

Migrant Urban Youth in the Draft National Youth Policy 2021

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India has one of the largest youth populations in the world. Migrant youth in the urban informal economy are a distinctly vulnerable group. They fall outside the purview of most of the labour legislations, including those related to rights-based social security. The draft National Youth Policy 2021 has recognised this. However, in the absence of a robust strategy, and timely and targeted intervention plan, the policy vision of “unlocking the potential of the youth” will remain on paper only.

Recognising the capacities of youth and realising their potential is extremely important for socio-economic development and eventually nation-building. Global population trends reveal the emergence of a “youth bulge” as one in every five persons in the world fall in the category of the population aged 15–29 years (Sahu and Kumar 2021). India is experiencing the most advantageous stage of its demographic transition wherein the demographic dividend has reached its peak. It has the world’s largest youth population of around 360 million in 2019, the youth will remain important in the demographic structure of the country at least till 2030 (Sasikumar 2019). It is the accumulation of quality education and skill among youth that will determine the extent to which India can reap the demographic dividend.

This demographic dividend might turn into demographic debt or disaster if youth development is neglected and lead to the potential “unfortunate lost opportunity” (Bhalla et al 2017; Sahu and Kumar 2021). The real challenge is to understand the diverse categories within the youth population and to foresee their potential and role in the economic development of the country. Therefore, the perspective of the draft National Youth Policy (NYP) towards its young population needs a closer reading.

The constructed image of “Young India” is partial as it misses the diversity within the youth. A small fraction of this population utilises their social and cultural capital as a ladder to fulfil their aspirations and explore better life opportunities and occupational mobility. However, a substantial proportion of the youth population in India comes from socially and economically disadvantaged sections and faces multiple challenges at different stages of reaching sustainable livelihood

avenues (Namala 2017). The youth who face social exclusion are not a homogeneous group in themselves and cover a vast diversity across and within each group (Namala et al 2016). One of the marginalised youth groups is the young migrant labourers scattered across the informal economy in urban centres of India, awaiting the attention of governments and policymakers.

Exclusionary Cities

Migrant urban youth in the informal sector form a prevalent and distinctive category, whose experiences and skills are widely different and more disadvantaged than those of urban educated youth. With low education and limited skills, they are more vulnerable to the various exclusions in urban areas (Bhagat 2020). In the past few decades, the degradation of agricultural land, climate change, shrinking employment opportunities and an increase in the casualisation of labour have pushed many rural young labourers to the cities. Greater participation of the disadvantaged youth population in the informal sector is a reflection of their exclusion from social and economic spheres, further perpetuating the inequalities and weaken their bargaining power in a capitalist system. Migrant youth is the key contributor to city development and eventually brings prosperity to the national economy (Bhattacharya and Sarkhel 2017); however, despite their significant contribution, they remain unnoticed in the development policy.

Migrant urban youth from rural areas have remained a relatively disadvantaged group in terms of access to social security and secured employment; they are primarily concentrated in the urban economy as informal workers (Table 1, p 14). The situation is worse in the case of urban female migrants (Table 1 and Table 2, p 14) and those who changed their last usual place of residence (UPR) during the COVID-19 pandemic (Table 2), primarily due to loss of employment or lack of employment opportunities. The level of employment informality was observed to be extremely high among them. The volume of such informality

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Table 1: Informality of Employment among Migrant Youth (Age 15–29 Years) in Urban Areas, 2020–21

Last UPR	Gender	Informal Sector Employment	Formal Sector Employment		Total Informal Employment (Million)	Per Cent Informal Employment	Total Employment (Million)
			Total (Million)	Per Cent Informal			
Rural	Male	1.93	1.90	49.6	2.9	75.0	3.83
	Female	1.17	0.49	31.9	1.3	80.0	1.66
	Total	3.10	2.39	46.0	4.2	76.5	5.49
Urban/other country	Male	1.24	1.52	31.0	1.7	62.0	2.76
	Female	0.63	0.76	29.1	0.8	61.3	1.38
	Total	1.87	2.28	30.4	2.6	61.7	4.15
Total	Male	3.16	3.42	41.3	4.6	69.5	6.59
	Female	1.80	1.25	30.2	2.2	71.5	3.05
	Total	4.97	4.67	38.4	6.8	70.1	9.64

Source: Authors’ calculation using unit-level data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2020–21; UPR—usual place of residence; estimated million numbers are adjusted with census population projected for 1 January 2022; total includes transgender population.

Table 2: Distribution of Workers Who Changed Their Last UPR during the COVID-19 Pandemic Period,* 2020–21

Last UPR	Gender	Total Workers (Million)			Per Cent Informal
		Informal	Formal	Total	
Rural	Male	0.13	0.03	0.16	80.9
	Female	0.27	0.00	0.27	98.8
	Total	0.40	0.03	0.43	92.2
Urban/other countries	Male	0.91	0.11	1.03	88.8
	Female	0.12	0.03	0.16	79.1
	Total	1.04	0.15	1.19	87.5
Total	Male	1.04	0.15	1.19	87.8
	Female	0.39	0.04	0.43	91.5
	Total	1.43	0.18	1.61	88.8

Source: Authors’ calculation using unit-level data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2020–21; UPR—usual place of residence; estimated million numbers are adjusted with census population projected for 1 January 2022; total includes transgender population; * this excludes those who did not work after changing their last UPR.

would have been even higher if the returnee migrants who did not work after changing their last UPR are taken into count. This indicates the extremely vulnerable socio-economic environment for the returnee migrants, which could be seen as an outcome of processes of inequitable socio-economic growth and regional inequalities that have been systematically creeping in during the neo-liberal policy regime.

Unequal Migrants

Migration to cities does not offer equal outcomes for all migrants. The migration process has an inbuilt screening system that privileges skilled labourers who usually belong to relatively higher social and economic strata (Kundu and Saraswati 2012). Whereas unskilled or semi-skilled young migrants are left with no better alternatives than working as a wage or casual labourers in the urban informal sector, which remains the last livelihood means for them. Most

of them migrate seasonally, temporarily and hail from poor and marginalised communities (Rajan and Bhagat 2021). These youth are mostly scattered across small-scale industries, construction, brick kilns, rag-picking, textiles, gig and platform work, sanitation and domestic work, petty self-employment activities, etc.

For the rural population, the migration decision is usually a survival strategy in search of (better) livelihood opportunities in the cities. However, the urban informal sector has an inherent vulnerability and many unfavourable attributes, and the miseries of the youth continue even after migration. The work is usually precarious and low paid, and the workers are at risk of experiencing multilevel exploitation and exclusion in the workplace. They are the floating groups due to their constant mobility, highly fragmented due to the urban informality, and remain undocumented in welfare policies due to lack of domicile and other proofs. Consequently, the urban administrative mechanism excludes them from accessing civil and legal rights, social protection coverage and public services (Srivastava and Sutradhar 2016). They are also the most vulnerable to any sudden economic shock (Jha and Kumar 2021). This is often amplified due to intersecting elements, such as region, religion and caste-based social identity, lower educational attainment, poverty and debt, and poor skill set and competencies. These elements function silently in the informal labour market, hinder upward occupational mobility and influence the power relations between migrants and their employers.

The COVID-19 pandemic badly affected these youth groups in several forms, such as wage theft, employment insecurity, stigmatised identities, restricted social mobility and issues of mental health. The International Labour Organization and the Asian Development Bank (ILO and ADB 2020), in their joint project, noted that before the pandemic, young people were already facing challenges in the labour market and the COVID-19 crisis has worsened their situation. The youth will be hit harder than adults in the crisis intervals that will have a long-term impact on society and the economy (ILO and ADB 2020).

National Youth Policy

NYP is a statement of purpose and intention to assure the youth of the country that policymakers are concerned about their interests and participation in national development (Priya and Telang 2012). Therefore, it is very important to critically review and recognise how the NYP 2014 and draft NYP 2021 have addressed the issue of migrant youth in the urban informal sector. The NYP 2014 stated to support the youth at risk and create equitable opportunity for all disadvantaged and marginalised youth (GoI 2014). In the NYP 2014, due emphasis is given to the economically backward youth, the differently abled, LGBT, those living in conflict-affected regions, victims of human trafficking or hazardous working conditions, etc. Although it has made a general reference to migrant youth but failed to implement specific measures for their inclusion. Instead of bypassing them, the policy should have included them with a broader framework of multidimensional exclusion. The NYP 2014 does not recognise or articulate social exclusion as a basis for determining youth deprivation and misses

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out on the critical barriers and constraints faced by a large majority of the youth in our country (Namala 2017).

This lapse in the NYP 2014 has been mirrored in various implementing agencies and monitoring bodies. Today, after eight years of policy implementation, we do not have a single programme to comprehensively address the specific issue of migrant youth in the informal sector. The migration crisis during the first nationwide COVID-19 lockdown has reinforced the need of addressing their issues and bringing them on the development agenda. On the other hand, learning from the lockdown lessons, the draft NYP 2021 shows a concern for the youth engaged in the urban informal sector, and acknowledges them as a separate category. The draft ensures to provide a support system for strengthening their social security as per the national labour standards and envisages the holistic development of this young populace (GoI 2022).

Now, the question of the inclusion of migrant youth is much more complex and challenging than it seems, as they are mostly engaged in the informal economy where the statutory social security laws are not applicable. Also, they are typically engaged in informal labour contracts, mostly in routine manual and non-manual jobs where the chance of their replacement in the rapidly changing technological environment is the highest (Vashisht and Dubey 2019). They are more likely to be excluded from the labour market as compared to their counterpart in the urban areas who have better access to the required skills.

In the process of mainstreaming the migrant youth in the development policy, the first and foremost challenge is of identification and documentation of these youth groups. This is an extremely diverse migratory group that requires special attention and needs to be identified in the urban spaces. Therefore, there is a dire need to have credible, comprehensive and disaggregated data on the internal migrants to know the trend, pattern, scale and nature of youth labour migration. The present e-Shram portal is an important initiative in registering migrants. However, the process of registering is

cumbersome and faces issues such as the requirement of Aadhaar-seeding, a permanent mobile number, an account in a nationalised bank, etc.

The Problems with Data

In 2017–18, the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) replaced and restructured its older quinquennial survey design on the Employment–Unemployment Survey (EUS) and introduced the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) intending to strengthen the Indian database on labour statistics and to improve the existing system on collecting data on the social-economic parameter. Jajoria and Jatav (2020) have raised several concerns about the present structure of the PLFS, as there is a limited possibility of carrying out a micro-level analysis at the household and individual levels across several important quality indicators and it is a narrowed-down version of the previously conducted quinquennial surveys at large. Also being urban-biased, the PLFS has overlooked the EUS in rural areas that puts limits to understand the situation at the places of origin. Consequently, there is a high possibility of missing out on the micro-dynamics of the migrant youth in the informal sector.

The gig and platform workers as a category has been overlooked by the PLFS as it uses the National Classification of Occupations (NCO) 2004, in which there is no classification of this workforce (Bhandari 2022). Along with that, regular and frequent availability of official migration data is also very crucial. The NSSO is the only source besides the population census that provides comprehensive data on migration. However, the survey on migration has an irregular time interval and was long due till the release of annual data of PLFS 2020–21. There was a growing requirement of integrating a migration module in the PLFS (Jajoria and Jatav 2020). Recently, it has been added in the PLFS, 2020–21 to capture the situation of migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, for effective policy intervention, it has to be integrated and continued regularly, not merely limited to the pandemic period.

The previous survey on migration was conducted during 2007–08; thereafter,

the population census was conducted in 2011, but there was an unusual delay in the availability of migration data. All these factors hamper the study of the minute dynamics of labour migration and the consistency in creating a comprehensive database of migrants and its timely dissemination.

Missing Female Labourers

The young female labourers in the urban informal sector are an important workgroup missed by the draft NYP 2021. This is among the most vulnerable segment in the urban informal labour market as they face severe gender-based challenges, sociocultural prejudices and discrimination in society in general and workplaces in particular. Because they are migrants and are women, they frequently face more issues, such as wage theft, unpaid work, safety, privacy, health and hygiene, violence, sexual exploitation, abuse and trafficking. The pandemic and lockdown have created a devastating impact on them and added miseries to their vulnerability. Hence, it is crucial to identify the gender-specific needs of migrants. The draft would be incomplete and partial if it overlooks migrant female labourers and therefore essential to identify them as a separate category among the migrant youth.

Gig and Platform Workers

The draft NYP has envisioned providing safety nets to gig and platform workers to protect them from exploitation. However, the draft is silent on the fact that there is a substantial proportion of migrant youth in the emerging gig platform economy. These migrants are usually from rural areas and small towns with low skill sets. The existing structural constraints in Indian society such as gender, region, caste and religion can hinder entry-level opportunity and make it challenging to sustain and grow in the gig economy. Hence, there is a need to minimise entry barriers and make them productively employable by imparting suitable skill sets required in the platform economy. In addition to this, there is an urgent need to ensure their health, safety and appropriate working conditions, along with other legal safeguards

envisaged under various labour laws and fundamental rights in the Constitution of India.

The distress-driven youth migration remains a persistent challenge. The recent employment crisis characterised by job loss growth (Kannan and Raveendran 2019) and increasing informalisation (in the formal sector too) indicate the failure of the state in providing gainful and decent employment to its youth in general and migrant youth in particular. The employment policy could have special provisions for urban migrant youth groups. Policies towards formalising the informal economy by ensuring the implementation of statutory social security legislations, along with other labour laws, and sustainable and decent livelihood opportunities will help in ensuring basic rights and securities. In the case of migrant urban youth particularly, the employment policy must protect them from exploitative work environment and social settings in the informal sector.

Access to Learning

Also, efforts could be made to develop alternative schooling models in different cities so that the dropout youth can complete their education. A special alternative education model based on the principles of lifelong learning and equitable quality education could be beneficial to alter their plight and break the vicious circle of poverty by creating legal, financial and civic rights awareness. It could be helpful to make them familiar with gender equality, risky sexual behaviour, reproductive health and rights, nutrition, health and children's education. The root cause of the plight of urban migrant youth is the lack of the right kind of education, and development of related infrastructure in the places of origin. It is the high time that the policies focus adequately on the hinterland to minimise the urban bias and resultant inequalities. As the draft is aligned with Sustainable Development Goals and there is also multidimensional poverty that prevails among migrant youth, it is extremely important to generate decent employment opportunities. A skill-based training strategy will be pivotal and could help develop potential, reduce

vulnerability and enable occupational mobility; it would eventually enhance their bargaining capacity in the labour market.

Another concern is the collective and shared responsibility for youth development. In the case of migrant youth particularly, a wide spectrum of issues, such as employment, decent work, social security, caste, gender, etc, remain critical and require a strong political will and bureaucratic commitment with a holistic approach of inclusion to reach a solution. Therefore, different state ministries and departments, trade unions and other civil society organisations must be comprehensively coordinated and an ecosystem should be developed for effective and meaningful inclusion of migrant urban youth. Considering the cross-sectoral nature of the urban informal labour market and youth engagement in it, the policies concerning migration, education and youth must be aligned with the labour codes for a long-lasting affirmative policy impact. Such institutional preparedness and convergence of policies will ensure the development and inclusion of the migrant urban youth.

To conclude, the draft NYP 2021 seems promising as it addresses the issues of migrant youth in the urban informal sector. It aims to achieve several youth development objectives by 2030. However, this is going to be complicated and much challenging to achieve in the absence of a strategic plan of action. Only a rights-based strategic plan will translate the goals and vision statement of the policy into reality. The coming decade will decide whether the policymakers are genuinely concerned over the issues of migrant youth, or is it merely a strategy for damage control over the broken "young India" image.

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