

# Migration and Informalisation: Underlying Processes

■ Sumangala Damodaran

From the last week of March 2020, lakhs of migrant workers and their families started long journeys from their places of work, mostly on foot, towards their homes in rural areas hundreds of kilometres away, in response to the 21-day countrywide lockdown that was announced from 24 March. For more than two months after, the stories of deaths by starvation or brutal accidents en route and accounts of how they have been treated at state borders or railway stations kept these largely invisibilised people in the news. Fearing starvation and the inability to provide for themselves or their families for this period, and fearful of contracting the virus and wanting the safety of their villages, their exodus continued, despite the known difficulties of the long journeys. This sparked widespread social outrage at the callousness of governments. Many also couldn't understand why the migrants undertook such 'irrational' journeys in the face of these hazards and despite the promises of governments that they would be taken care of.

The massive loss of employment and livelihoods of vast segments of the population, a visible fallout of the lockdown, brought into focus the phenomenon of informality in labour markets and the fact that it was those who had the insecure and vulnerable jobs or occupations who were making the large journeys homewards. The relationship between migration and informalisation of work, long researched and studied in the social sciences, seems to have been revealed with horrific starkness in the wake of the pandemic and the lockdown in India.

This essay attempts to throw light on how the informalisation of work and employment, a phenomenon that is not only pervasive but also deepening in the Indian economy over the last couple of decades, is aided by the realities of migration and migrant lives. Key to this are the relationship between the village and the city in the case of rural-urban migration or between home and workplace in general. What the response to the pandemic has perhaps highlighted is that despite the diverse conditions in the villages or towns that migrant workers originate from are two common factors: one, the pull of 'home' as the place to go back to in a crisis and two, the intensifying precarity of jobs that these workers do. Both these are realities that characterize the world of work in India, and are linked to *processes of informalisation* and the *nature of rural-urban entanglements*. This essay talks about industrial workers in the city of Delhi, to make the point that migration and the realities of migrant lives facilitate informalisation of labour, and this is intensified by the relationship between the village and the city.

The industrial profile of the city of Delhi is constituted by production largely in industrial areas. These latter are of two kinds: older industrial estates that were established during the early phases of planning the city; and newer industrial estates that reflect the newer, 'cleaner and greener' version of the city and either house the polluting industries that were relocated in the late 1990s and early 2000s, or where new industrial units have come up. Our essay draws upon research mapping

migration, employment and livelihoods in the city of Delhi based on a survey of more than 300 migrant industrial workers in three industrial areas (Wazirpur, Badli and Patparganj) and in-depth interviews with over 100 migrants (industrial and non-industrial) residing in settlements around these industrial areas<sup>1</sup>.

The relationship between migration, informalisation and the city-village relationship of the industrial workers are presented under two broad headings: links with the village of origin, and production conditions.

## Links with the village of origin

First, industrial workers in a city like Delhi are largely not the poorest of the poor who migrate to the city from situations of desperation in the villages; they often either own land in the village themselves or belonging to land owning families. What this means is that even if the holdings are meagre in size, the fact of being connected to the village through land is an important aspect of their identity and results in a pull towards the village.

Second, the most common reason cited for migration is economic, even for workers who own land in the village. This has been typically noted in most migration literature, more recently in the livelihoods framework, which documents the increasing diversification of rural livelihoods away from agriculture towards more non-farm activities and as a considered strategy on part of households to mitigate the risks posed by agriculture.

Third, industrial workers, even if possessing strong links with their villages, identify strongly with and take pride in industrial work in general and in specific industries they work in. Thus, garment workers, steel utensil workers, plastic workers and various such workers that were interviewed in the studies emphasised time and again that they would be unwilling to move away from whatever they were doing.

Fourth, migrating to the city, because it offers the possibility of industrial work and the possibility of bettering their lives and life prospects of their families, is also continuously evaluated in terms of their prospects in the village on their eventual

return. In this sense, city and village, or workplace and home are continuously juxtaposed in terms of the lifetime prospects of these workers and their families, even as they take immense pride in their identities as industrial workers.

The above four aspects together suggest that migrant industrial workers, who enter and continue for long periods in the industrial labour market, are also strongly connected with their places of origin, with the actual or desired ownership of land in the village being an important pull factor that causes them to have a continuous relationship with the village. The following three narratives obtained from the interviews testify to this:

“... a poor worker’s real wealth is his land. No one can understand the pain of one who does not own his land. This (land) is one of the reasons why people migrate to earn – they migrate to be able to earn so as to cultivate their land, or to increase the size of the landholding in case it is small; or in order to repay debt and get land back from seizure... For now we are able bodied, but once our bodies no longer have strength to work in the factories ... then our it is our land that will keep us alive.” (Pappu Lal, Patparganj industrial area, cited in Damodaran 2016: 178)

“A person who sells the whole of his land, cuts his roots, his belongingness to a particular territory.” (Amir, 31 years, Wazirpur industrial area)

“Whenever I go back to the village, I am treated with great honour ... it is a big thing in the village to be working in Delhi’s factories. If I continued to work in the fields with my education, people would never respect me. Since I work in a factory, and that too, in Delhi, it is a big deal”. (Tejeshwar Sharma, Wazirpur industrial area, cited in Damodaran 2016: 178)

Migrant workers thus move frequently between the city and their villages with no discernible pattern that might enable them to be classified as seasonal or circular migrants, but symbolically significant enough to be a regular feature that identifies them (Damodaran 2016). The aspect of strong relationships with land in the villages of origin, combined with the strong sense of identification with the work that they do in the city, which represents the place of aspirations (brutally betrayed in the harsh light of the Covid-19 crisis) perhaps calls for

greater interrogation of the ideas about industrial work as well as migration that sustains such work across the board. We turn to the nature of industrial work below.

### **Production conditions**

The main industries that have operated in Delhi are readymade garments, paper and paper products, rubber and plastic products, steel product fabrication, engineering goods, electrical machinery, repair services and automotive equipment. Our studies found that irrespective of whether the industrial areas were part of the old or new vision of the city, the latter ostensibly involving both the ‘cleaning and greening’ of the city and the transition from informality to formality in industrial layouts, planning and design, conditions of employment are entirely informal, for the following reasons:

First, the agglomeration of industrial units in formal ‘estates’ or industrial areas, along with informal employment conditions has meant that there is always a pool of jobs available in the specific industry that work is being sought in. Fieldwork shows that workers tend to specialize in terms of sectoral work, that is, a steel rolling worker only looks for work in steel rolling units, and similarly for garments and other industries, even if his/her job is casual, as noted earlier, even if conditions are very difficult and occupational mobility is restricted. The following narrative from a steel rolling (garam rolla) worker demonstrates this.

“The first job I got here was that of a helper. I had contacts in a garam rolla unit. Today I work as a mistry (master worker). It’s been 8 years. You have to learn the work on machines while you are a helper, and the owner soon makes you a mistry.... Yes, I have changed factories. It has been to get a hike in wages” (Ram Singh, 43 years, Wazirpur).

Second, the conditions of work are uniformly informal, quite irrespective of industry or area, with the distinctions between workers being on the basis of whether they are regular or casual workers, whether remuneration is time-rated or piece-rated and whether or not they receive remuneration on the basis of their status in employment. Typically, in large units employing larger numbers of workers, there is a pool of what are referred to as “regular” workers, where the only mark of being regular is that they are in continuous employment

with the same unit for long periods of time. We have found that in such units, about 50 % of the workers employed had been working in the same unit for 10 years or more, in some cases more than 20 years. In most of these cases, the wage paid was the monthly equivalent of an unskilled worker’s wage, ranging from Rs. 200 to 270 per day, without any Provident Fund or ESI benefits that are associated with a minimum wage and also scant adherence to work stipulations.

Thus, regular employment does not denote the existence of a formal employment contract, of clear records of employment by the firm concerned, or of the long-term benefits associated with stable employment. All it ensures is that the employment has been available for long periods of time for this category of “regular” workers. Casual workers, in comparison, form a circulatory pool of workers who move between enterprises, but even in their case, tend to stick to one industry.

Third, the workers fully recognize the violations of employment norms that are committed by employers, but also emphasize that conditions in the city are better than in the villages and importantly, in addition to this, the fact that becoming an industrial worker is a matter of prestige when they go back to the village. Further, as already argued, the links with their villages of origin and to land are important factors that influence strongly both their identities as city dwellers as well as the movement between the village and the city.

The informal conditions of employment in the industrial areas of Delhi are thus embedded in the lives of the workers, but at the same time influenced by the conditions of migration and the pulls from the villages of origin of the workers. It is thus a combination of two features, the need to regularly visit the village and the existence of a pool of jobs, even if informal ones, due to industrial agglomeration, that are taken advantage of by employers to reproduce conditions of informality that keep labour costs low.

Thus, to summarize: a) migration into industrial work (at least in the Delhi industrial estates I have studied), it appears, does not happen from the poorest segments of rural society, but from contexts of some landholding which has a very high symbolic value; b) The need to visit the village

regularly, whether to cultivate land themselves, or to facilitate an increase in landholding through remittances, or to claim back seized land, becomes possible because of the nature of informal work in the estates; c)irrespective of the imperatives of industrial relocation and the creation of “cleaner” industrial estates, thus, the conditions for a classic “low road” to industrial development are facilitated by the phenomenon of migration.<sup>2</sup>

**Postscript: COVID 19 Blues**

Given the realities of industrial production and migration described above, the conduct of the government in the context of the Covid-19 crisis, both with regard to migration as well as to small scale industrial production, is shocking. First, the non-recognition of migrant workers’ actual conditions of existence and callous treatment meted them as they trudged back home, combined with the introduction of draconian labour law reforms in several states reflects the idea that governments see the protection for workers and migrants as a burden. Second, as far as industrial production itself is concerned, the complete relaxation of regulatory and tax commitments for the largest proportion of industrial units in the country through changes in the definition of ‘small’ and ‘medium’ units will spell doom

for the already floundering small scale sector. As the continuing impact of the present crisis we will perhaps witness the collapse of hope from industrial livelihoods, both for small scale producers who are faced with failure and for migrant and other marginalized workers who are now fearful of returning to workplaces which largely exist in the small scale sector.


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**Endnotes**

1. The research was done with funding for two projects, the first by the ICSSR (2012-14) and the second by Tata Trusts, under the the Shramic initiative (2015). Some part of the research has been already been published (S Damodaran.2016. The Shape/ing of Industrial Landscapes: Life, Work and Occupations in and Around Industrial Areas in Delhi in Chakravarty, S and R.Negi (eds) Space, Planning and Everyday Contestations in Delhi, Springer) and some more is under publication. The information presented in this essay is only pointing to broad findings from the projects, not the specific details.

2. The “low road” to industrial development is characterized by growth dependent on lowered

costs (due to low wages) and low value addition in the production processes involved. This is opposed to the “high road” which depends on high value addition, competitive growth and dependence on high technology as instruments of success.



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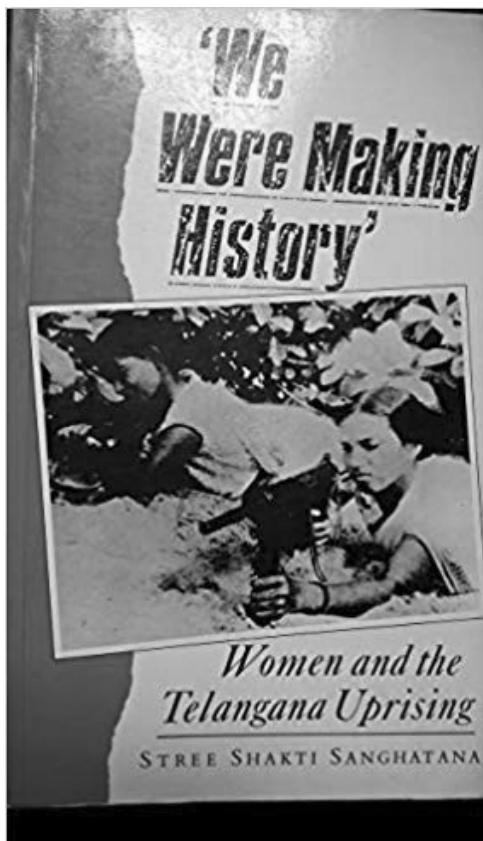
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