Navigating hyper-precarity: im(mobilities) during the Covid pandemic in India

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Introduction

Navigating Hyper-Precarity: Im(mobilities) during the Covid Pandemic in India

SAGE

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The hyper-precarity, enforced immobility and invisibility of India's migrant workforce have been starkly in focus since March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic began. The papers in this special issue explore migrants' lived experiences of mobility and immobility during the Covid pandemic. They provide granular accounts of the translocal and temporal strategies of migrants as they navigate state controls, citizenship rights, patriarchal norms and barriers to accessing welfare schemes. The case studies empirically delve into the gendered subjectivities of exclusion and power and how these vary by caste and ethnicity. They provide unique insights into what it means to migrate, live and work in today's India, where neoliberal values have undermined labour rights and protection. At the same time, migrants stories of everyday struggles and socialities reveal how they have created spaces of hope, aspiration and resistance.

Keywords

Hyper-precarity, mobility, India migration, translocality, social reproduction, aspirations

The events that unfolded in March 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic were a powerful reminder of the precarity and invisibility of circular labour migrants in India. Now more than two years on, and despite a number of initiatives from the new government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to protect migrant rights,[1] their lives continue to be fraught with uncertainty. This special issue draws attention to the ruptures created by the pandemic and how that affected groups of

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migrants who were already hyper-precarious due to their marginalisation in the city, their informal work as well as their inability to make claims on state welfare programmes or protective legislation. They also trace the experiences of migrants since the lockdowns of 2020 as they try to regain a foothold in the city and rebuild their lives. In analysing these experiences, the papers in this special issue consider the manifestation of power in relationships governed by the institutions of patriarchy and caste and how these have shaped gendered subjectivities of exclusion, power and hope during the pandemic.

The papers trace the lived experiences and subjectivities of migrants in particular locations and specific occupations, including cab drivers in Hyderabad (Annavarupu, 2022), coal miners in Odisha (Nayak, 2022), sex workers and construction workers in Delhi (Agarwal, 2022), a variety of low-paid occupations in Kishangarh and Mangalore (Naik, 2022), industrial labour in Delhi (Chaudhary, 2022) and industrial workers and home-based workers in Haryana, Rajasthan and Gujarat. They provide a grounded view on the specificities of labour relations in these hitherto under-researched and invisiblised forms of work. The contributions are from scholars who have had their ear close to the ground, studying everyday social interactions in places of work and living in diverse contexts. They have had the opportunity to critically evaluate the structural and cultural conditions that have shaped the migration of men and women entering these specific labour market niches and how the pandemic impacted them. One of the papers in the special issue considers the post-Partition period, but flags issues that are of concern here related to exclusionary state regimes, citizenship and belonging (Kannabiran & Tella, 2022).

Nearly all of the papers dwell on the experiences of migrants belonging to disadvantaged communities—the so-called Scheduled Castes (SCs) or dalits, those at the poorer end of the broad category of Other Backward Classes (OBCs), adivasis or the indigenous peoples of the subcontinent as well as minorities. These groups are heavily represented in labour circulation between rural and urban areas (Breman, 1978; Deshingkar & Start, 2003; Keshri & Bhagat, 2012). There is no doubt that migration has allowed those who have been excluded in rural areas to benefit from some advantages of growth in urban areas. The major source states for circular labour migrants continue to be characterised by widespread poverty, low wages and a lack of regular work which are all recognised economic drivers of migration (the social and aspirational dimensions are discussed later). But we also know that labour migrants may be adversely incorporated into labour markets' hierarchies at destination and face multiple structural barriers to breaking free of class-, caste- and gender-based dependency relations (Lerche & Shah, 2018). Although the urban and industrial sectors employing migrants have changed significantly since Independence in terms of growth and infrastructure, the social relations that underpin labour relations have been slow to change (Breman et al., 2009; Harriss-White & Gooptu, 2001; Mezzadri, 2016). Breman et al. (2009) note that while historical relations of patronage, bondage and dependency have been eroded over time, these have not been replaced by freedom, dignity and fair remuneration. Others have examined these processes through a gender lens, highlighting the differences in experiences and subjectivities of male and female

migrants belonging to lower castes as they enter different forms of work and migration (Arya & Roy, 2006; Mazumdar et al., 2013).

Once in the city, the conditions in which circular labour migrants are employed are indecent and precarious: many do not have written contracts, are not paid for sick days, are paid less than local workers, are actively discouraged from unionisation and demanding better conditions (Srivastava & Sutradhar, 2016). Most are absorbed in the ever-expanding informal or unorganised sector which is now a feature of the lowest tiers of the organised sector as well. Ramana Murthy (2019) estimates there are 92.4 per cent informal workers (with no written contract, paid leave and other benefits) in the economy. There are also 9.8 per cent informal workers in the organised sectors, indicating widespread outsourcing. Such migrants are the 'flexible' workforce that neoliberal regimes idealise—where workers can be hired and made redundant at will to serve the needs of capital. While there is a welfare system in place in India to mitigate some of the risks faced by circular migrants, serious problems of exclusion remain (Paliath, 2021). Large numbers of migrants stranded in the first lockdown were unable to claim their rights because they were not registered under laws such as the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service), 1979 and the Building and Other Construction Workers Act, 1996.

But there were many other intersecting factors that created vulnerabilities among the migrant population which remain poorly understood. The case studies provide details on the ways in which vulnerabilities were created in particular under-researched spaces of living and working. They also show the complex ways in which migrants' experiences of exploitation and inequality are entangled with their aspirations to embark on different life trajectories and navigate structures that constrain them to achieve their personal goals. This calls for renewed attention on the ways in which relations of exploitation and migrant agency are intricately folded together and how they were constituted, disrupted and reconstituted when the pandemic hit. It especially raises the question of how migrants reconsidered the options available to them after the initial lockdown to fulfil their social, emotional and material goals, and at what point in time they decided to take action. All too often labour migration in India is discussed from a purely material perspective with a focus on economic deprivation, wages at destination and retaining strategies based on rural employment creation. But as recent research is revealing more and more, migrants are not simply following the money; their decisions are entangled with multiple social, emotional and temporal considerations related to their personal aspirations (Carling & Collins, 2018), a sense of dignity (Roy, 2021), their natal families' desires and their plans for their children's future. These aspirations and decisions are embedded in the particular social fields that they come from and are shaped and reshaped by new social and political configurations in the places that they move through (Deshingkar, 2022a).

For most of the hundreds of millions of labour migrants in circulation in India,[2] these drivers of migration which straddle social, psychological, emotional and material factors collide with exploitative labour markets and exclusionary bureaucratic regimes. This complex interaction of exploitation/exclusion with aspirations and agency runs through the papers in this special issue.

Theoretical Contributions

While approaching the issue from different disciplinary lenses, the papers speak to the shared goals of feminist critiques in migration studies that seek to understand the relationship between gender, power, place and space. Feminist geographers have done much to show how migration is entangled with power relations and their multiple social, cultural and economic manifestations (Basu, 2012; Pratt & Yeoh, 2003; Rai, 2020; Silvey, 2004). An understanding of exploitative employment in India would be incomplete without grasping how migrants belonging to particular social backgrounds are incorporated into jobs at destination. The work of feminist geographers like Linda McDowell has been instructive in unpacking the intersections between migration, race and gender in the construction of different labour markets (McDowell et al., 2007). McDowell and colleagues examined labour relations in the London hotel industry to show how work was segmented by gender and class based on social constructions of embodied attributes of the workers. Thus, workers from diverse cultural and country backgrounds were positioned by managers and recruiters in ways that constructed and recreated certain social hierarchies. Her research showed that gender, nationality, personal style, embodiment, skin colour, weight, bodily hygiene and language abilities influenced how workers were hired and the jobs they were given. Junjia Ye (2014) observed similar patterns of segmentation in her study of the Singapore construction industry where Bangladeshi migrants were incorporated at the lowest tiers because of their construction as pliant and feminine, thus unlikely to protest against exploitative conditions. Earlier research by this author (Deshingkar, 2017) also found similar patterns in the construction of workplace identities for particular labour market niches in India.

Taking a feminist perspective on the links between caste, class and gender throws light on how such migrants are positioned in structures of social stratification and inequality. The papers presented here contribute to this field while also offering important insights into migrants as agents, who are actively assessing and planning ways of challenging their precarity and subordination and moving on towards a situation that they regard as a step up. Each paper in this issue advances our understanding of what it means to be a migrant in contemporary India and how their decisions related to their day-to-day work, survival in the city and strategies for the future are shaped.

The broader framing of the papers in this volume speaks to the idea of mobility and immobility and feminist geographers' endeavours of examining the relationality that shapes mobility rather than just a movement of people from one place to another. Central to this kind of research is the recognition that identity, subjectivity and lived experiences are critical to understanding migration (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Those researching mobilities recognise the enormous diversity that is possible in movement or that different people move in different ways (Adey, 2006) which is very much what the papers in this volume illustrate. The mobility approach does not underplay the importance of place, but draws attention to the politics and power that shape mobility and immobility. The literature focussed on immobility has aimed to understand how it is created and how it is imbricated with

geopolitical processes. In the Indian context, the papers here reveal the political processes that have caused immobility among migrants and the spaces within which it occurs. Immobility may also refer to the impossibility of continuing a career path, interruption to life plans and having to put life on hold (Cangià et al., 2021), which all appear as themes in the papers here. An important dimension of immobility is waiting, and there is now a growing literature on the subject (Conlon, 2011). Conceptualisations of waiting focus attention on the temporalities of migration and the numerous manifestations of time in migrants' lives. Waiting is not the same as statis, but instead it represents an interrupted lifeworld fraught with uncertainty and imbued with migrant agency and aspirations where migrants decide how to plan for the future and when, how and where to take action (Axelsson et al., 2017; Bissell, 2007; Janeja & Bandak, 2018; Khosravi, 2020). The papers by Sneha Annavarupu, Pankhuri Agarwal, Mukta Naik, Priya Deshingkar and Jyoti Tripathi, and Kalpana Kannabiran and Ramya Tella explore migrants' spatial and temporal encounters with waiting in very different spatial niches and cultural settings. They show how waiting is experienced in terms of emotions, feelings and a sense of frustration and how migrants are using their waiting time to plan ways of challenging their circumstances.

Hyper-Precarity

Even though internal migrants are exercising their constitutional right to live and work in any place of their choice, they suffer from a range of inequalities and exclusions. In fact, the very process of migration and the way in which migrants are channelled into particular jobs and spatial niches at destination creates layers of precarity in their lives. The analyses contained in the papers clearly indicate that migrants are working and living under a variety of informal arrangements without full protection as states recognised employees or citizens. While these aspects of their liminal existence did not pose an immediate problem in 'normal times', they led to extreme vulnerability and suffering during the pandemic as they were suddenly caught without the means to make claims on the state or employers (Carswell et al., 2020; Deshingkar, 2022b). The informal nature of their work, coupled with low levels of registration under protective laws, meant that they were effectively invisible to the state (Deshingkar, 2022b). The pandemic thus laid bare the dual and mutually reinforcing precarities that migrants faced—at the workplace and also due to their invisibility as migrants, workers and citizens. Migrants employed in the jobs considered in the coming pages suffered from this interaction of the precarities associated with their work and their exclusion by the state. In effect, they are what Lewis et al. (2015) have called 'hyper-precarious' because of the ways in which their legally liminal status and the workplace precarities created on account of their social characteristics (discussed in greater detail below) reinforce each other. The papers speak to the theoretical concept of hyper-precarity and unpack its gendered and caste-related manifestations during various phases of the pandemic: lockdowns, lifting of restrictions, the return to work afterwards and changing work opportunities.

Translocality and Social Reproduction

The authors also demonstrate the inextricable material and emotional connection between hyper-precarious migrant workers at destination and their places of origin. The importance of these translocal connections with communities and kinship networks is now well recognised (Datta, 2016; Lawreniuk & Parsons, 2020; Nguyen, 2014). It became evident during the first lockdown that migrants who were stranded without an income, housing and food depended on their natal families in rural areas to support them through the crisis in a variety of ways. As the crisis intensified, millions returned to their rural homes, their main locus for social reproduction and security. They remained at home, drawing on the security of family, kinship networks and sharing of resources until such time that they could venture out again into hostile cities. Even in normal times, the precarious conditions at destination mean that the costs of the social reproduction[3] of labour are borne by migrants and their families. Thus, capital maintains a supply of labour differentiated by race, gender, ethnicity or caste (Norton & Katz, 2017; Shah & Lerche, 2020) but lacks the means to reproduce the labour that it relies on (Katz, 2001). This was much evident when millions of migrant workers returned home creating a serious labour crisis across a range of industrial units, care homes and eateries that depended on migrant labour. The way these connections and interdependencies unfolded in India during the pandemic has been explored (Mezzadri, 2020; Shah & Lerche, 2020), and the papers here provide further evidence from different contexts.

Aspirations

Finally, the papers provide granular accounts of the complexity of migration and how decisions to move or stay are influenced by hope, desire, material circumstances as well as structural barriers related to caste, gender and migration regimes. They help us to understand how migrants' aspirations come into play and move beyond purely economic motives (Carling & Collins, 2018). The papers show how migrants' aspirations and strategies for change, both for themselves and their families left behind, are shaped by the structures that define their lives and how their aspirations are shaped by what they regard as feasible within their own means. They throw light on the ways in which migrants are continuously weighing up options, re-evaluating their social and economic position, and what they can mobilise to realise their next move. These questions have been addressed from different theoretical positions, including the work of migration scholars (Carling & Collins, 2018) who build on the work of feminist geographers to take migration theory beyond the preoccupation with migration as a rational decision to a recognition of the centrality of subjectivities and identities. Others have drawn on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus to show how migrant decisions are shaped by societal norms (Tucci et al., 2021) and also to better understand how migration results in the emergence of new cultural configurations (Erel, 2010). Deshingkar (2022a) uses Bourdieusian ideas of capital, social fields and habitus (Bourdieu, 1987, 1991, 2011) to understand the struggles and positioning of lower caste as they navigate both the societies they have left behind in rural areas and

the urban fields that they migrate to. Men achieved this by mobilising their caste habitus and performing the bodily and behavioural markers of belonging to a subservient lower caste. In contrast, women's agential strategies were more complicated where they engaged in caste-based and gendered practices of obedience, co-opting patriarchal narratives to become more independent. In this way, they were able to recast their identities as modern women within their own means. Appadurai's work (Appadurai, 2004, 2013) situates aspirations within the rapidly changing social and material contexts brought about by the forces of contemporary globalisation. His seminal work on the 'capacity to aspire' examines how people are able to develop practices of self-governance, self-mobilisation and self-articulation despite extreme poverty and powerlessness. Such means allow the poor to pursue their own visions of equity, justice and democracy and develop capacities that are needed to navigate their precarity.

These themes are explored in the papers in this special issue from different disciplinary and theoretical standpoints. The stories of migrants provide granular accounts of their negotiations and strategies within their families and societies of origin before migration, their relations with a variety of social actors at destination and their interactions with the state. They show how these together have shaped their subjectivities and experiences and how these are embedded in particular social contexts. Collectively, the articles in this Special Issue connect theoretical and empirical work on migration in key sectors by contextualising migrant experiences within wider processes of globalisation and liberalisation. They present a highly differentiated picture of migrant work patterns across industries and cultural contexts. These accounts highlight the complexity of informal work arrangements and the way in which migrants are incorporated in them. The intersection of migration with labour markets imbricated with caste and gender as well as exclusionary policy regimes results in a complicated path that they must navigate to fulfil their aspirations.

The Papers

Sneha Annavarupu carried out research among migrant cab drivers in Hyderabad to show how the pandemic had led to immobility and waiting. Through pains-taking interviews carried out during cab rides across the city, Annavarupu shows how cab drivers' aspirations are shaped and how their life goals and strategies have changed during the pandemic. She engages deeply with the way that migrants relate to time and their experiences of waiting, highlighting the need to examine the temporalities of mobility and immobility together with spatial displacement. The lives of the migrants in her study were conditioned not only by the uncertainties in the cab-driving economy created by the pandemic but also by the demands of their families. She offers insights into the ways in which the uncertainties and precarities created by the pandemic have reconfigured migrants' aspirations, their relationship to work, their imaginaries of the future and their articulation of hope and despair.

Suravee Nayak's paper draws on deep ethnographic research among migrant labour in Odisha's Talcher coal mines to unpack the factors that have shaped labour mobility during the ongoing pandemic. She situates the current pattern of migrant recruitment and work through sophisticated historicisation of migrant work in the Indian coal mine sector, paying attention to subjectivities shaped by caste and gender. She shows how the labouring lives of migrants belonging to dalit and adivasi communities have been cheapened and invisiblised in a 'shadow economy' operating under the aegis of the capital-intensive mining practices of Coal India Limited. Her paper compares the experiences of interstate migrants recruited from Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh and the local dalit community to show how workers' identities are socially constructed by employers and how that has structured the coal mining labour market. Her study offers valuable context-specific insights into the material and social aspects of migrant precarity as well as their own hopes and desires for a better life.

Tanya Chaudhary's paper is based on ethnographic research among migrants in the Narela Industrial Estate in the National Capital Region of Delhi. Her paper explores how the government-imposed lockdown and closure of industrial units in Narela as well as the resulting loss of income and dearth of means of travel resulted in the immobility of migrants. The paper draws on the connections between mobility, translocality and social reproduction to unpack the processes that have shaped migrant experiences in the ongoing pandemic. The paper provides context-specific insights into the entanglements between aspirations and precarity in migrant workers' lives and how it contours their decision-making process and experiences. The interviews detail experiences of employers' strategies that precarise workers such as surveillance and control over their bodily movements. She also examines the imperatives and relational aspects that then led to them becoming mobile again when they decided to return to their villages and how that differed for men and women. The interviews reveal how men felt discontent to remain in the village because they had acquired new skills in the city, and this led to different aspirations and desires to remigrate. On the other hand, interviews with women revealed why they wished to remain in the city because of tensions related to the natal family's pressure to bear children as well as servitude to the in-laws and backbreaking work in the fields in the village.

Pankhuri Aggarwal tackles issues of precarity and lack of citizenship rights among interstate migrant workers who have been rescued under legislation related to bonded labour and trafficking. Her respondents included sex workers and bonded construction workers from disadvantaged caste backgrounds working in Delhi. She shows through extensive fieldwork and observations including interviews, accompanying migrant workers to government offices and scrutinising legal records, how they are immobilised, subjected to waiting and placed in a precarious state without access to any source of livelihood. This state of precarity can continue for years, and in all of the cases she examined, none were able to break free of dependency and poverty, showing that legal approaches and the bureaucracy that implements them are reproducing the very conditions that they seek to abolish. When the pandemic hit, these already hyper-precarious workers were hit hard, leading to increased dependencies on informal networks and increased exploitation at worksites.

Mukta Naik's paper compares the experiences of female migrants in the culturally diverse cities of Kishangarh in Rajasthan and Mangalore in Karnataka to understand how they navigate patriarchal norms as they embark on work, education and mobilities. She deploys a Bourdieusian framework to analyse their situatedness within their social field that is imbued with caste and gender norms and how this conditions women's aspirations and agency. She uses Deniz Kandiyoti's concept of the 'patriarchal bargain' in which women negotiate within the family and the wider kinship system to maximise their own life chances without challenging the structure of patriarchy. She provides a critical assessment of smaller cities as a place for women's emancipation as they present different cultural restrictions on their mobility under patriarchal restrictions, being closer to their places of origin. She concludes that small cities can be places for women to test and explore their mobile aspirations while being able to strategically retreat and fall back into safety nets. Follow-up interviews with contacts who had stayed in touch with the women during the pandemic did indeed show that they had withdrawn from city-based work and had returned to a more traditional life course—stages of marriage or working remotely from their homes.

Priya Deshingkar and Jyoti Tripathi trace the experiences of married women migrating from poorer parts of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar who enter the hyper-precarious industrial workforce either as factory workers or home-based workers. They offer insights into the ways in which married women navigate power relations within the family as well as their places of work to fulfil their family obligations while also pursuing personal aspirations. The authors show how they juggle multiple family roles as wives, mothers, daughters-in-law and daughters in their decisions related to (im)mobility, work and earning. Theoretically, the paper speaks to the production of gendered and racialised work and spaces of work and how gender inequalities shore up capitalist accumulation. The paper also examines how married women manage their productive and reproductive labour and the tensions between family duties and personal aspirations. The accounts show that married women are active agents who are using their earnings to help their children to break class boundaries through education.

The final paper in the special issue by Kalpana Kannabiran and Ramya Tella delves into the legal and social conceptualisations of citizenship and belonging and the tensions that arise between them. They narrate the story of a Tamil woman who migrated to Pakistan in 1950 and who then wished to return to India. But despite her strong feelings of belonging in India, she fell foul of the legal citizenship framework of both countries and was then stuck in a hyper-precarious and immobilised state. Thus, while not addressing the fallout of the current pandemic, the paper nonetheless offers critical insights into the nature of state-driven processes of (im)mobility and hyper-precarity. The paper implicitly highlights the central importance of subjectivity and identity in understanding mobility. Throughout her peripatetic experiences, Ansari Begum self-identified herself as a Tamil woman—a Tamil woman in Pakistan and in India. Based on her story of belonging and alienation, the authors propose the idea of intimate and interwoven personal histories of citizenship that they believe merit further examination.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. For a comprehensive overview of the various central and state government schemes that have been introduced recently, refer to Rajan and Bhagat (2022).
2. Estimates of the numbers in circulation vary depending on the data sources used: see for example (Tumbe, 2017)
3. Norton and Katz (2017) define social reproduction as 'the daily and long-term reproduction of the means of production, the labor power to make them work, and the social relations that hold them in place' (p. 1).

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