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Indian migrants caught in the lockdown: How many will return? Where will they come from? Where will they return to?

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Summary

Since March 24th when the lockdown of India was announced, many migrant workers have been without work, and were prevented from going home. Without support from their family and networks back home, they have to rely on government assistance for food and shelter. The plight of migrants gathered in camps, protesting at train stations, or walking hundreds of kilometres, has moved the nation and the world. After May 3rd, once restrictions on mobility are lifted, they are expected to return home. This return migration poses the risk of carrying the virus to rural areas with poor public health provision. In the sectors where they would have been working, labour shortages are feared.

The objective of this note is to answer three simple questions:

1. How many migrants will return?
2. Which districts will returning migrants come from?
3. Which districts will returning migrants go to?

The main takeaways are the following:

1. Up to 22 million migrants (11 million interstate migrants) may go home when the lockdown is lifted. But the actual numbers are likely to be much lower.
2. Returning migrants will come from a few urban / manufacturing clusters where the prevalence of COVID-19 is currently high.
3. Returning migrants will go back to poor and remote rural areas where the capacity to provide health care and quarantine them is low.

Migrants are always difficult to track. I will use the most recent data available:

- Census 2011 on permanent migration.
- NSS Employment-Unemployment Survey 2007-08 on seasonal migration.
- Census 2001 district-to-district migration matrix to guess which district permanent migrants are from and which district seasonal migrants go to (as in Imbert and Papp 2020).
- Monthly unreserved trips in 2014-15 from the Indian Railways (Firth and Imbert 2020).

1. How many migrants will return?

To know how many migrants will go home, we need to know how many migrants there are, and what fraction of them will go home once mobility restrictions are lifted.

Permanent migrants are people who changed their residence. From Census 2011 we know that in the year preceding the census, 8 million people had moved to another district, 4 million to another state. **The question is how many of these permanent migrants will go back?** Many of them have a house, a family, and a livelihood where they currently are. They may be tempted to go home if their livelihood is compromised, but in the current uncertainty they may also prefer to wait until the end of the year

Seasonal migrants are people who go away to work when there is less work to do at home. From the NSS Employment Survey 2007-08, we know that between July 2007 and June 2008, 10 million people spent one to six months away from home for work in another district, 6 million to another state. These figures are for a whole year, but seasonal migrants are typically gone for a few months only. **The question is how many seasonal migrants were away at the time of the lockdown (March 24th)?** To shed light on the timing of seasonal migration, I use Indian Railways data (Firth and Imbert 2020). Bi-monthly net flows from rural to more urban stations exhibit a peak in Nov-Dec (after the Kharif harvest), people come back from Jan to April (for the Rabi harvest), and go out again in May-June.

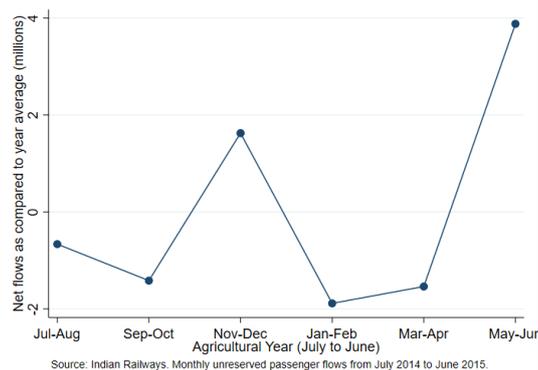


Figure 1: Seasonality of railway passenger flows

To sum up, and rescaling numbers to account for population growth, **there may be up to 22 million migrants (11 million interstate migrants)** who will go home when the lockdown is lifted. **But the numbers are likely to be much lower**, as a majority of permanent migrants will stay at their destination, and a majority of seasonal migrants may actually be still at home for the Rabi harvest.²

2. Where will migrants return from?

To know where migrants currently are, we use the Census 2011 for permanent migrants, and NSS Employment Survey 2007-08 combined with Census 2001 for seasonal migrants:

² I did not make any distinction between male and female migrants, although many female migrants are married and would not go back to their own family, but to the extent that migrants marry migrants, women are equally likely to go back to their in-laws than men to their parents.

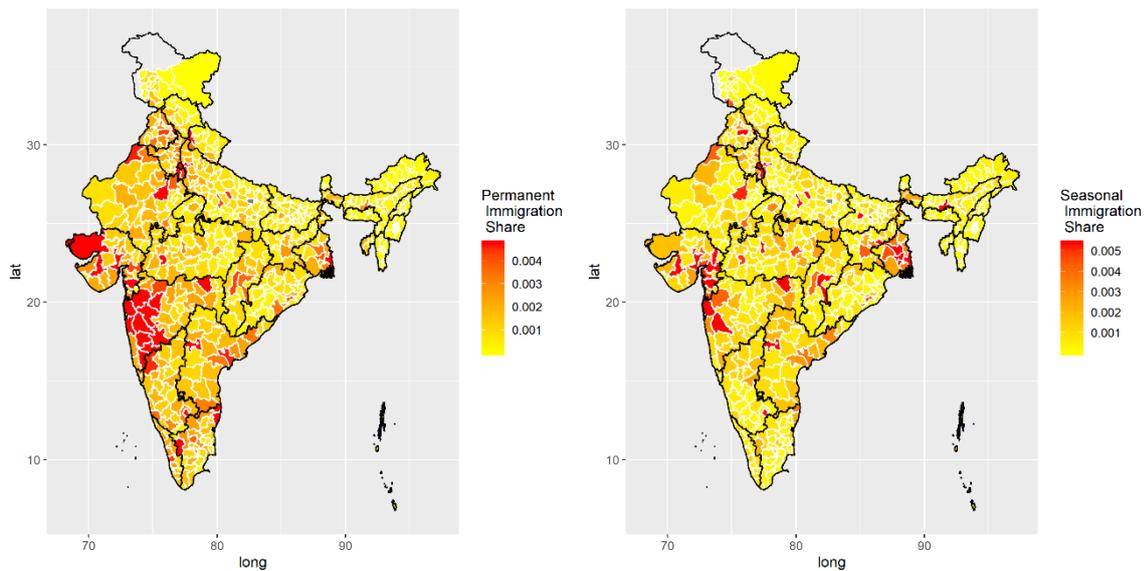


Figure 2: Share of total permanent migrants (left) and share of total seasonal migrants (right) in each district of destination.

The two maps paint relatively similar pictures. Permanent migrants who return will come from the main urban centres of India (e.g. Ahmedabad, Bangalore, Chennai, Delhi, Mumbai), as well as from manufacturing clusters in Gujarat and Maharashtra. Seasonal migrants are even more concentrated geographically, which reflects the fact that they tend to go and look for work, e.g. construction work, in large manufacturing/urban centres (Imbert and Papp forthcoming).

There are two things to learn from the concentration of migrants in a few destinations. **In the short-run**, as migrants return from places where COVID-19 is the most prevalent (Delhi, Gujarat, and Maharashtra), **the risk that they disseminate the virus is high**. In the long-run, if migrants go home and do not come back (e.g. if they wait until November), **destinations will experience severe labour shortages**. Previous evidence from the drop in seasonal migration due to MG-NREGS suggests that urban centres depend heavily on migrants for their casual labour (Imbert and Papp 2020).

3. Where will migrants return to?

To know the location of the home permanent migrants will return to, we use the Census 2011 combined with the Census 2001. For seasonal migrants, we use the NSS Employment Survey 2007-08:

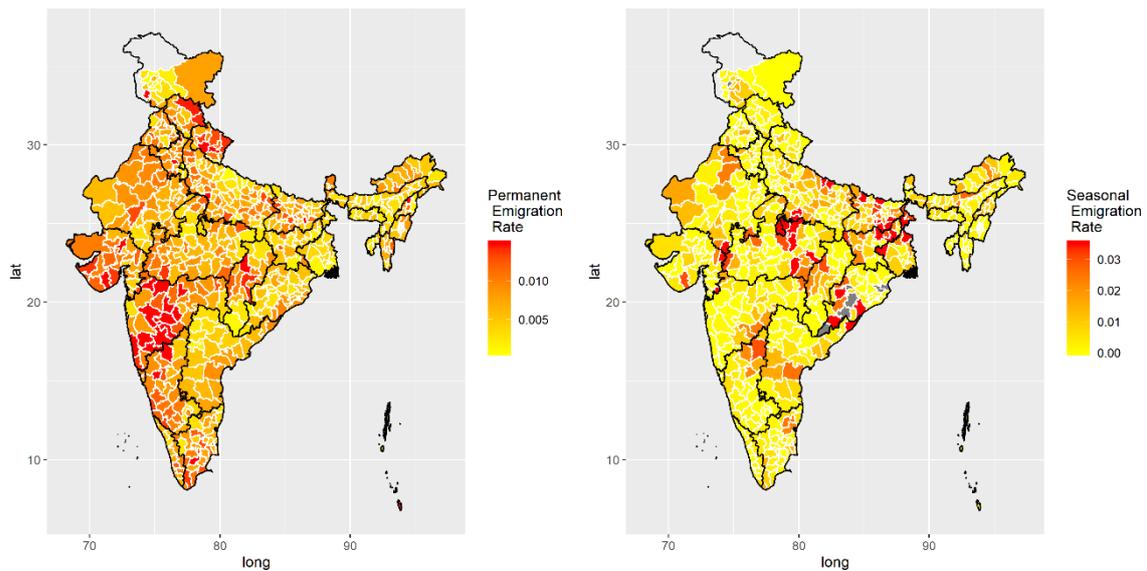


Figure 3: Permanent migration rate (left) and seasonal migration rate (right) coming from each district of origin

The two maps paint a different picture. To the left, permanent migration is relatively spread out across states. To the right, seasonal migration is concentrated geographically in remote rural areas in the poorest states of India (Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, and Odisha). This means that **when seasonal migrants go home, the responsibility to provide them with health care or quarantine them will fall on a small number of districts which are poor and remote** to start with.

References:

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