

# GENERAL ESSAY 2020

## Cities and migrant workers in India

The migrants are our dhobis, drivers, domestic help, tailors, mechanics, waiters, delivery men, garbage sorters, lavatory cleaners, designers in leather units, vegetable sellers, street food vendors, factory workers, construction labourers, even rat catchers. The myriad kinds of work they do power the urban economy, both informal and formal, but they remain largely invisible to fellow citizens and governments. Their work is necessary in cities. There are, data shows, more than 100 million migrant workers who make the semi-permanent, male-dominated, remittance-based migration wave that's unique to India.

Cities offer work and economic opportunities to millions, many of whom do not own land or whose lands in villages yield little. India's lingering agrarian crisis has made work-related migration inescapable for hundreds of thousands of people. Young men from Assam and Sikkim have travelled across the breadth of India to work in ice cream parlours in Pune, they have migrated from Odisha and Bihar to Tamil Nadu and Kerala to work in restaurants or as electricians and plumbers, from Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar they have found work in diamond and textile factories in Surat, and from all over they have trooped into Mumbai and Delhi. This is economic security — the ability to earn a few thousands and send most of it back home.

Economic security, however, does not automatically bring social security, let alone social comfort. For almost all those who migrate for work, their idea of home is the house they left behind, families they separated from, and community networks they slackened from. In times of distress — such as this one where the threat of an incurable pandemic and the world's most stringent lockdown with weeks of no work, no wages, and an uncertain future — they seek social security. If basic needs mean rations or food, then governments have tried to do their bit, but basic needs include emotional needs such as being with families which have not been met.

India's cities are cleaved into glitter and grit in ways that their civic design does not adequately provide for the latter. Nothing in recent times has shown this as much as the pandemic. There are two cities within an urban boundary: one equipped to cope with lockdowns, the other simply not so. Those of us who have homes that can double as workplaces were mildly inconvenienced since the March 25 lockdown. Those who grit it out on daily or weekly wages, living in impossibly cramped settlements which mocked the very idea of 'social distancing' or who simply live in their now-shut workplaces, had nowhere to go except back home to villages.

This must call into question the fundamentals of India's urban design and planning in which affordable basic housing — a non-negotiable aspect of building cities — is at best a government's mission statement and at worst a joke. A

housing crisis has lurked on our urban horizons for decades, but has gone unaddressed or camouflaged in 'smart city' concepts. The informal settlements or slums that dot our cities are manifestations of the failure of urban design and economy. If migrants were comfortably housed in cities with their families, if landlords or land mafias did not demand rent from them, there might have been fewer of them on the roads defying the lockdown.

Their work is welcome, but not their presence in our cities. This is not a sustainable model of urban development whether there is a pandemic or not. COVID-19 and lockdown have only underlined this truth.

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