research and Orientation Workshop on Global Protection of Refugee and Migrants organized by Calcutta Research Group (CRG) in collaboration with IWM Vienna, Rosa-Luxembourg Stiftung South Asia, and various other national and international universities.

Acknowledgment: I acknowledge the Ministry of Labour, the Ilo website, the Wire, and Firstpost for supplying the information that informed this research. Additionally, I affirm that the work presented herein is original, with no sections copied or derived from other sources without proper citations. I also confirm that this paper has not been published in any format and is not currently under consideration for publication elsewhere.
Author's Contribution: *Joydeep Sarkar*: Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing
Funding: No
Declaration: Not Applicable
Competing Interest: No

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