# Livelihood Crisis and Distress

**Context**

- This article speaks about seasonal unemployment in many villages in Maharashtra, after sowing the rabi crops.
- Hence thousands of small and marginal peasant households migrate to other districts and even outside the state, in search of livelihood opportunities.

**What is Seasonal Migration?**

- Seasonal migration is a move made for a short period of time with the intention of returning to the place of usual residence. Their temporary movement is according to the seasonal labour requirements at several places.
- Regional inequalities and uneven development impel temporary internal migration from agriculturally backward and poor rural areas.
- Seasonal migration has long been a source of income for rural households unable to support themselves through agriculture.
- Households diversify their economic activities outside the traditional agricultural sphere by sending out members to work in urban areas in the lean period
- Temporary migration is one of the most significant livelihood strategies adopted by the poorest sections in rural India, predominantly in the form of seasonal mobility of labour.

**Causes of Seasonal Migration**

- Seasonal migration is a dry season event chiefly because of the changes in the village economy.
- The main reasons for migration are
  o seasonal unemployment
  o less wages in village
  o need of a large amount of money to meet emergency expenditure
  o most households who migrate have reported having outstanding debts/loans (mostly informal).
- It is economic hardship that drives people out of the village to offer their labour for a wage. Thus, it can be said that seasonal migration is largely distress-driven.
- In a survey, the share of income from seasonal migration in the annual wage income households was found to be 80%, confirming the necessity of seasonal migration for ensuring a livelihood for the households.
- There is not much disposable income, and thus, the amount earned from seasonal work is used to meet essential needs and paying off debts. This finding is also an indicator of the dependence on seasonal migration for survival.

**How seasonal migrants are employed?**

A study conducted in Beed district is in the Aurangabad division of Maharashtra. It has often drawn media attention for drought and farmer distress.

- For many households, at the end of the rainy season, there are hardly any possibilities for earning a living. So most households take up seasonal migration to other districts or states for employment.
- Seasonal migration from Beed district is based on advances paid to the migrants, or repayment of debt through manual labour.
  - The arrangement is called the Koita system wherein a work unit comprising a husband, wife and one child or two children is given work on a piece-rate basis.
  - The role of labour contractor (mukadam) is vital in channelising seasonal migration. Labour recruitment takes place almost entirely through the mukadam.

**Employee retention and Vicious cycle of debt**

- Seasonal migrants are offered work and onsite residence. Work at the destination entails long working hours, averaging about 12 hours daily. They are paid a part of their wages during the employment period on a weekly basis.
  - The remaining amount is settled at the end of the season. This binds the worker to their employer.
  - The carry-over of advances from one season to the next ensures the availability of workers for the next season.
  - Most of the households could not even repay the advance amount they had taken. This binds the worker to the labour contractor, a relationship that is strengthened through loans/debt.
- It denies the employee various freedoms, including the freedom to negotiate the terms and conditions of their contract. The average duration of such "relationships" was found to be 6.6 years. This is an indication of the cycle of debt in which they are trapped.

**Social Cost of Seasonal Migration**

Besides its economic benefits for the migrants, seasonal migration has significant negative consequences, such as:

- Poor living conditions in the destination locations
  - Most migrants live in temporary shelters near their workplace, and there is no provision for toilets
  - No access to safe drinking water
- Loss of school days for the children
  - Seasonal migration takes a severe toll on the education of the children of the migrants as they are never at one location throughout the academic year.
  - In the Koita system, children are an essential (though informal) part of a work unit. They are made to do hard labour that jeopardises their lives, safety, and physical development.
  - There is sufficient evidence to show that the migrant community will remain deprived of educational opportunities and be stuck in a vicious cycle of economic backwardness.
- Experience of fear and insecurity by the women migrants
  - The decision on women's migration is usually taken by other members of the household, mostly the husbands or fathers/fathers-in-law.
  - They are mostly not aware of the place of work or type of work they will be doing once they migrate.
  - It is found that women migrant workers are forced to live in vulnerable circumstances.
- Adverse impacts on health.
  - Exposure to dust and grime, lack of minimum basic facilities, and the drudgery of their work cause severe health risks among the seasonal migrants.

- o They face unique health challenges due to their work environment, poverty status, inadequate housing, limited availability of clean water and sanitary facilities, inadequate access to healthcare, and lack of insurance.
- o Their poor economic status makes it difficult for them to access timely and appropriate medical care.

**Other Negative Impacts**

- Exclusion from social benefits:
  - o The need to provide proof of address, ration cards, Voter IDs and Aadhaar cards, which is difficult due to the fluidity of their lives, deprive them from accessing welfare schemes and policies.
- Political Exclusion
  - o Seasonal migrants are deprived of political rights such as Right to Vote.
- Exploitation of Migrants
  - o Since most seasonal migrants are illiterate they cannot take up high paying jobs in the destination cities, also prone to the victimization of exploitation, trafficking, psychological abuse, and gender-based violence in the case of female migrants.
- Increased Slum
  - o Mass Migration results into an increase in slum areas, compromising quality of infrastructure and life at the destination, which further translates into many other problems such as unhygienic conditions, crime, pollution, etc.

**Way Forward**

- Indian government needs to formulate migration centric policies, strategies, and institutional mechanisms in order to ensure inclusive growth and development and reduce distress induced migration.
- The government at Centre needs to provide amenities and social securities for the migrant population which is riddled with the issues of inadequate housing; low-paid, insecure or hazardous work, etc.
- Schemes like Kerala government's Aawaz health insurance scheme, Apna Ghar project -accommodation for migrant workers, Portable Rights- ensures the basic rights to workers in their respective home state, even as they labour in other states.

**Conclusion**

- Households that are heavily dependent on wage employment and subsistence agriculture do not have the resources to adopt expensive long-term mitigating strategies.
- They have no option other than to resort to low-cost short-term actions like seasonal migration. It is found that, as a family arrangement, adult members often decide to migrate to absorb the shock of seasonal income variability.
- It is a repeated annual livelihood strategy for the majority of the socially and economically disadvantaged households.
- Hence, such migration can no longer be viewed merely as an adjunct to an essentially agrarian way of life, but has to be seen as integral to the coping, survival, and livelihood strategies of farming families.
- One may thus conclude that seasonal migration is a compromise where the households knowingly bear the social cost for ensuring that the immediate material needs are taken care of.