# Migration, Social Structure and Citizenship in India

R. B. Bhagat *

## Abstract

**Keywords**

Migration, Social Structure, Citizenship

Migration has been a historical process shaping social structure like caste and class relations, patriarchy and family. Globally, colonialism promoted slave trade and indentured labour followed by immigration to the western world. In the context of India, the migration and mobility has been institutionally denied to the lower castes, and the freedom of the women's movement has been curtailed shaping gender relations. On the other hand, there is a dearth of studies debating the ideas of citizenship in relation to internal migrants particularly those of seasonal and temporary nature who lose their equal status, face discrimination and miss their civic rights and entitlements. This study discusses the relationship between internal migration and social structure pertaining to caste and gender keeping in view citizenship as a framework to understand the vulnerability and exclusions as a concern for public policies and governance in India.

*Professor and Head (Retd), Department of Migration and Urban Studies, International Institute for population Sciences, Mumbai-400088 Email: rbbhagat@iipsindia.ac.in

# Introduction

Migration has been a historical process shaping citizenship, social structure, patriarchy and family. It is a spatial process of change in residence leading to the change in the social milieu and social relationship. While some migrants are able to assimilate and integrate in the society at the destination, others are excluded and denied the privileges and entitlements directly or indirectly. There is also a need to take into account different forms of migration such as internal and international, permanent/semi-permanent and seasonal/temporary migration while studying the relationship between migration and migrants' right. In respect with internal migration nativism plays a crucial role in the exclusion of opportunities and entitlements either through practice or institutional mechanisms, while for international migration the idea of citizenship is central in determining the rights, entitlements and the access of privileges. Citizenship is defined as a legal relationship between the individual and the sovereign state within a defined territory (Lem 2013). The idea of citizenship came into existence with the emergence of nation-state in contrast to the concept of subject associated with monarchy. In India, subjects have been called 'Praja' in relation to Raja (King), while citizens are Nagrik in relation to the nation-state. Nagriks are rights holders, while Praja had hardly any rights during the monarchy.

Scholars trace the origin of nation-state to the treaty of Westphalia in 1648 after 30 years of war among the Catholic and Protestant princes. It recognized the territorial sovereignty and accepted the existence of non-dominant Christian denominations based on principles of secularism- i.e., state is not bound by any religion. Unlike the state in monarchy, the nation-state is defined as a state that belongs to its people as a community of citizens who identify themselves a nation. France is often cited as a first nation-state established after the French Revolution (1787-99) (Feinstein 2024). As the nation-state has been an ethno-political entity believed to be socially bounded and geographically delimited, migration and mobility may pose serious challenges to the idea of nation-state rooted in citizenship (Castles and Davidson 2000). Thus, people moving across national borders (international migration) and those moving within a nation (internal migration) face different challenges and enter into different relationship with the state. In several parts of the world including India making of the nation-state co-exists with the extant idea of nativism which affects the rights of internal migrants. According to Myron Weiner (1978) 'nativism is that form of ethnic identity that seeks to exclude those who are not members of the local or indigenous ethnic groups from residing or/working in a territory because they are not native to the country or region: nativism is anti-migrant'. However, it is worthwhile to mention that both the ideology of nation-state and the idea of nativism distinguish between those who are insiders and outsiders. Both are territorial in nature historically evolved and spatially bounded posed serious challenges in the realization of citizenship rights. As migrants are treated as outsiders, migration forms the political core in defining the boundaries of citizenship (Baubock 2006). While in respect with international migrants the denial of the privileges, entitlement and rights constitute a legal issue based on citizenship, the denial of the same for internal migrants, in spite of satisfying the conditions of citizenship, is influenced by their several socio-economic conditions including caste and gender. A migrant's status as a non-native intersects with caste and gender identities may create barriers and

vulnerabilities in the fulfillment of citizenship rights particularly for internal migrants influencing their well-being. The various components of migration and migrants and their characteristics, relationship, status, rights and well-being are presented in Fig 1 .
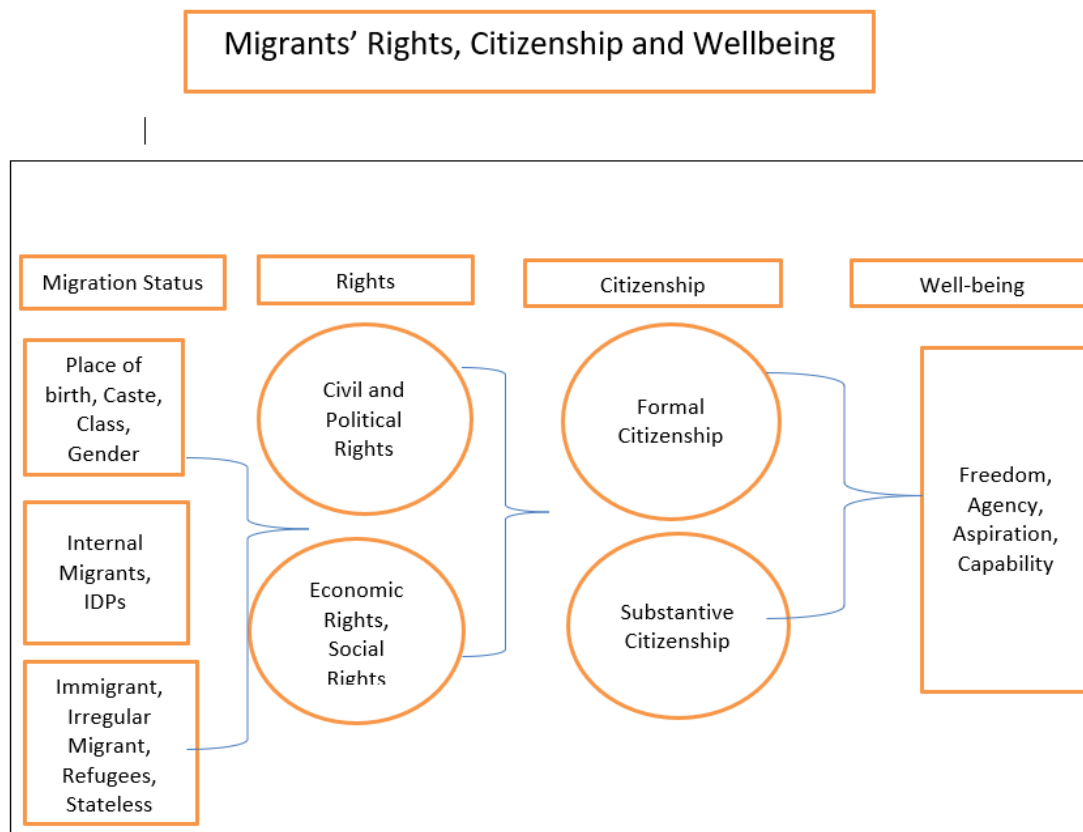


**Figure 1.** Migrants' Right, Citizenship and Well-being
Note: IDPs- Internally Displaced Persons

It may be noted in Fig 1 that among the various components making a distinction between formal and substantive citizenship is pertinent to understand the relationship between internal migration and citizenship. While formal citizenship refers to being the member of the nation-state, the substantive citizenship connotes an array of civil, political, social, cultural and economic rights people possess and exercise (Holston and Appadurai 1996). In respect with poor migrants who have membership of the state but are deprived of access to various rights, the non-fulfilment of substantive citizenship turns their formal citizenship (e.g. right to vote) ineffective. In other cases, many migrants with formal citizenship are unable to vote either due to non-inclusion of their names in the voter list at the place of destination or unable to reach the place of origin at the time of election. The portability of voting rights or mechanism of remote voting could be a solution to restore political right to vote for many internal migrants. Fig 1 also portrays that rights are bundles of entitlements starting with civil and political rights followed by economic and social rights. However, rights are neither hierarchical nor separable but interrelated and reinforcing each other. Deficit in one right also leads to

deficit in another right. The figure enunciates that the various forms of migration and their background characteristics such as caste, class and gender determine the fulfillment or denial of citizenship rights influencing well-being defined on the basis of freedom, agency, aspiration and capability. An understanding in the deficit of citizenship is extremely important from the perspective of policy and governance both for internal and international migration (de Haas, 2021)

Globally, colonialism promoted slave trade and indentured labour followed by immigration to the western world. In the context of India, the migration and mobility has been institutionally denied to the lower castes, and the freedom of the women's movement has been curtailed shaping gender relations. On the other hand, there is a dearth of studies debating the ideas of citizenship in relation to internal migrants particularly those of seasonal and temporary nature who lose their equal status, face discrimination and miss their civic rights and entitlements. This study discusses the relationship between internal migration and social structure pertaining to caste and gender keeping in view citizenship as a framework to understand the vulnerability and exclusions as a concern for public policies and governance in India.

# Social Structure and Migration

In India the basic idea of citizenship continues to be debated in the context of immigration, irregular migration and refugees (Roy 2010; Jayal 2019; Bhagat 2022), while 449 million internal migrants comprising of 37 per cent of India's population in 2011 also face challenges of losing their equal status, face discrimination and miss their civic, political rights and entitlements. About 40 per cent of India's

working class comprises of internal migrants (about 200 million). In addition, 3 per cent also constitute short-term (about 15 million) temporary migrants (Bhagat et al 2020). With regard to internal migrants, citizenship intersects with status, rights and identity, and the perpetuation of social and economic inequalities shape their status as citizens. As such citizenship is not a fixed and immutable category and its experiences and implications vary according to one's location in the social structure. Similarly, migration is also not a singular and monolithic phenomenon, and much depends upon forms of migration such as permanent/semi-permanent and seasonal and temporary migration, voluntary vs forced migration etc. It is also a freedom enhancing and bondage creating depending upon the forms of migration such as voluntary vs forced migration. Thus, there is no linear relationship between migration, social mobility and citizenship.

Migration has been looked upon so much as a part of the economic process that its contribution in shaping social structure, culture and history is overshadowed. As a result, economic reasons of migration grounded in economic theories pervade migration studies compared to its relationship to social theories. In more recent times, non-economic reasons like marriage, education, getting rid of violence and conflict in search of security and safety are important reasons of migration. Political prosecution and forced migration are part of the non-economic factors turning many people into refugees and internally displaced persons. Thus, migration covers a vast swathe of areas which could be kept under the rubric of non-economic domain of migration.

India's social organization is known for the institution of caste- a hierarchical arrangement of social groups where status is determined by birth. Each social group also lived in a spatially demarcated area

also identified with the level of purity and pollution. The lowest rung of the caste hierarchy are the *Shudras* (also known as untouchables officially called as scheduled castes) largely occupied the outskirts of villages as they were considered to be polluted. In fact, historically they have been the agrarian working class in the villages who tilled the land which they did not own. The traditional system of procuring agricultural labour tied to land and land owners has been the dominant practice Indian social system in the past. The system of caste relations which was both social and spatial was known as *Jajmani System* (patron-client relationship) which kept the agrarian labouring classes immobile. On the other hand, the privilege of mobility was confined to the *Brahmins* (priestly castes) and *Vaishyas* (trading castes) principally who moved to provide priestly services and the latter trading of goods. The traditional *Jajmani system* has been given way as urbanization unfolded the opportunity of salaried jobs and wage labour in cities and towns (Dube 1990). Dr B. R. Ambedkar was highly critical of the village system of economic and social relations which kept *Dalits* under subjugation and bondage for centuries. He declared,

> **I hold that these village republics have been the ruination of India. . . What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism?** (Moon 1994:62).

Similar situation was also observed in medieval Europe with the presence of *serfs* who were tied to land. The immobility of serf was a characteristic feature of European feudalism. They only became mobile in the wake of industrial revolution and migrated to towns with growing urbanization (Barzun 2025).

Urbanisation provided an immense scope for the scheduled castes people to migrate into the cities and free themselves from the yoke of caste system. While Dr B.R Ambedkar believed in the emancipatory role of migration to cities for the dalits, Kashiram felt that *dalits* whether migrated from villages or not, caste always remained with them (Narayan 2014). However, Joseph (2007) argues that city offers a space for the development of separate identity and also a space of liberation compared to the constricting village system. Although dalits generally live in slums in urban areas, it is still different from villages as urban way of life offers avenues of freedom and mobility.

It would be interesting to know how propensity to migrate varies by social groups. Broadly two types of migration could be identified namely permanent and semi-permanent which is identified based on change of usual place of residence. This category is also generally considered as typical migration in migration studies. There is another type of migration which is of seasonal and temporary nature and the migrant is not expected to change the usual place of residence. NSSO (2010) defines a seasonal or temporary migrant as "a household member who has stayed away from the village/town for a period of one month or more but less than six months during the last 365 days for employment or in search of employment. This is also called short term migration- a dominant form of migration from rural areas.

The earlier studies show that permanent and semi-permanent migration does not vary much across social groups but seasonal and temporary labour migration is higher among the Scheduled castes and scheduled tribes- the socially disadvantaged groups. Seasonal and temporary migration largely occurs in the rural to urban migration stream. Further, studies show that the annual rate of seasonal and temporary migration is seven times higher

than permanent and semi-permanent migration (Keshri and Bhagat, 2013). It has also been increasing particularly in the rural areas (Bhagat and Keshri 2023). Studies also point out that seasonal and temporary migration is a livelihood strategy among rural households (Deshingkar and Farrington, 2009; de Haan, 2011; Keshri and Bhagat, 2012). The largest proportion (about 36%) of seasonal and temporary migrants is employed in the construction industry followed by agriculture (20%) and manufacturing (about 16%). There is a dearth of data on the actual magnitude of seasonal and temporary migration and estimates vary depending upon how short-term migration is defined (Keshri and Bhagat, 2013; Deshingkar and Akter, 2009). The Planning Commission suggested that there is a need to undertake state-centric surveys to capture the flow and pattern of migration to the various sectors, particularly the construction sector (Planning Commission 2013: 363). Srivastava (2012) opines that seasonal and temporary migration has been increasing in the recent past. However, seasonal and temporary migration among females is about 6 times smaller than male migration, whereas it 5 times higher than male in the category of permanent/semi-permanent migration (NSSO 2010). This is because female migration is predominantly results due to marriage migration and shaped by gender and patriarchy. The seasonal and temporary migrants largely belong to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes with poor skills and education, migrate for their survival are hugely vulnerable and suffer from deprivations and exploitation in the places of destinations (UNESCO 2013). As such migration has not been able to erode the close association of between caste and occupation at the places of destinations which are mostly urban. A close association between the two has played a significant role in the maintenance of caste

identities resulting into citizenship deficits (Beteille 2012).

# Patriarchy, Gender and Migration

Historically migration also intersects with gender and patriarchy. The age-old system of marriage migration for women who leave parent's house and join husband's house in most of the parts of India, has been an important element of the architecture of patriarchy. This practice led women to have been separated from family and kins and transferred to an unknown social set up subjugating their agency and voice. In the later stages of life women's movement follow husband's movement or move with household. This further reinforces patriarchy which premised on the division of work such as productive work assigned to men and unproductive work of home making and child rearing to women. Lack of inheritance and access to property and invisibility of women in the lineage tree are other features in most of the patriarchal society, and India is no exception to it. In such system voluntary movement of women is controlled and they are made dependent on men for every decision and act. If fact immobility is the foundation of patriarchy, and it reflects in every bit of opportunity of migration and migration decision making. Men have the privilege of migration as they are breadwinners of the family across societies. On the other hand, women's migration results predominantly due to marriage and the movement of family. However, in India, gender relations are also buttressed not only by patriarchy but also by the institution of caste and religion through various boundaries of endogamy and gender role practices. Thus, in majority of cases mobility of women is controlled and carefully planned within this system either through

the normative structure such as patrilocal residence or in the name of safety and security of women. In more patriarchal society of north and north-west India, village exogamy is also practiced combined with the practice of child and early marriages which distanced them from their kin groups. Purdah (veil) system further reduces their agency and worsens the opportunity of mobility and freedom of movement (Dyson and Moore 1983).

However, in the recent times there have been many social and economic changes associated with urbanisation, changes in the labour market and rising education which unleashed a growing share of women migrating independently both internally and internationally. Notwithstanding it continues to remain very low. In consistent with patriarchal values, employment appeared as the main reason for males to migrate, whereas marriage is the main driver of female migration in urban India (about 86 per cent). In addition, about 8 per cent of women migrants migrate with their parents or other family members. It shows that women's agency as measured through independent movement on account of employment is seriously limited in Indian situation. Less than 2 per cent women migrants reported employment as a reason of migration and even less migrate for education (less than 1 per cent) (NSO, 2022). This indicates that citizenship right to move is seriously curtailed in India. Further, women migrants are generally employed in vulnerable conditions such as domestic servants as well as construction workers. Women migrants are also found working as sales workers, beauticians, hair dressers, call centre workers etc. Many of these jobs are not only low paid but also subjected to high risk of exploitation including the risk of sexual exploitation (Mazumdar, Neetha and Agnihotri and 2013). Studies also show that illiterate women have higher propensity to migrate than illiter-

ate men (Singh, Keshri and Bhagat 2016). Thus, the emerging labour market is extremely segmented with women migrants relegated to low skilled, less paid and less secure jobs of informal nature.

Moreover, cities have also turned to be more exclusionary through violence against women more recently. This has implications for the movement of women in the cities and consequently their participation in the work. It is to be noted that mobility and migration is an important instrument for the realization of citizenship rights which is seriously compromised in respect with women (Bhagat 2017). Intrinsically, migration and mobility could erode patriarchy and attendant social norms and practices, but paradoxically economic opportunities of migration are very limited for women. On the other hand, rising dowry, violence against women, son preference and female feticide continue to be persist reinforcing patriarchy even with rising urbanization and economic growth.

# Protection of Internal Migrants' Citizenship Rights

In India, all migrants are not equally vulnerable. Migrants engaged in technical, professional and managerial jobs are less vulnerable compared to migrants in informal sector. The former category generally belongs to permanent and semi-permanent migration category with higher education and skills who can withstand the challenges and succeed in becoming members of the urban citizenship. On the other hand, migrants belonging seasonal, temporary and circulatory nature mostly belonging to scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and lower class with low education and skills are more vulnerable and subject to various kinds of exclusions

and exploitations in urban areas. Such migrants also do 3D jobs namely dirty, dangerous and demeaning. Many of them face exclusions from social security programmes such as public distribution of food, access to education and health care and the entitlement to housing at the place of destination owing to the absence of identity and residential proofs. Most importantly portability of voting rights is crucial for migrants as citizens to realize and all other rights. There are large number of short-term seasonal, temporary and circulatory migrants who are not able to exercise their voting right as they are away from their political constituency on the day of voting.

The implementation of social security programmes generally falls under the purview of the state government. While this should have been done easily in respect with intra-state migrants, an inter-state co-ordination may be required in respect with inter-state migrants. The inter-state migrants also incur hostility from the native residents who are constantly fed with the ideology of the sons of the soil. As the attitude toward migrants are negative and migrants are believed to be snatching the jobs of the locals, they are treated as outsiders. It is because of this reason that many programmes either by central or state governments are silent on the problem of migrants facing in the urban areas. Further, different states of India formulated variegated domicile policies deterrent to the movement of many aspiring migrants to access admission in medical, technical and professional courses.

In India, the Right to Move is a fundamental right under the Article 19 of the Indian Constitution, however, the sentiments of sons of the soil, domicile policies denying access to housing and education, and inner permit to visit several parts of North-east India still persists in different intensities. It is also argued by researchers that it would be inappropriate either to prevent or discourage migration as it plays a very important role in development and fulfilling human aspirations. Preventing migration either through direct or indirect means could be counterproductive (World Bank, 2009; UNESCO, 2013; Foresight, 2011).

Migration policy, particularly with respect to internal migrants however, should not only be viewed merely as part of labour policy but needs to be embedded in the citizenship rights-based framework. As evident, the case of India is different in the sense that a vast number of temporary and seasonal migrants belong to scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and poor. Social security is also important because approximately 90 per cent of the workforce is employed in the informal sector. Further, the provisions of various social security programmes are place bound. Although it can be transferred to the destination provided migrants are able to show residential proof of residing at the place of destination along with an identity proof. In the event of short-term migration procuring a residential proof is very difficult. Therefore, there is a need to make the social security programmes portable to protect the entitlements of migrants. Although some progress is evident such as *One Nation, One Ration Card* announced during COVID times, the portability of PDS for inter-state migrants remains tardy until recently (Tumbe and Jha 2024). The other initiatives like rental housing, New Labour Codes and eShram Portal need to be more sensitive and effective in protecting migrants' citizenship rights.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize people centric development. In several SDG goals and targets, migration was incorporated unlike the Millennium Development Goals earlier. SDGs also emphasize protection of economic, social and cultural rights of

migrants and their mainstreaming in the development process. Addressing the vulnerabilities of migrants from the point of view of citizenship rights is not only consistent with the slogan of Sustainable Development Goals - 'Leave no one behind', but also to build an ideal, inclusive and just society based on democratic citizenship. In the words of Dr B.R. Ambedkar, chief architect of India's constitution,

*An ideal society should be mobile, should be full of channels for conveying a change taking place in one part to other parts. In an ideal society there should be many interest channels for conveying a change taking place in one part to other parts. In an ideal society there should be many interests consciously communicated and shared. There should be varied and free points of contact with other modes of association. In other words, there must be social endosmosis. This is fraternity, which is only another name for democracy. Democracy is not merely a form of government. It is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. It is essentially an attitude of respect and reverence towards one's fellow men.*
(Dr B.R. Ambedkar,1936, The Annihilation of Caste).

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