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Understanding Post-Pandemic Migration in India

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Abstract

This paper examines post-COVID migration in India with a focus on the socio-demographic profile of migrants. The study begins by estimating the overall share of individuals who migrated during this period and then disaggregates migration patterns by gender, caste, education level, region, and marital status. The main reasons influencing migration in the post-pandemic period are also examined. Using secondary data from the National Sample Survey Office's (NSSO) Periodic Labour Force Survey for 2020-2021, the study concludes that employment-related factors—specifically, job loss and dwindling local opportunities—emerged as the primary driver of migration following the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting the economic disruptions encountered during the pandemic. While women's migration was associated with household mobility or family-related conditions, men were more inclined to relocate in quest of better jobs or education. Further evidence that socially and economically advantaged groups had distinct mobility and opportunities than disadvantaged groups come from caste and educational disparities.

Keywords: Migration, gender, COVID-19 pandemic, worker, PLFS.

1. Introduction:

Migration is a universal process that has existed since the earliest stages of human existence and its social and economic implications have long been widely acknowledged (Virupaksha et al, 2014). It plays a crucial role in shaping the social, economic and other structural characteristics of the population of a region (Khan et al, 2010; White & Woods, 1980). It has always been a strategy in which a majority of workers in India used to fulfil their aspiration to uplift from poverty and to access livelihoods that promise decent work (Thakur, 2020).

This COVID-19 induced reverse migration is the second-largest mass migration in India's recorded history after the partition. A significant share of these migrants is attached to the informal sector where employment is largely casual or contractual basis without any job security (Thakur, 2020). In the backdrop of COVID-19 pandemic, the much-needed official migration data for India was collected in the fourth round of PLFS for the first time during July 2020-June 2021 after the COVID-19 lockdown (Mitra & Shrivastav, 2024). Though, the sample design of PLFS is not specifically focused to capture information on migration and temporary visitors, some additional information on migration was collected by adding two

blocks in the PLFS schedule (MoSPI, 2022). We utilise this information to assess the migration situation against the backdrop of much larger issues relating to livelihood and levels of living.

The paper aims to study the broad pattern of migration during the COVID-19 pandemic across socio-economic characteristics such as gender, marital status, social group, education, etc. Along with that, we will study the reasons for this migration across gender.

2. Objectives:

The main objective of the study is to enquire into the nature of the migrants of India in the aftermath of COVID-19 pandemic in India. The study is based on the following objectives:

- a) To analyse the socio-economic characteristics of migrants of India in the post-COVID period.
- b) To identify the major reasons for migration in the post-COVID period across gender.

3. Research Methodology:

This study undertakes a descriptive analysis of the migration data on Indian states by using Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2020-21 collected by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO). The NSSO definition of migrant is based on the last usual place of residence A migrant is defined as an individual whose place of residence at the time of enumeration is different from his usual place of residence (PLFS,2020-21). The migration data is estimated using the current and last place of residence. However, the sample design of Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) is not specifically designed to collect detailed information on migration characteristics as well as temporary visitors. Migration related data are not available in the prior PLFS surveys, but some information related to migration are collected in the PLFS survey of 2020-21 (MoSPI, 2022).

This particular survey contains questions such as whether present place of enumeration differs from last usual place of residence , whether moved to this present place of enumeration after March 2020 , whether the present place of enumeration was usual place of residence any time in the past , location of the last usual place of residence , reason for leaving the last usual place of residence, etc and based on that we are trying to see the details of the migrant of India during this period.

4. Analysis and Discussion:

4.1. Understanding the pattern of migration:

The data shows that nearly 28.93 percent of the population reported that their present place of enumeration differs from their last usual place of residence, indicating that they are migrants. Out of 4,10,818 persons sampled this year, 1,13,998 individuals have been reported to be migrated this year. In contrast, a much larger share i.e., around 71.07 percent or 2,96,820 individuals reported no change in their usual residence.

Table 1: Whether Present place of enumeration differs from last usual place of residences(migrant):

All India	Migrant	Percentage share
Yes	1,13,998	28.93
No	2,96,820	71.07
Total	4,10,818	100.00

Source: Author’s calculation using unit level data of PLFS 2020-21.

The regional distribution of migrants in India shows considerable variation across different parts of the country. The southern region records the highest share of migrants with 33.51% share, indicating relatively greater mobility, while the western (30.3%), central (29.63%), and northern (29.26%) regions also show migration levels close to the national average. In contrast, the Union Territories (26.02%) and eastern region (24.7%) have relatively lower share of migrants, suggesting comparatively less population movement. The northeastern region has the lowest migration share at 18.72%. Overall, the data highlights that migration is most prominent in southern and western India, while the eastern and northeastern regions experience limited mobility patterns.

Table 2: Percentage share of people who are migrant and non-migrant in different regions of India

Region	Migrant	No migrant
South	33.51	66.49
West	30.3	69.7
Central	29.63	70.37
North	29.26	70.74
UTs	26.02	73.98
East	24.7	75.3
North-East	18.72	81.28

Source: Author’s calculation using unit level data of PLFS 2020-21.

The table 3 shows a strong gender pattern in migration. Among individuals classified as migrants, women constitute around 81.13%, while men account for only 18.84% of the share. This indicates that migration is mainly female dominated, which is consistent with the common pattern of marriage-related migration in India (Rao & Finnoff,2015). Among non-migrants, however, the pattern reverses. Men constitute 64.08%, while women form 35.91% showing that males are more likely to remain at their make up an overwhelming majority usual place of residence.

Again, data shows that among the male population, only 10.69% are migrants, while a large majority, 89.31% are non-migrants. In contrast, 47.92% of women, i.e., nearly half of the female population are migrants and 52.08% are non-migrants. This indicates that women in India migrate at far higher rates than men, largely due to social factors such as marriage-related migration, which is a major driver of female mobility in the country (Suraj & V., 2024). Whereas male migration is comparatively lower and more often tied to employment or economic reasons (Desai & Banerji,2008).

Table 3: Gender wise percentage share of people who are migrant and non-migrant in different regions of India

Gender	Migrant	Non-migrant
Male	10.69	89.31
Female	47.92	52.08

Source: Author’s calculation using unit level data of PLFS 2020-21.

The data highlights a strong link between marital status and migration patterns in India. Among people who have never married, only 6.14% are migrants, while an overwhelming 93.86% remain as non-migrants. In contrast, migration is far more common among those who are married. It is observed that 46.68% of married individuals, i.e., nearly half of this

group are migrants. This reflects the well-known pattern in India where marriage is a major driver of migration particularly for the women, as people often move to their spouse’s residence after marriage. Thus, marital status plays a significant role in shaping migration trends at the national level (Das & Munda,2024).

Table 4: Distribution of Migrants and Non-Migrants by Marital Status (All India)

Marital status	Migrant	Non-migrant
Never married	6.14	93.86
Married	46.68	53.32

Source: Author’s calculation using unit level data of PLFS 2020-21.

The data show clear variation in migration patterns across different social groups in India. Scheduled Tribes (ST) have the lowest migrant share at 25.34%, indicating relatively limited mobility, with 74.66% remaining non-migrants. Scheduled Castes (SC) show slightly higher mobility, with 27.18% migrants. Migration rate is even higher among the Other Backward Classes with 28.96% migrants. The highest migration share occurs among the “Others” category, with 31.68% migrants and 68.32% non-migrants. These differences suggest that relatively privileged groups showing greater movement compared to historically disadvantaged communities (Williams et al. ,2020).

Table 5: Distribution of Migrants and Non-Migrants by Social Group

Social Group	Migrant	Non-migrant
ST	25.34	74.66
SC	27.18	72.82
OBC	28.96	71.04
Others	31.68	68.32
Total	28.93	71.07

Source: Author’s calculation using unit level data of PLFS 2020-21.

This table shows how migration varies across different education levels in India. Among illiterates, 34.47% are migrants, which is relatively high compared to most of the other education groups. Those educated up to primary and below primary level have a lower migration rate, with 21.94% migrants and 78.06% non-migrants. Individuals educated up to ‘middle, secondary, and higher secondary level’ show a moderate migration level, with 27.53% migrants. Interestingly, people with education above higher secondary have the highest migration share at 36.47%, indicating that more educated individuals may be more mobile, likely due to employment or higher-education opportunities (Nilsson, 2019). Overall, the total distribution shows that 28.93% of the population is migrant and 71.07% is non-migrant, suggesting that education plays a meaningful role in shaping mobility patterns (Vaid, 2016; Nilsson, 2019). The highest migration shares appear among people with diploma/certificate courses at 35.96%, graduates at 34.90%, and postgraduates and above at 41.86% that reflects the role of higher skills in enabling mobility for jobs and education. Overall, the data exhibits the pattern that migration is lowest among the least educated, rises moderately for those with middle or secondary education, and is highest among individuals with higher qualifications.

Table 6: Distribution of Migrants and Non-Migrants by their education level (All India)

Education level	Migrant	Non-migrant
Illiterate	34.47	65.53
Primary and below primary	21.94	78.06
Middle, secondary, and higher secondary	27.53	72.47
Diploma/certificate course, graduate, postgraduate and above	36.47	63.53
Total	28.93	71.07

Source: Author's calculation using unit level data of PLFS 2020-21.

The data clearly show that migrants have a higher labour-force participation (43.25%) compared to non-migrants (40.91%) (ILO, 2024). This means a larger share of migrants are either working or seeking work. In contrast, non-migrants have a greater proportion of people not in the labour force (59.09%) compared to migrants (56.75%). This suggests that compared to non-migrants, migrants show greater economic engagement, as non-migrant populations include a relatively higher share of students, homemakers, elderly individuals, and others not participating in the labour market.

Table 7: Labour Force Status of Migrants and Non-Migrants

	Migrant	Non-migrant
Labour force participation	43.25	40.91
Not in labour force	56.75	59.09

Source: Author's calculation using unit level data of PLFS 2020-21.

Based on the question "Whether moved to present place of enumeration after March 2020," only 3.15% of respondents reported moving to their current residence after March 2020, while 96.85% had not moved. Among males, 8.29% reported moving to their current residence after March 2020. Among females, only 1.95% reported moving, compared with 98.05% who remained in the same residence. Overall, this indicates that males were more likely than females to have moved during this period, though movement was low for both the groups.

Another question was asked to those who have migrated, "Whether present place of enumeration was the usual place of residence in the past" shows that 11.14% of respondents indicated their current location was not their usual residence in the past, while 88.86% reported that it was their usual residence. This indicates that the large majority of individuals were living in the same place they had lived previously, with only a small share reporting a change in their usual residence.

4.2. Reason for Migration

To know the reasons for migration, one question is asked, "the reason for leaving the last usual place of residence" shows that loss of job, closure of unit, or lack of employment opportunities is the most common reason, accounting for 48.89% of all migration. The next most frequently reported reasons are social / political problems (riots, terrorism, political refugee, bad law and order, etc.) with 15.73 of the percentage share and displacement by a development project with 13.22 of the percentage shares. Around 4.26% of the people have migrated to take up employment/better employment, business, proximity to place of work or due to transfer. Migration of a parent or earning family member is the reason for around

3.02% of the migration. Overall, economic distress due to job loss or lack of employment opportunity stands out as the dominant driver of relocation among those who moved.

Table 8: Reason for migration

Reason for leaving the last usual place of residence	Percentage share
In search of employment/better employment	12.19
For employment/work (to take up employment/to take up better employment/business/proximity to place of work/transfer)	4.26
Loss of job/closure of unit/lack of employment opportunities	48.89
Migration of parent/earning member of the family	3.02
To pursue studies	1.72
Marriage	0.81
Natural disaster (drought, flood, tsunami, etc)	0.15
Social / political problems (riots, terrorism, political refugee, bad law and order, etc.)	15.73
Displacement by development project	13.22

Source: Author’s calculation using unit level data of PLFS 2020-21.

The reasons for leaving the last usual place of residence show some differences in the factors driving migration. Both for males and females, the most prominent reason is the loss of job/closure of unit/lack of employment opportunities. 59.58% left their previous residence because of job loss or the closure of workplaces, while for males 41.70% have migrated due to this reason. In search of employment/better employment, 17.89 % of the males have migrated, while relatively few women moved in search of better employment (3.60%). A notable movement happened due to social or political problems -17.01% of the males and 13.87% of the females have migrated due to riots, terrorism, political refugee, bad law and order, etc during the study period.

Table 9: Reason for migration across gender

Reason for leaving the last usual place of residence	Male	Female
In search of employment/better employment	17.89	3.60
For employment/work (to take up employment/to take up better employment/business/proximity to place of work/transfer)	3.33	5.67
Loss of job/closure of unit/lack of employment opportunities	41.70	59.58
Migration of parent/earning member of the family	2.72	3.49
To pursue studies	2.32	0.83
Marriage	0.99	0.53
Natural disaster (drought, flood, tsunami, etc)	0.19	0.09
Social / political problems (riots, terrorism, political refugee, bad law and order, etc.)	17.01	13.87
Displacement by development project	13.84	12.34

Source: Author’s calculation using unit level data of PLFS 2020-21.

5. Summary and Conclusion:

This study examines the patterns of migration in India during 2020-21 using percentage distributions across key demographic and socioeconomic groups. The analysis begins by estimating the overall share of individuals who migrated during this period and then disaggregates migration patterns by gender, caste, education level, region, and marital status.

Employment-related reasons emerged as the dominant factor for the migration, particularly loss of jobs and shrinking local opportunities, thus reflecting the economic disruptions experienced during the pandemic. Men were more likely to migrate in search of better employment or education, while women's migration was linked to family-related circumstances, or household mobility. Caste and educational differences further indicate that socially and economically advantaged groups experienced different mobility and opportunities compared to disadvantaged groups. Again, regional patterns suggest varying levels of mobility between northern and southern states, indicating structural differences in the labor markets of different regions.

Overall, the findings indicate that the migration during this period was not only a response to individual choice but deeply connected to economic disturbances, household characteristics, and regional disparities. These results highlight the need for policies that strengthen employment stability, expand social protection and mitigate the uneven impacts of economic shocks across different demographic groups and regions.

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