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NREGA and labour migration in India: Is village life what the ‘rural’ poor want?

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The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) is the flagship welfare programme of the UPA government, and the largest of its kind in India. One of its main objectives is a significant reduction in labour migration through the provision of locally available work in rural areas, but in spite of some successes, the programme has not had the wished-for impact. Drawing on government data, recent independent studies and the Indian media, the present article argues that NREGA’s limited impact partly stems from a misconception of labour migration – as a poverty ‘problem’ and as merely a product of ‘push-and-pull’ economic factors. It contends that this view wrongfully casts ‘rural’ livelihoods and ‘urban’ society as somehow separate, and assumes that farming is what ‘the poor’ really want, thus establishing poverty as chiefly a rural problem to be tackled by rural development. Accepted explanations for NREGA’s relative failure do not account for the possibility that migration for work may be perceived as a more attractive activity. The view of labour mobility as essentially ‘involuntary’ and driven solely by economic considerations overshadows two sets of reasons why people may still prefer to migrate; namely social factors and evolving perceptions of ‘modernity’. The poor too have aspirations, which are not restricted to survival matters. NREGA has benefitted those with little or no access to positive migration opportunities, especially Scheduled Castes and Tribes, but is unlikely to succeed in curbing labour mobility significantly – which is not desirable anyway. Here, the crucial development challenges are not to reduce migration but to improve its conditions, both economic and social – and to account for the poor’s aspirational horizons.

NREGA... [should help] in reducing the number of migrant labourers in the country as employment is being provided to them in their own villages.

(Indian Labour Minister Mallikarjun Kharge, cited in *The Economic Times*, 2010)

The poor, no less than any other group in a society, do express horizons in choices made and choices voiced, often in terms of specific goods and outcomes, often material and proximate, like doctors for their children, markets for their grain, husbands for their daughters, and tin roofs for their homes. But these lists, apparently just bundles of individual and idiosyncratic wants, are inevitably tied up with more general norms, presumptions, and axioms about the good life, and life more generally.

(Appadurai 2004: 68)

Introduction

The role and scale of temporary labour migration is often under-estimated; more people are involved in it than in international migration in India, and the poor, less educated and lower caste are less likely to embark on longer-distance mobility¹, which generally requires greater assets, skills and social capital (Gardner and Osella 2003; Breman 1996; de Haan 1999; Skeldon 2003; Deshingkar 2008). Labour mobility has long been an important part of the lives of poor people across the country (de Haan and Rogaly 2002; Gardner and Osella 2003; Coffey, Papp and Spears 2011) and, contrary to earlier expectations, it is not decreasing (Deshingkar 2008). Actually, studies from different parts of the country show

that temporary migration for work, be it seasonal migration or shorter-term movements, is increasing markedly, both in absolute numbers and relatively to the country's population (Breman 1996; Rogaly et al 2003; Gardner and Osella 2003; Bhagat 2009; Deshingkar and Start 2003; cf. Deshingkar 2008 for a review of some of the relevant literature). Yet, development policies and welfare programmes often aim to reduce labour migration in one way or another (de Haan and Rogaly 2002). The latest, and largest of those programmes put in place in India is the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA or NREGA), which came into effect in February 2006. In spite of some successes, on the whole the Act has had a limited impact so far (see the third section below).

¹ Although the use of these terms has been a matter for debate, for the sake of simplicity 'migration' and 'mobility' are used interchangeably here.

In this light, the present article argues that NREGA's relative failure may be partly due to its misconception of temporary labour migration as a 'negative force' (Jacob 2008) and as essentially 'involuntary'. The programme's aim to reduce significantly the number of migrant labourers in India is unlikely to be successful, and is misguided.

In order to justify these claims, this article will begin with a brief discussion of some of the current debates surrounding labour migration in India – who moves, and why –, establishing that the livelihoods of the 'rural' poor in the country are generally 'multilocal' (Deshingkar and Farrington 2009). The second section will be concerned with showing that the design of NREGA is largely based upon a misconception of migration for work as a development 'problem'. Lastly, it will be argued that the relative failure of the programme to attract many takers may be partly due to its misguided focus on curbing labour mobility.

Labour migration in India: Multi-local livelihoods of the poor

Who moves?

Labour migration seldom involves the migrant alone. The decision to migrate is often taken within the household, with considerations of wider family and/or community contexts (Skeldon 2003). The stereotype of the individual, male labour

migrant is somewhat misleading in the context of India; a considerable proportion of migrants are women, and many migrants take their families with them (Shah 2006; Skeldon 2003; Rogaly et al 2003).

In general, it is not the poorest of the poor who migrate. Migration requires capital – to cover the costs of the journey and potential unforeseen problems along the way or during the stay; social networks – for example knowing the employer or people in the area of destination; and access to information – especially work opportunities (Skeldon 1997; Deshingkar and Start 2003; de Haan 1999; Rogaly et al 2003). Those are scarcer amongst the poorest, who often do not know of positive migration opportunities and/or cannot afford to move (de Haan 1999; Skeldon 2003).

Caste also plays an important role in determining who has access to positive migration opportunities, largely because of the strong correlation, up to this day, between poverty and social exclusion on the one hand, and belonging to a Scheduled Caste (SC) or Scheduled Tribe (ST) on the other (Desai and Dubey 2011; Deshingkar and Start 2003; Mosse 2007). Whether the discrimination SCs and STs face is less in 'modern' markets than in 'traditional' village societies is "a hotly debated point" (Deshingkar 2008: 174), but it is certainly not nil. This is not to say that the very poor and/or socially excluded never

move; however, when they do it is often ‘involuntarily’ – this will be discussed below.

Why do people move? Competing views

While migration is increasingly recognised as a major factor in the lives of the rural poor, in India and elsewhere, there are several interpretations of why poor people migrate temporarily for work. First, the ‘dual economy’ model, which derives from neoclassical economics, sees labour mobility as an expression of the rational choice of the migrant, to move from a poor agricultural/rural/traditional area to a richer or better paying industrial/urban/modern area (Mosse et al 2002: 59). Labour migration is seen as a voluntary choice, a “response to diverse economic opportunities across space” (Jacob 2008: 3), where the migrant is basically ‘pulled’ out by better economic activities. In the Indian context, this is exemplified by a praise of ‘growing opportunities’ in the informal sector, which accounts for approximately 60 percent of the GDP and over 92 percent of the workforce and provides more opportunities to switch rapidly between different (low-profile) jobs (Deshingkar 2008).

Second, Marxist theories emphasise structural factors rather than individual agency, the exploitation of migrants by the dominant classes and the actions of large-scale capital through ‘uneven patterns of proletarianisation

and depeasantisation’ (Breman 1996; de Haan and Rogaly 2002). Migrants are ‘pushed’ out of peripheral areas. Third, the dominant view in development and policy circles is a ‘neo-Malthusian variant’ of structural analysis, where migrants are seen as ‘ecological refugees’, pushed out by natural calamities (e.g. drought, crop failure), declining agricultural opportunities (decreasing production, land fragmentation, declining agricultural commodity prices), debt cycles, demographic pressure, deforestation, soil erosion or water scarcity (Mosse et al 2002: 59; Deshingkar 2008). In both these understandings, labour migration by poor people from rural areas is seen as largely ‘involuntary’, as an expression of distress (Deshingkar and Start 2003).

Over the past fifteen years or so, sociological and anthropological studies have moved beyond ‘push-and-pull’ analyses, and tend to view labour migration as a complex process, combining structure and agency and rejecting the view that ‘urban’ work and ‘rural’ society are somehow separate (de Haan 1999; Mosse et al 2002; Rogaly et al 2003; Gardner and Osella 2003). They also describe migration as a ‘dynamic socio-political process’ (Shah 2006: 93) rather than as purely economic, and as part of the ‘normal’ livelihood strategy of poor people across India, not only during times of crisis (Deshingkar and Start 2003; de Haan 1999; Rogaly et al 2003; Mosse et al 2002; de

Haan and Rogaly 2002; Gardner and Osella 2003). In other words, the livelihoods of the rural poor in India are ‘multilocational’ (Deshingkar and Farring-ton 2009). Here, ‘livelihood’ does not mean mere subsistence, but also en-compasses social factors; material gains are only one of the reasons why people leave – though generally the main one –, and only a part of what migrants bring back (de Haan and Rogaly 2002).

Other reasons may include challenging existing social relations, gaining skills and networks, exploring a new environment, escaping social constraints at home (notably in the case of women) etc. (de Haan and Rogaly 2002; Gardner and Osella 2003; Shah 2006).

The meaning of labour migration in India, as well as its drivers, vary from place to place and from migrant to migrant; it is very difficult, and often problematic, to generalise. Nevertheless, it has increasingly been considered an important development issue in the country, as shows the recent setting up of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act.

(MG)NREGA: Misconception of labour migration as a development ‘problem’

Overview: Preventing labour migration as a way to alleviate rural poverty

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act was the flagship welfare programme of the United Progressive

Alliance (UPA) government during the General Election 2004. It was passed in August 2005 and launched in February 2006, initially across 200 districts. It was extended to 330 districts in April 2007 and then by another 295 districts from April 2008, making up 625 districts out of a total of 640 nationwide (Census 2011). The Act guarantees up to 100 days of unskilled manual work at the statutory minimum wage, on a voluntary basis, to adult members of any rural house-hold. The work undertaken aims to de-velop infrastructure (notably water harvesting structures and roads) in rural areas. Households are registered by the Gram panchayat which issues a job card. Applications for work must be submitted in written form, either to a Programme Officer or to the panchayat. If an applicant is not provided with employment within 15 days, he is entitled to an unemployment allowance. The employment must be pro-vided by the Gram panchayat within a 5 km radius (otherwise extra wage has to be paid). Being an Act, NREGA binds the state to implement it. Officially, 25 percent of the funds allocated to the programme are provided by the central government and the rest by the respective state govern-ments. (Government of India 2005; Jacob 2008; Khan and Saluja 2007; Marius-Gnanou 2008)

Though its scale makes NREGA unique, the principle of rural employment programmes is not without precedent in India, and NREGA

is based on previously existing schemes –such as the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme (MEGS), the National Rural Employment Pro-gramme (NREP), the Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY) etc. (Datar 2007; Khan and Saluja 2007; Jacob 2008). In fact, the programme basically aims to reduce rural poverty by providing locally available work, with a broader view, as then Labour Minister Mallikarjun Kharge said in the Rajya Sabha, to help “reducing the number of migrant labourers in the country as employment is being provided to them in their own villages” (quoted in *The Economic Times*, 2010). This statement exemplifies the view, which underpins the design of NREGA and which is dominant in development and policy circles, of migration as a poverty ‘problem’.

Misconception of labour migration as a poverty ‘problem’

“How will you reduce migration...?” asked (rhetorically) Dr. Mihir Shah, a member of the Planning Commission, when questioned about the success of NREGA in alleviating rural poverty (in *Indianomics*, 2011); it is widely accepted in Indian policy circles – and among the urban middle classes – that ‘reducing migration’ is a good development measure (Jacob 2008; PACS 2007; *Economic Times* 2010). Labour migration is under-stood as a ‘negative force’, as a cause of poverty (Jacob

2008: 3). The fact that migrants generally do not have “continued access to health... and welfare facilities” is often invoked to justify this position, notably in the context of NREGA (Jacob 2008: 6; Khan and Saluja 2007).

However, this should be seen as a political issue rather than as an intrinsic feature of labour migration (cf. Tacoli et al 2008); indeed, migrants could be included in, rather than excluded from, health and welfare systems in their area of destination.

This view of labour migration as a ‘problem’ (cf. Spencer 2003) stems largely from two misconceptions. Firstly, mobility for work is viewed essentially as a response to crisis or distress –as ‘a sign of rupture’ (de Haan 1999: 30). While distress migration does take place, especially among the poorest and socially excluded, the recent literature shows, as discussed in the first section, that this is but one type of migration. In most cases mobility is an integral part of, and a critical factor in the livelihoods of the rural poor in India, and not just a response to crisis or an ‘involuntary’ undertaking (de Haan 1999; de Haan and Rogaly 2002). Therefore, labour mobility should be seen as ‘the rule rather than the exception’ (Bremner 1996: 83).

Secondly, migration for work is thought to be detrimental to migrants, who often end up swelling the ranks of the urban poor –a phenomenon that Harris and Todaro classically described as the ‘urbanisation of poverty’

(1970). Even where migration is profitable, the benefits are thought to occur to the detriment of social welfare in destination areas, through overcrowding and increased inequalities (Jacob 2008; Khan and Saluja 2007). However, recent studies have shown that while the outcomes depend on the context – especially the resources, both social and economic, that a household can command (Mosse et al 2002; Gardner and Osella 2003; Skeldon 2003; Kothari 2002; de Haan and Rogaly 2002) – and are not uniformly positive, labour migration tends to improve the lot of most – both the migrants and those left behind (Skeldon 2003; Deshingkar 2008; de Haan and Rogaly 2002). Furthermore, the problem posed by unacceptably substandard urban infrastructure and services is, yet again, a political issue as much as a financial or technical one, as regulations often serve to render poor urban-dwellers' neighbour-hoods informal or illegal rather than to improve them (Tacoli et al 2008). Thus, 'excessive' labour migration *per se* is not a cause of poverty, and, as Robert Skeldon put it, "there is a basic contradiction between attempts to control migration on the one hand, and poverty alleviation on the other" (Skeldon 1997: 12). Another misconception, evident in what has been discussed above, which underpins the design of NREGA is the opposition between 'rural' and 'urban' livelihoods.

'Urban versus rural' fallacies

NREGA is designed as 'a safety net to reduce migration by rural poor households in the lean [agricultural] period' (Khan and Saluja 2007: 26) –the number of work days has been limited to 100 because the rest of the year is assumed to be dedicated to agricultural work (Jacob 2008). Another goal of the programme is to rejuvenate agriculture, notably through the construction of water harvesting structures, so that farmers go 'back to farming' (Shah in Indianomics 2011). The perceived 'normal' activity is agriculture – in or around the village –, as opposed to migration – to cities – and it is assumed that farming is what the poor want (cf. de Haan 1999; Deshingkar and Start 2003). This approach fails to grasp the dynamic role of labour migration in rural livelihoods, and the variety of reasons – other than economic – that play in one's decision to leave. In other words, it mistakenly attempts to reaffirm what is perceived as a 'disrupted sedentary agricultural community' (Mosse et al 2002: 60).

While urbanisation is considered beneficial to social and economic development, there is also a conviction that migration should be controlled in order to prevent excessive urban growth. 'Rural' livelihoods and 'urban' society are cast as separate, and this assumption underpins the view of poverty as chiefly a rural problem, to be tackled by rural development (cf. Tacoli et al 2008). Hence, like many other development programmes in

India (and elsewhere), the main goal of NREGA is to curb labour migration by making staying in the village economically more attractive (cf. de Haan 1999; Deshingkar and Start 2003). However, as argued in the first section, for poor people spreading assets and activities is often a risk-minimising strategy, and migrants generally do not decide whether to migrate solely according to economic factors. The next section is concerned with arguing that these misconceptions on labour migration may be part of the reason why NREGA has had a limited impact so far.

The limited impact of NREGA: partly due to its misguided focus on curbing labour migration?

NREGA's relative failure: Accepted explanations

As Naomi Jacob stated, “[t]here is an article every week pointing out the regions where NREGA has failed miserably.” (2008: 1) While in some places –especially (though unevenly) in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Rajasthan– and amongst Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST), the programme has been fairly successful and has employed over 40% of women (cf. PACS 2007; Khan and Saluja 2007; Jacob 2008; Marius-Gnanou 2008; Ministry of Rural Development 2012b), it is a matter for consensus that on the whole it has not had the expected impact (Jacob 2008; Khan and Saluja

2007; Das 2008; Datar 2007; Dhar 2011; Siddharta and Vanaik 2008).

Every year since its launching in 2006, around 25% of the funds allocated to the programme are not being used, and though in absolute numbers the demand has increased (cf. Ministry of Rural Development 2012a, 2012b; Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation 2011: Table 35.1), so has the coverage –from 200 districts in 2006 to the entire country (upwards of 600 districts) today. Furthermore, one of the most comprehensive studies since the infamous ‘CAG Report’ –an interim performance audit conducted by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) in 2007, which described the programme as plagued with corruption and deficiencies–, carried out across nine states by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), shows that the much-hyped NREGA has limited takers and has failed to generate ‘any major interest’ among the rural poor (Das 2008). Demand for employment in the programme has been particularly low in poorer states, such as Bihar, Orissa and Uttar Pradesh, which have a high incidence of out-migration for work (Khan and Saluja 2007; Deshingkar 2008; Shah 2006). In short, it is widely acknowledged that on the whole, labour migration has not decreased significantly since NREGA came into effect (Khan and Saluja 2007; Datar 2007; Das 2008; Jacob 2008), and

a number of explanations for this have been advanced.

The issue brought up most often in explaining the relative failure of NREGA is that of corruption. Indeed, stories of ‘irregularities’, of “workers not being paid their wages, of inflated muster rolls with non-existent workers and [of] large amounts being swindled out of the programme” abound (Jacob 2008: 1; see, for example, Dhar 2011; Das 2008; PACS 2007; Singh 2009; Khan and Saluja 2007).

Wages are another, often mentioned reason behind the lack of demand for NREGA employment. In most states, workers are paid less – when they are paid – than the statutory minimum wage, which varies from state to state (Das 2008; Rajalakshmi 2011; Singh 2009). Further-more, few states have been able to provide more than 50 average person days of employment per year to NREGA takers, let alone the 100 days to which every household is entitled as per the Act (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation 2011: Table 35.1). It is also worth noting that the 100-day limit takes no account of the varying number of people (whether of working age or dependent) constituting one household; this implies potentially vast discrepancies in the relative value of the income provided by employment under the Act.

Technical issues have also been identified as a hindrance to providing enough work,

especially in relation to the decentralised nature of the programme – the setting up of employment schemes is devolved to the Gram panchayats (GP). Indeed, it has been argued that the GPs do not have the means to design enough good projects and provide work for all employment seekers – they lack capacity building (Mukherjee and Ghosh 2009; Khan and Saluja 2007).

Lastly, but importantly, it is said that “most people do not access the scheme [because] they have not heard of the programme” (Khan and Saluja 2007: 19; Jacob 2008). This point derives from the fact, mentioned earlier, that employment in NREGA is provided on a voluntary basis. What is more, applicants are expected to apply, and to receive a response, in written form (Jacob 2008). As a consequence, the socially excluded and/or illiterate are at a disadvantage as they may not be aware of the opportunity to be provided work under NREGA. Lack of access to information may be a hindrance to more people applying for work.

While the above factors certainly do have an impact, a crucial one has been left largely unaddressed because of the misconceptions about labour migration, described in the previous section, upon which the design of NREGA is based; migration for work may be perceived as a more attractive activity.

Migration as a more attractive activity?

The view of labour mobility as essentially ‘involuntary’ and driven solely by economic factors, which underpins the design of NREGA, has overshadowed the possibility that the limited impact of the programme may partly be a consequence of the perception of labour migration as more attractive than working ‘at home’, on several grounds other than economic. This is not to say that distress migration does not happen, or that economic factors are not important determinants; but those are only part of what constitutes labour mobility in India.

The first set of reasons why people may still prefer to migrate relates to social dimensions. A crucial factor is that NREGA provides *unskilled* work – which, in the worst cases, means “digging ditches and then re-filling them at work sites” (Jacob 2008: 1), and in virtually any case means that the nature of the work undertaken will not enable takers to learn new skills. As such, it is unlikely to improve one’s social capital (whether in Bourdieu’s or in Putnam’s sense), which, as was discussed in the first section, is often one of the reasons why poor people migrate (de Haan and Rogaly 2002; Gardner and Osella 2003). That the work will improve one’s social position is equally improbable – it might even, in some cases, worsen it, where working under NREGA may be looked down on. This is another important factor since migration is

often perceived as a way to challenge existing social relations (Gardner and Osella 2003; Shah 2006).

The second point relates to what may be described as the relationship between migration and ‘modernity’, or rather perceptions of modernity – from the perspective of the migrant –, and to the capacity of the poor to ‘aspire’ (Appadurai 2004). The design of NREGA stems from the assumption that all villagers want to work in or around the village and be involved in agriculture full time –that they want to go ‘back to farming’ (Shah in *Indianomics* 2011; cf. de Haan 1999; Deshingkar and Start 2003). This opposition between rural livelihoods and migration is false, and fails to grasp the role of wider notions of ‘modernity’ in which decisions to migrate are embedded – where modernity could be defined as ‘a set of imaginings and beliefs about the way life should be’ (Gardner and Osella 2003: xi). Indeed, as Robert Skeldon has it, it is often ‘not absolute poverty as such that is significant in accounting for migration but whether people *feel* that they are poor’ (Skeldon 2003: 4, emphasis added). The spread of information about (supposed) conditions elsewhere – people’s ‘mediascape’ (Appadurai 1996) – can alter the meaning of ‘poverty’. And, as Arjun Appadurai has it, “the poor, no less than any other group in society, do express horizons in choices made and choices voiced” (Appadurai 2004: 68). In other

words, the rural poor too have dreams and aspirations – they do not just think in terms of survival. Often, migrants move even if they do not gain much – materially – from it (de Haan and Rogaly 2002; Shah 2006). This fact is often ignored in development discourses and welfare programmes, which may lead to design misconceived projects – as in the case of NREGA and its attempt to curb labour migration.

Conclusion

NREGA may benefit Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and, generally speaking, those with little or no access to positive migration opportunities – in other words, it may be a good way to curb *distress* migration, which is commendable. However, it is unlikely to succeed in reducing mobility for work in general – which is not desirable anyway. As Arjan de Haan put it, the central question “is not about migration itself, but what kinds of opportunities are available for what groups of people” (1999: 27) – economically, but also socially. The programme’s attempt to reduce labour mobility by providing unskilled, socially unrewarding work in rural areas stems from its misconception of migration for work as merely a product of ‘push-and-pull’ economic factors, and its failure – like many other ‘development’ programmes – to recognise the poor’s ‘capacity to aspire’. This

incapacity – or refusal? – to acknowledge the ‘rural’ poor’s aspirational horizons leaves one to doubt that the much-hyped NREGA really is the radical legislation it is often portrayed as in India 🇮🇳

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