Mysterious MIGRATION

The strange story of ‘package-based’ migration in central Maharashtra and how it’s affecting the livelihood and lives of those who migrate.

Greenery all around. Sugarcane, cotton, millet, bajra, corn, tuar, sunflower, growing on either side of the road, be it on the highway or the village roads. Eye catching indeed. Ponds, streams, lakes, wells, bore wells with electrified submersible motors - water-reservoirs were a common sight everywhere. This is Beed, a district in central Maharashtra, part of the Marathwada sugar belt.

Beneath the sheen of this colourful picture, however, lay the rather unattractive truth. All it took was a single conversation with villagers from Bhopa, Kothmirwadi and Koyal and we knew that all was not as it seemed. Looking at the region from outside, one sees no reason for farmers to want to migrate. Sure, there exists a divide between those with plenty and those with little, but nothing suggests that there would be shortage of work here. The villages have smooth tar roads, a well-maintained school, water connections to households, a stream and ponds, a health-centre, a temple with an audio system for entertainment in the evenings, a sugarcane factory nearby for employment opportunities, and even DTH service to most households. And yet, on speaking to farmers, we came to know that they were not happy. “What could possibly be the reason for this unhappiness?” we thought. The answer was within grasp. The prime cause of this unhappiness was that most farmers here called themselves ‘migrant labour’ rather than marginal labour. The reasons for this migration, at first sight, seemed unfathomable but we were able to discover them on digging a little deeper.

It was around 2 ’o’clock in the afternoon, me and my teammate, Rizwan walked through muddy roads, covering approximately 4 to 5 kilometres to reach the remote fields of Kothmirwadi- a Maratha...
We can't send our women out to work as it is derogatory for us. If the women work in some other area, where nobody knows us, it's okay.

MGNREGA is non-existent in this region because the wages are too low and you have to bribe the officers.

After they come back from this voluntary migration, they spend the next six months in their villages either cultivating land or just resting. When we asked them why they didn't make use of MGNREGA, Arun replied, “Nobody wants to work under MGNREGA, because the wages are too low and you have to bribe the officers. MGNREGA is almost non-existent in this region.” When we insisted, saying that they could seek employment under MGNREGA for the non-migratory six months, he said in a rather irritated tone, “Nobody wants to work during these months. People want to rest. They only work during this time if they urgently need money.” When we asked other people about MGNREGA, they actually said that it didn't exist in this region because people simply weren't interested. Farmers didn't want to go to nearby cities like Pune and Mumbai for employment during these non-migratory six months either. They didn't like to work as industrial labour. Only six people from this village are employed in the nearby sugar mills.
Finally, in order to understand this migration better, we asked them what they gained from this, after all the hardships they faced. Arun smiled and replied “They give us good money. A large number of labour agents from northern Karnataka come here in May or June and book as many labourers as they can. The booking amount is usually the wages for the months we migrate paid up front. The average price for a couple can vary from Rs 80,000 to 1 Lakh for five to six months.” In spite of this, some labourers claim that they are unable to save money. However, on speaking to officials from a nearby cooperative bank, we discovered that migrant labourers were their prime depositors. “We don’t have any problem giving them loans because we know they will pay it back after getting their package,” said one bank manager.

When we visited the schools in these villages, teachers told us that labour migration was one of the biggest roadblocks for them. “Migrant labourers take their children with them for six months, so how can we teach them?” questioned the headmaster of a well-kept primary school. “We are trying our best but low attendance defeats all our efforts. We informed the district education authority of this problem some years back and finally we have got some solutions from the state government. From this year, we are going to start hostels on our school premises or in the villages, on rental basis for children of migrant labourers. Government will provide us with Rs 23-27 per day per child for 180 days. There is a provision for stationary and a daily use reimbursement also. The school committee will be entirely responsible for these hostels.”

This story leaves us with many unanswered questions about people’s radical choices and the socio-economic impact of the same. Can we call this practice a new form of bonded labour or the beginning of ‘package-based labour,’ something based on their own terms and conditions? Answers to this are awaited.

“Migrant labourers take their children with them for six months, so how can we teach them?” questioned a headmaster.

(The author is enrolled in the Masters of Arts in Development programme at the Azim Premji University.)