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INDIA

# As farm distress intensifies, rural poor who migrate to survive at risk of exploitation; women particularly vulnerable

India's farm sector has been in distress for decades due to a number of systemic reasons such as crop failures, debt burden, and rising prices of inputs.

Priyansha Singh and Rohini Mitra | April 25, 2019 16:58:36 IST



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- This distress has given rise to seasonal migration as a survival strategy.
- This is particularly true for rural people in remote areas, the chronically poor,

landless, and those with low educational attainment.

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- **An IIPS study discovers that women migrant workers were forced to live in vulnerable circumstances,**
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*Rural India is in the midst of a long-drawn agrarian crisis, which has led to a rapid rise in seasonal migration. A recent IIPS, Mumbai study conducted by Abdul Jaleel CP and Aparajita Chattopadhyay, in Beed, Maharashtra sheds light on this issue and suggests possible remedies.*

Nearly three-quarters of India's families depend on rural incomes, and the majority of India's poor are found in rural areas. India's food security depends on producing cereal crops, as well as increasing its production of fruits, vegetables, and milk to meet the demands of a growing population with rising incomes. The rural populace also constitutes the largest voter block in India and as a result, the plight of farmers becomes a key national election issue. In fact, the central government has pledged to pay Rs 19,000 crore to farmers in this election season.

### **Why are Indian farmers suffering?**

India's agricultural sector has been in distress for decades due to a number of systemic reasons such as crop failures, debt burden, and rising prices of inputs which are inadequately offset by falling prices for output. Of these, the most alarming existential concern is of water. Drought, monsoon failure, and water shortages affect over 40 percent of the population, with states such as Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan the worst-hit.

This distress, in combination with a lack of alternative livelihood opportunities, has deepened the plight of the rural populace and given rise to **seasonal migration** as a survival strategy. This is particularly true for rural people in remote areas, the chronically poor, landless, and those with low educational attainment. A report on the state of Indian farmers, released in 2018 stated that 76 percent of farmers preferred to do work other than farming and 61 percent of these farmers preferred to be employed in cities because of better education, health, and employment prospects there.



*Children of seasonal migrants at a brick kiln in Ahmednagar, Maharashtra. Image courtesy: IIPS study*

### **How are drought and water shortages driving migration trends?**

In 2011, eight districts of Marathwada, Maharashtra —Aurangabad, Jalna, Beed, Osmanabad, Nanded, Latur, Parbhani, and Hingoli (nearly 6,500 villages), faced some of the worst droughts ever experienced in Maharashtra. Approximately, 3,900 villages suffered more than 50 percent crop loss.

An International Institute for Population Studies (IIPS) study conducted in 14 villages of the Beed district in Maharashtra, examines the factors influencing seasonal migration and how it relates to the reach of the existing welfare framework for rural families. The study finds that during the dry season, 16 percent of the local population migrated and the scale of seasonal migration ranged between 4 percent and 90 percent. It also discovers that seasonal migration is a typical strategy for avoiding loss of income during the dry season. It is seen as a common coping mechanism of the landless, (who comprised 58 percent out of the total sample) and households with marginal land holdings (11 percent).

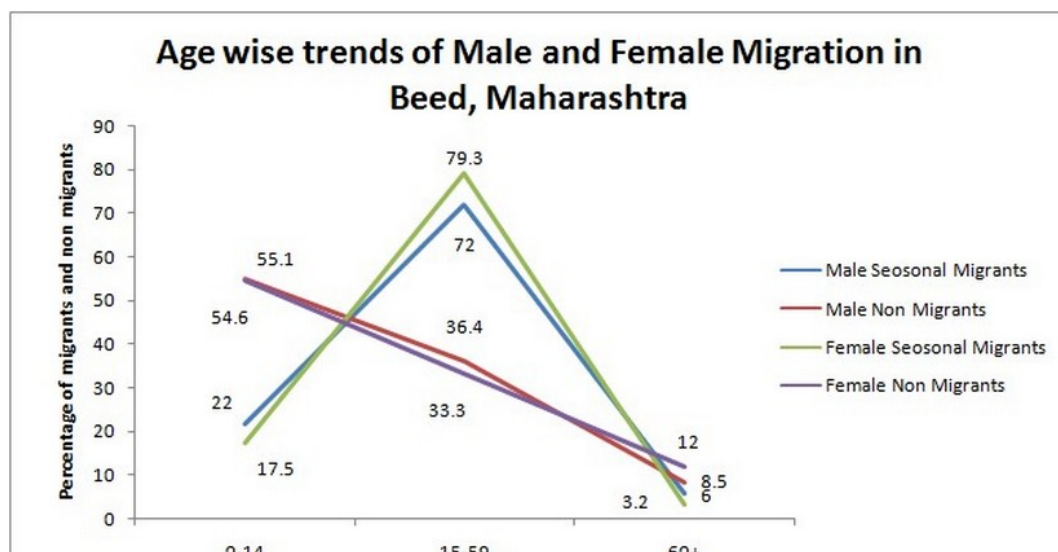
The scale of distress is likely to escalate considering that over the last decade, the number of farmers has reduced by over 8.6 million, while the number of more vulnerable landless farm labourers has increased.

The administrative response has also not been hopeful. Last year, the government of Maharashtra declared 151 of its 358 talukas as drought-hit whereas, in reality, well over 200 talukas (over 11000 villages) were affected. The government has also made the process of declaring a drought long and difficult, further reducing the chances of effective and targeted alleviation measures for the worst affected.

### The condition of women migrants

*“...it is all decided by my husband. He runs the house. He takes money from the mukhadam and spends it for us. When he asks me to move, I follow him. It has been the way of our life.” — a female seasonal migrant.*

*A study by Jaleel and Chattopadhyay examines the seasonal migration patterns from a gender-differentiated angle. While the trends of male and female migration from Beed are very similar, the decision regarding women migrating is taken by the men of the household. 94 percent of the respondents stated that the decision regarding their migration was taken by their husbands or fathers/fathers-in-law.*



Source: IIPS study (Beed, Maharashtra)

The study discovers that women migrant workers were forced to live in vulnerable circumstances, with exposure to dust and grime, and often in unsafe conditions. 87 percent of women workers said that they felt safer at their source village than in the places they had migrated to work in. Many of them (45 percent) even said that they were afraid of their workplaces.

The lack of adequate sanitation facilities at the workplace often left women migrants with no choice but to get hysterectomies as soon as their family was completed, as menstruation often causes pain and requires workers to take a break. Contractors are often unwilling to hire menstruating women and offer advances to women in order to get the surgery done.

### Seasonal migration: a double-edged sword?

While temporary/seasonal migration is an established strategy for the landless and farmers with marginal holdings, it is increasingly also becoming a choice for better-off households — particularly in the years of monsoon failure. Although it is a survival strategy, evidence from the field reveals that it is often counterproductive and results in poor households slipping further down the scale of vulnerability.

Take the example of the koita system, documented in the IIPS study. This is a system wherein a work unit, comprising a husband, wife, and one or two children is given work on a piece rate basis.

*“The mukhadam comes to the village and informs us about employment opportunities. He sets the wages and pays an advance. A work unit (koita) is paid Rs. 25,000/- in advance for working for six months. This advance helps to keep us alive when we are jobless in villages” — A respondent of the study.*



A seasonal migrant preparing food at her workplace. Image courtesy: IIPS Study

This system of debt bondage is exploitative and exponentially increases the vulnerability of migrants, who are denied further freedoms such as the ability to negotiate higher wages and better working conditions. Adding to this, even after 5–6 months of work at the destination in the dry season, only 54 percent of migrant households were able to repay the advance amount taken from the employer. The average time period of engagement between a seasonal migrant from Beed and their employer (including the time needed to pay off the debt) was between 6–7 years, an indication of migrants being trapped in a vicious cycle of debt.

Additionally, there are several issues faced by seasonal migrants at the destination such as poor living conditions, children losing school days and women migrants living in continuous fear. In the IIPS study, 97 percent of the migrants lived in temporary shelters near their workplace, and 98 percent did not have access to toilets where they lived, while 49 percent reported that they did not have access to safe drinking water.

Seasonal migration is an invaluable source of labour in rural agro-based industries as well as in the urban informal service sector, but their often distress-related origins are symptomatic of a large-scale policy failure. The reasons reported for leaving the villages by the majority of households in the study revolved around lack of opportunities. Their economic circumstances, along with lack of livelihood opportunities, left them with no choice but to migrate. However, even after migrating, they remain trapped in a vicious cycle of debt, contributing to further distress seasonal migration.



*An image showcasing the living arrangements of seasonal migrants at a brick kiln in Raigarh district. Image courtesy: IIPS Study*

### **What can policy do to make migration in the agricultural sector productive?**

The study conducted by Jaleel and Chattopadhyay at IIPS not only maps some of the most alarming aspects of distress migration but also shines a light on the failures of policy implementation in rural areas where schemes such as MGNREGA are often the difference between survival and starvation. In such a situation, most families turn to short term intra-state or inter-state migration in order to survive.

But migration is often not enough for many households to get back on their feet. This indicates a policy gap when it comes to designing effective policies capable of including migrant families. Policy gaps are usually addressed through collective bargaining in the form of electoral politics. Extensive research in the Indian context, however, shows us that migrants, particularly temporary/seasonal migrants from vulnerable groups, are often disenfranchised due to the non-portability of voting rights.

The resultant vicious cycle is one of systematic exclusion and worsening livelihoods for many thousands in the chance years of a bad harvest or monsoon failure. *India Migration Now's* own Inter-State Migrant Policy Index (IMPEX) analysis reveals the lack of migrant integration measures taken by states such as Gujarat and Delhi despite the fact that they receive some of the highest numbers of internal migrants. It also points out that **migrant political inclusion has been ignored in the state policy framework, which has direct and indirect consequences for overall migrant welfare.**

In the absence of integration measures, seasonal migrants are not only left more vulnerable due to the rural distress they experience, but are also not able to take advantage of the opportunities that migration presents. While we have taken some steps towards understanding and prioritising distress in the farm sector, most of these policies lack teeth and do not consider the unique forms of vulnerability that migration involves.

The lead up to the 2019 general elections has brought the plight of farmers centre-stage. The 'kisan march' protests of the past year, along with heightened media coverage over the question of farmer suicides, loan waivers, and sectoral growth, has shone a light on the deeper, and more pervasive problems in agriculture.

Given the larger pattern of internal migration and regular mobility that is increasingly coming to characterise the lives of agricultural workers across the country, reducing this vulnerability in the form of targeted integrative measures should be a part of a larger policy plan addressing rural distress and the agricultural sector.

*Priyansha and Rohini are researchers at India Migration Now, a Mumbai-based migration data, research and media agency. Follow their work at Twitter: @nowmigration and medium.com/@indiamigration*

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A total of 1066 candidates are in the fray for the first phase of the Bihar elections, 114 of them women.

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The Narcotics Control Bureau on 27 October raided a residence of Karishma Prakash in Mumbai, and seized a small quantity of hashish, an official said.

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Political parties, including the DMK and MDMK, condemned the 'attack' in Dhanushkodi area in Indian waters that came close on the heels of more than 4,000 fishermen being driven away by the Lankan navy on 17 October

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