Migrant Workers in the Cityscape

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The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the contested and contradictory relationship that India's migrant workers share with the cities where they carry out their productive and reproductive activities. This paper focuses on the issue of migrant housing as an extreme site of exclusion that works not only as shelter poverty but also as a structural mechanism that perpetuates social, economic and political marginalisation of a vulnerable workforce. It demonstrates how the housing struggles faced by migrant workers eloquently demonstrate their fractured association with cities they help make and their marginalisation in urban policies that keep them on the margins of full citizenship. What questions does the experience of these migrants pose to urban planning and knowledge paradigms in Indian cities?

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The COVID-19 pandemic that ushered in the current decade has not only pushed the Indian economy into a state of fear, insecurity, and hardship but has also presented the ruthless face of urban-centric industrialism, a key feature of the country's vision of development. The horrific image of exasperated families of migrant workers treading hundreds of kilometres from cities to villages following the lockdown did convey how this demographically lost and politically disempowered workforce has been hidden in the urban underbellies. More than anything else, the pandemic has laid bare the contested and contradictory relationship that India's migrant workers share with the cities where they carry out their productive and reproductive activities. What questions does the experience of these migrants pose to urban planning and knowledge paradigms in Indian cities?

Short-term and circular migrants constitute a significant share of the urban working class in India. Estimates show that the size of "the vulnerable circular migrant workforce" increased from 85 million in 2011–12 and 111 million in 2017–18 or from 49% to 65% of all vulnerable urban workforce that also includes long-term and permanent migrant workers (Srivastava 2020: 11). These workers, whom Samaddar (2016) refers to as "transit" workers, belong to highly diverse communities in terms of origin, language, and recruitment modes. What they have in common is the precarity of their informal employment in sectors like construction, manufacturing and services like trade, transport, hospitality, domestic work, etc. Informality in their work arrangements means that they have to labour under highly unstable, exploitative and hazardous conditions. Without representation in collective bargaining platforms, they are also unable to bargain for minimum wages and welfare benefits (Aajeevika Bureau 2020). Such "overlapping succession of chronic forms of social and labour exclusion" (López-Sala and Molinero-Gerbeau 2022) places them at the bottom of the urban employment heap.

All these vulnerabilities decisively determine how migrant workers experience and negotiate the peculiar processes of urban growth and transformation steered by a neo-liberal state. As scholars of urban studies have observed, neo-liberal policies during the decades since the late 1980s have reconstituted cities as consumer products competitively seeking markets and speculative private investment in real estate and housing, transport, entertainment, and other urban services (Ayşe and Schiller 2011; Bhagat 2017). The links between migration, informal employment and urban poverty remain to be fully explored (Sood 2014). Recent studies have addressed the contribution these migrants make to the corporate city-making

project and the vibrancy of everyday urban life (Naik 2025). The three-part reports published by the Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group (MCRG) in 2015 focusing on Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata are perhaps the only systematic illustrations of how the dispossessed migrants participate in the process of neo-liberal urban recycling.

This paper focuses on the issue of migrant housing as an extreme site of exclusion that works not only as shelter poverty but also as a structural mechanism that perpetuates social, economic and political marginalisation of a vulnerable workforce locked in a "subaltern spatial-residential situation" (López-Sala and Molinero-Gerbeau 2022). The paper demonstrates how the housing struggles faced by migrant workers eloquently demonstrate their fractured association with cities they help make and their marginalisation in urban policies that keep them on the margins of full citizenship (Feldor and Pattaroni 2023). As Prakash (2002) puts it, these workers are seen as part of the "unintended city" and are ignored in the knowledge and planning frameworks used by the official city.

Living in the City as Migrants and Workers

A study done by the Aajeevika Bureau in 2020 focusing on Surat and Ahmedabad in Gujarat sheds light on the shelter-related problems faced by migrant workers across sectors. It is worth noting that many previous enquiries—notably the Report on Conditions of Work and Promotion of Livelihoods in the Unorganised Sector (2007) prepared by the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector and the Working Group on Migration Report released by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation in 2017—have analysed the plight of informal migrant workers in accessing decent and adequate accommodation. The Aajeevika Bureau study shows that the vast majority of migrant workers in Ahmedabad (where migrant workers form about a sixth of the population) and Surat (where about 70% of the workers are migrants) do not live in places recognised by the local self-government bodies. Most of them do not have any documents to show that they are residents of the cities. Given the sedentary bias of urban policies, without these documents, they cannot become beneficiaries of any welfare scheme. This is the case even with welfare schemes targeted at specific sectors like construction (the Building and Other Workers Welfare Scheme). The most basic necessities like drinking water, toilets and health services are all inaccessible to large numbers of migrant labour households toiling in these cities, let alone protection of rights to food security and education of their children and access to childcare, water, sanitation, and cooking fuel facilities for women.

The city-level planning and essential service delivery are envisioned to be the responsibility of urban local bodies (ULBs) in the 74th constitutional amendment of 1992. Notwithstanding the lofty promise contained in this amendment of granting financial and functional devolution to the ULBs, the power of the state governments has continued to determine the capacity of cities to plan and deliver urban services (Banerjee-Guha 2009). The growth-oriented and market-centric urban reforms ushered in by the early 2000s have not only deprived the ULBs of financial patronage by the centre, but have created barriers for the urban poor, including the migrant labour, to access land and housing in cities (Batra 2009). In metropolitan cities like Mumbai, as Banerjee-Guha (2009) observes, "the poor were pushed out from old industrial cores to the outskirts, ghettoised in peripheral slums" (p 122), while the core city went in for a massive facelift as a financial capital as designed by urban planners in collaboration with corporate advisers. As public services have been commodified in the neo-liberal regime, only the tax-paying citizens are considered as legitimate consumers with rights and privileges. The workers are seen as the responsibility of employers, who, paradoxically, use a network of intermediaries—staffing agencies, subcontractors, and, increasingly, digital platforms—to distance themselves from that accountability.

There are many examples of ULBs' failure to clearly specify rules and standards to improve the well-being of migrant workers. While studying the living arrangements of construction workers in Ahmedabad city, Desai (2020) finds that though the municipal corporation has issued a directive to provide "temporary accommodation" with "proper sanitation facility" to these workers, it has not clarified what constitutes such accommodation. She also reports that the unwillingness of the municipal authority to map the temporary informal colonies provided by contractors has resulted in exclusion of workers from its oversight.

Coming to manufacturing, it may be noted that provision of efficient, adequate and decent worker accommodation in close proximity to industrial hubs has not been a policy priority in India. It may be noted that there are institutional barriers like zoning regulations (restricting the building of residential units in industrial areas) and building regulations that prevent worker housing projects from coming up closer to industrial areas. A perilous consequence of state apathy in recognising the housing rights of migrant workers has been the increasing control of employers, real estate agents and indifferent and rent-seeking landlords over their housing choices. In large cities with significant populations of migrant workers like Surat, Ahmedabad and Mumbai, rental accommodation is typically provided to workers in congested slums without tenure security. The other available options are privately run and overcrowded worker hostels or mess halls, as in cities like Surat (Aajeevika Bureau 2020). A large number of factory workers are also accommodated dangerously within workplaces amid machinery and equipment (Kaushal and Nair 2023). Thus, these workers are trapped in hyper precarious work-occupation niches constituted by migration, unorganised production and internal labour relations.

The most vulnerable among the migrants end up squatting in open spaces. As Jha and Kumar (2016) observe in the context of Mumbai these homeless migrants "perpetually suffer the condition of suspended citizenship" caught between the city's grand vision of jumping the scale and transforming to a global metropolis, the heightened informalisation of labour, and the cultural politics of the middle class that demands exclusion and segregation of working-class neighbourhoods (Pow 2009).

They are compelled to conduct their private lives constantly under public gaze and without access to progressively commodified public amenities and services (Jha and Kumar 2016). Their interaction with the state is limited to municipal authorities and police who routinely come to seize their measly assets and evict them from their places of stay (Jayaram and Mehrotra 2020).

Cities like Kolkata and Delhi have witnessed a series of evictions, relocations and reclassifications of slums (into legal and illegal) over the past decades as they recycled core city spaces for aesthetic, ecological and economic reasons (Mitra 2016; Chaudhary 2019). The successive waves of incoming migrants to these cities are forced to settle for illegal slums or worksites or remain shelterless for long periods of time.

In more organised sectors like garments and electronics, the migrant workers, mostly women workers, are ingeniously segregated from the city's everyday social and civic life in employer-provided hostels and dormitories. The "dormitory labour regime" creates a situation wherein the migrant women enjoy a "hybrid (un)freedom" wherein they feel both protected and restricted at the same time (Crane et al 2022). More importantly, this kind of housing cleverly and deliberately exploits the social asymmetries that shape workers' expectations and vulnerabilities and prevents the formation of working-class identity and solidarity. These closely monitored housing arrangements in the industrial complexes of urban peripheries signify the emerging patterns of control that global value chains tend to exert on workers to fill the bottom lines of transnational corporations. At the same time, they help produce a community of passive, footloose workers spatially, socially and culturally alienated from the broader urban community and its social and political structures.

In Conclusion

Housing is a critical site of social reproduction. It also legitimises one's socio-spatial identity as a citizen. Migrant workers powering production in the cities of India face the trickiest challenges in securing access to dignified, safe and adequate accommodation affecting their social lives in significant ways. Policies have been woefully unresponsive and inadequate to address the maladies that affect migrant housing. As Desai and Sanghvi (2020) point out, the central, state and local governments have not been able to come up with a comprehensive approach to addressing issues with respect to quantity and quality of housing stock targeted at urban working class. Despite the long-drawn debate around the many possible models of rental housing, nothing concrete has been delivered on this front.

The Union Budget of 2024–25 also made a proposal for rental housing with dormitory-type accommodation in a public–private-participation (PPP) model with viability gap funding support and commitment from anchor industries. Recently, the NITI Aayog has suggested a model called SAFE (Site Adjacent Factory Employee Accommodation) to resolve housing shortage closer to factory sites and industrial areas to manage worker attrition, lower productivity, and weak competitiveness. For the first time, there is an explicit acknowledgement that worker accommodation is a necessary corollary to industrial growth. However, such mass housing projects targeted mainly at single male/female migrants tend to push workers away from urban public spaces to zones of containment safely distant from the usual sites of interaction with the "citizens." Such "enclavisation" and "enclosure" (Yeoh and Lam 2022) reinforce the "othering" of migrant workers already caught in the broken rhythm of trans-local living and limit their citizenship rights.

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