

Interstate Migration in India During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Analysis Based on Mobile Visitor Location Register and Roaming Data

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Abstract

In migration and mobility studies, the availability of scientifically reliable data remains a persistent challenge. The recent move towards harnessing mobile and big data has also been unable to resolve the data issues due to accessibility, privacy, as well as ethical and methodological intricacies involved with such data sets. In this paper, we explore a new set of data known as visitor location register (VLR) and roaming data, which is recorded and reported by mobile service providers. The reporting model of VLR data used and presented in this paper is not only free from privacy and ethical concerns but also methodologically sound and simple to compute as compared to any previous approaches. Drawing on VLR data, this paper finds direct evidence of unusually high interstate net reverse migration during the first and second COVID-19 lockdowns in India (44.13 and 26.3 million, respectively), and thereafter quick return migration back to cities during unlocks. The findings from this paper also provide insights into evolving migration directions, precarity, pockets of origin and destination and state policies in containing reverse migration during lockdowns in India. We anticipate that the data presented in the paper have the potential to fill a major data gap in migration

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and mobility studies in other countries too if VLR and roaming data are made available at the required spatial and temporal levels.

Keywords

COVID-19, distress migration, internal migration, mobile visitor location register, roaming data

Introduction

Internal migrants or so-called India's unsettled settlers (de Haan, 1994) have long been neglected at government levels and among policymakers (Rajan, 2020a). The neglect begins with the invisibility of migrants in the available data. The lack of credible data also makes migrants' precarity and vulnerabilities invisible (de Haan, 2020). The official decennial censuses and National Sample Survey (NSS) fail to capture circular, seasonal and semi-permanent migrants, which constitute the largest pool of internal migrants in India and are mostly a vulnerable group on the cusp of exploitation (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009; Rajan, 2020b; Srivastava, 2012).

Historically, this data gap has also led to a consensus view among demographers and researchers that Indians are less mobile due to caste-based hierarchical division in society, apart from linguistic and cultural diversities (Bell et al., 2015; Davis, 1951; Munshi & Rosenzweig, 2016). Those views might have had an element of truth during the colonial period and initial years of independence. For example, post-independence domicile-based state policies and sub-national politics against interstate migrants in some states were also impediments to internal migration in India (Kone et al., 2018; Weiner, 2015). In spite of those barriers, especially since the early 1990s with the beginning of liberalization of the Indian economy and improvements in communication and transportation infrastructure, long-distance interstate migration has been continuously on the rise (Bhattacharjee, 2020). The discussion on migration further suggests that migration increases with development (de Haas, 2007). Therefore, with the rapidly growing Indian economy, the further intensification of internal migration in India is inevitable.

The available data and discussions on interstate migration in India suggest some unusual characteristics but also almost linear directions between migrant origin and destinations states (Census of India, 2011; Economic Survey of India, 2017). Scholarly literature further highlights the increasingly circular, seasonal and semi-permanent nature of internal migration in India, primarily due to the inefficient and highly informal labour market, lack of portability of social security benefits, exclusionary urbanization, uneven regional development and environmental and economic distress in certain rural pockets (Bhagat & Keshri, 2021; Bharadwaj et al., 2021; Kundu & Saraswati, 2012). Those complex and fragmented processes not only make India's largest pool of internal migrants and their precarity invisible to researchers and media but also provide excuses for policymakers and government for devising a coherent policy on internal migration.