



# Are Inter-State Migrant Workers a part of the Precariat?

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## Introduction

Social Class in India is an extremely problematic and puzzling aspect. Given the diversity of the country which is juxtaposed with intersectional inequality, vulnerability, and discriminatory practices it is challenging to identify who belong to which class without the risk of being a reductionist. At the same time, with the onset of the Covid 19 Pandemic, India saw a mass exodus of inter-state migrant workers who had no means of social security and legislation to support their precarious condition. As a part of the informal sector their numbers are ambiguous, their conditions are uncertain, and their wages are minimal. Furthermore, while being a significant part of the supply chain of several industries such as the textile industry in Surat, they are neither compensated in a just manner nor can unionize or mobilize that is visible to the mainstream society. With the move of introducing 100% FDI in India and greater demand for products, the inter-state migrant workers must negotiate their life not only through their labor conditions but also through the ambivalence of the home-state and the work-state along with meeting the demands of their families. In such a scenario it is important to question whether inter-state migrant workers are still part of the working classes or constitute the Precariat<sup>i</sup> in India. In this essay I attempt a comparative-historical review of the inter-state migrant workers<sup>ii</sup> in India and understand their class location. <sup>iii</sup>

## The Inter-State Migrant Workers

The terminology to address the main protagonists of this essay is quite ambiguous and problematic. They are often termed as informal workers, differential workers, migrant workers, seasonal workers, labor migrants and many more. Each term owes its coinage to a particular disciplinary orientation or theoretical lens. I am referring in this essay to people who travel from one state, that is their home state, to their work state, that is the place they travel to for their work. I call them 'Inter State Migrant Workers' I should point out certain aspects of this 'people' and their 'travel' here. The first feature is the motive to travel is based on the dialectics of presence and absence of work. The contemporary labor supply and demand is quite distant from its industrial roots. It is not a movement from suburbs to the city's core, particularly referring to Park and Burgess's notion of the concentric city (Scott and Marshall 2009). It is also not a linear movement from rural to urban areas (Kumar and Fujita 2014)(Kikon and Karlsson 2019). For example the movement of Odia workers from Ganjam to Surat<sup>iv</sup> is a case in point. The movement is between urban and urban. A key aspect here is the availability of an industrial corridor. For instance, Surat is a textile corridor in India and is labor intensive. It is a manufacturing site and attracts labor from eastern India and Southern India. Akin to information networks that allow transnational migration among Hispanics in

America, the inter-state migration of these labor migrant workers operate in a similar manner. Once an established set of people from one region become a part of the labor supply chain restricted to a site they create social capital using their ethnic networks. This enables a flow of what Marx would call, organic capital, and thereby creation of a reserve army of cheap labor. The departure of inter-state migrant workers (ISMW) from this proletarian discourse is, however, the unstable conditions of labor rather than a constant stability of poor conditions. I will elaborate this in the later sections.

Another aspect of the ISMWs is the lack of data. Savage (2015) while writing about their survey methodology in the Great British Class Survey (GBCS) pointed out that methodology reflects a quality of the objects of the study based on how accessible they are. He noted that the new class called the 'precariat' were missing in the nationwide online survey. On similar lines it can be argued that the ISMWs have been the missing people for India. Development Studies specialist Arjan De Haan (2020) was quick to point out that ISMWs or what he refers to as labor migrants, are vulnerable because the state has no reliable numbers to do any sort of means-testing or policy recommendations. He assesses the work of Srivastava (2020) and Srivastava and Sutradhar (2016) to argue that estimates varied between 5-40 million. De Haan (2020) further states that the numbers could be as high as 100 million contrary to the census data that ballpark the number at 45 million. The range between 5 to 100 million is enormous to convincingly argue that

“Theories and models of migration tend to neglect the complexity of patterns of mobility, again enhancing the gaps in knowledge about the extent and impact of population mobility, often particularly important with respect to more marginalised group”.

A third aspect of ISMWs is their precarity. Simon During (2015) argues that precarity is a state of dispossession where one experiences an anthropological lack. As highlighted above, and as an aspect of this anthropological lack, is the lack of data. But it has greater implications. It implies a bioploitics of bodies of their labour and a disregard to enfranchise them. So anthropological lack would mean the ISMWs

lack of home, basic living conditions, a wage structure and a distanced relation with the state. An important sociological concept that emerges here is risk and ontological security. First we have a group of people, the ISMWs, who are dependent on the state's welfare schemes. Second to be a beneficiary of these schemes they have to be identified and documented. Thirdly, this identification also creates a political identity of the migrant worker as the subject of the state. These three factors create the subject and the identity of the ISMW's being. In the absence of the above anxiety, alienation and anomie occur. Giddens would call this as ontological insecurity as the ISMWs are not a part of the subjects of the state. An absolute dispossession creates a whimsical market where brokerage and middlemen appropriate the vulnerability of the dispossessed.

A final aspect of the ISMWs is about who they are as a group. Though predominantly men, these studies have ignored the gender bias. ISMWs also include women who now form the backbone of the care economy. Furthermore it is extremely important to highlight the national contingencies of ISMWs being spoken of. Given the context of India and its oriental understanding through the lens of caste it is common to conflate the precariat with lower castes. However, ISMWs are a heterogeneous group. They are composed of different class and castes. As well as different ethnic identities. They are not an occupational group either. ISMWs are engaged in multiplicity of occupation such as textile workers, construction workers, brick layers, cement pickers, garbage collectors etc.

Socially ISMWs lead a multiply divided life. It is not simply a matter of a binary between the home state and work state but managing the multiple vectors within them. Between these two states – of home and work, is an everyday that is routinized with hazards, low wages, lack of mobilization and precariousness. While most study focus on migrant remittances, they fail to address the nuances of these remittances. While an economic aspect of this migration is still acceptable it does not explain the irregularities and the issues with remittances. A part of the precarity is the culture of debt among ISMWs who, in the habit of sending money home also enter

a culture of debt by borrowing money through informal means. This can occur in the form of seeking an advance from the floor manager for more hours of work or a pay cut from the wages. While it may appear as a smooth balancing of money it is important to note that there is no formal banking involved. The whimsical nature of the floor manager and the vulnerability of the borrower increases the chances of exploitation. As far as residential conditions go, ISMWs are generally kept in what I call work towns. They were worse than the workers dorms in many countries as they lack proper infrastructure and are poorly kept. It is constructed to restrict family migration. Not surprisingly the majority of the ISMWs not engaged in the care economy are young men. The question which becomes important is to what class do these people belong? Even before answering this the question that requires answering why is social class important in understanding ISMW. I address the latter first by a brief overview of Indian Class structure and answer the former by explaining the new class called the Precariat.

### The Indian Class Structure

Indian class system has mostly incorporated EGP scheme or the occupational classes schemata. They use employment relations in economic life to understand the class location of an individual. I highlight here the traditions of social class understanding in India which are widely used and excavate their flaws.

Drawing from EGP scheme Sovani and Pradhan (1955, p 25) explain India's social stratification in terms of category called skill-status. They describe it as a within social status, economic status and other elements like skill, enterprise. In the same paper they chart 10 grade schemata mentioned below:

1. Unskilled manual work (workers who require no sort of skill but only physical energy) domestic workers, beedi-workers, sweepers, those engaged in agriculture
  2. Skilled manual work (their earnings represent payment for their labour) – includes both semi-skilled and skilled workers like the artisan classes, like cobblers, carpenters, barbers, tailors, wiremen, goldsmiths
  3. Lowest professions, administrative posts—astrologers, priests, compounders, jugglers, primary teachers
  4. Small businesses—hawkers, shopkeepers
  5. Highly skilled and supervisory manual work
  6. Clerks and shop-assistants
  7. Intermediate professions ('absence of manual work and greater emphasis on brainwork and educational attainment') — salaried posts, secondary teachers, sub-inspectors
  8. Medium business
  9. High professions and administrative posts
  10. Owners of factories, large shops
- A more definitive imitation of the Goldthorpe class schema is conducted by Kumar, Heath and Heath (2002). They use market relations, employment relations and work situations to list classes based on stability of the job contract. The classes are follows:
1. Higher Salariat = Executives, professional and white-collar employees
  2. Lower Salariat = Class IV employees
  3. Business = Large and small businessmen
  4. Petty Business = Small store owners and road side businesses
  5. Skilled and Semi-skilled manual labourer = mechanics, electricians, tailors, weavers, carpenters and craftsmen, and rickshaw puller
  6. Unskilled Manual Labourer = Manual labourers, excluding those in the agricultural sector (such as construction workers, chowkidars and sweepers)
  7. Farmers = Owner cultivator and tenant cultivators with more than 5 acres of land
  8. Lower Agriculturists = Less than 5 acres of land, sharecropper, agricultural labourer, landless labourer, tea plantation worker, dairy farmer, fishermen, shepherds, hunters.
- Beyond this a classical and a simplistic way of observing Indian classes has been dividing classed based on its agricultural relations. Nijhawan (1969) uses the

1967 NES data to list the following classes:

#### Non-Agricultural

1. Professionals: administrative, executive, technical, and managerial
2. White-collar: clerks, salesmen, and other related occupations
3. Business and trade
4. Skilled and semi-skilled
5. Unskilled

#### Agricultural

1. Owner cultivators and farmers
2. Tenant cultivators
3. Agricultural labourers

Divya Vaid (2018) provides a critical analyses of the above schemes and argues that most of the social stratification in India draws extensively from western categories. She demands, and as he does in her book, that Indian social classes have a more contextual analysis of classes since the majority of population is still engaged in agricultural activities. While I agree with her emphasis on a contextual analysis I do not see it as a reason to rule out the formation of a class caused to widescale dispossession brought out by neoliberalism. I also have to address that Vaid focusses on social mobility while I focus on the lived experience. In the above class schemes there is no scope to locate the ISMW as the relations of employment and skills and market situation are constructed as distinct. For example a ISMW can have a supervisory manual work and be unskilled for example the dorm manager of the ISMW residences. At the same time ISMW can be unskilled and still own a farm back home. For example the Filipino FDWs in Singapore. None of these categories question the discontinuous history of social classes. The major flaw of the above understandings is visualising the lower classes as a part of the working class or the proletariat. As such ISMWs require a new category that wholly captures their class location and the urgent need of attention.

## The Precariat

To demonstrate that the ISMWs belong to the social class called the precariat it is essential to show why they do not belong to the working class. Fundamentally this is important because labor migrants, as they are referred to in most of the literature are either understood as a part of the skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled Manual labor in the informal sector. Or just left out of the stratification system as I mentioned above. Apart from the existing conditions post 2008 economic crises, the ongoing Pandemic (de Haan, 2020) exposes the differences between the working class and the precariat. The ISMWs in India suffered what is being called as India's worst migration crisis post-Independence<sup>v</sup>. It exposes as de Haan argues the pre-disposed rupture in the Indian society especially in its flawed labor policies such as the failure of the 1979 Migrant Workers Act. Furthermore, the bilateralism between the home state and work state provides no relief to the ISMWs in the case of harm or loss. De Haan points out that this is not endemic to India. Or rather what is happening in India to ISMWs reflects the global approach towards refugees and asylum seekers. In a way the ISMWs is reduced to a refugee in the work state as he is dispossessed of his identity.

A critical point of departure from the working-class structure is the concept of the ISMWs as denizens where they become less than citizens. I synthesize Standing (2014) and de Haan (2020) to argue that Standing's denizens are the ISMWs precisely because their exclusion is based on the residential policy scheme. By this it means to avail welfare benefits or to become a part of the welfare scheme the data government collects if based on your home state. For example, a migrant worker with an identify card that states they belong to state A and is working in state B, cannot avail the relief in state B. This is more acute for ISMWs as the welfare schemes are mostly directed at the urban poor which they theoretically are a part of but are excluded in all methodology.

As such the ISMWs differ from the working class based on three criteria:

- Relations of production  
ISMWs across India have incomplete or ambiguous contracts. They are what Guy Standing calls routinised to uncertain labor conditions and job insecurity. This is marked by an increased control of middlemen and brokers as opposed to the state or the elite. While the working class is about a stable but low wage, the ISMWs receive unstable wages. Furthermore, ISMWs engage in jobs that are a myriad and unaccounted for. Unlike the proletariat they are more likely to do unpaid labor.
- Relations to the state  
ISMWs are denizens. Despite being citizens of the country, they are denied voting rights because they can vote only from their home state and they are not allowed to go back to their home state when the election takes place. This distances them from the political apparatus and keeps them away from the exercising their social, cultural, and civil rights.
- Relations of distribution  
This refers to being divorced from the formal banking sector. The ISMWs receive wages in cash on a hand-to-hand basis and without any fixed interval. Furthermore, there is no balance sheet that ensures fair pay for the job done. Because of this there is no scope of non-wage benefits that is generally found in other parts of the informal sector.

## Conclusion

What we learn from this, as argued by Standing is while the Proletariat is concerned with jobless growth, the precariat is considered with growthless jobs. Statistically, Guy Standing argues that the number of jobs has increased in India's informal sector. However, the nature of the job has changed considerably over decades. A major concern here is that ISMWs do not unionize because of the above conditions. This was evident during India's pandemic when millions of migrant workers travelled as individuals. As a class in the making, they have no union or ineffective union who cannot bargain with the state for better way of life. In such a case to call them the working class is to fit them

into a group which has a political life. This is important to further the argument for universal basic income. During the pandemic a demand was made to give direct cash to ISMWs to help them obtain the minimum needs which is like the call for UBI. With the above factors in consideration there is significant evidence to argue that ISMWs in India are a part of the global precariat that is increasing. To call the ISMWs as a part of the precariat is to engage sociologically with the issue of social class in extending social justice to a group of people that are at the most insecure and at risk in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> See Standing, Guy. 2014. *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London, UK ; New York, NY: Bloomsbury.

<sup>ii</sup> See Haan, Arjan de. 2020. "Labour Migrants During the Pandemic: A Comparative Perspective." *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, October. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41027-020-00283-w>.

<sup>iii</sup> By state I refer to the meaning of 'state' in India. For example, the state of Odisha, Maharashtra, Gujrat. I address the territorial demarcation here.

<sup>iv</sup> See "‘We Have Been Sitting Idle’: Without Work, Migrants From Odisha Return to Surat Mills." n.d.. <https://thewire.in/labour/odish-migrant-workers-gujarat-surat>.

<sup>v</sup> See *BBC News*. 2020. "Coronavirus: India's Pandemic Lockdown Turns into a Human Tragedy," March 30, 2020, sec. India. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52086274>.

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