

A Qualitative Exploration of Rural–Urban Migration Narratives in Chandigarh’s Informal Economy

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Abstract

Rural–urban migration in India is often reduced to economic statistics, but beneath every moved family lies a story of hope, struggle, and belonging. This study explores the lived experiences of 45 migrant labourers in Chandigarh through focus group discussions (FGDs). Using a narrative, human-centred approach, we examine why people leave their villages, how they survive in the city, and what keeps them connected to their rural roots. Our findings reveal that migration is rarely a simple choice: it is shaped by fragmented landholdings, the pull of modest but reliable urban wages, and the presence of kin networks. Participants described migration as a “journey without a map” – a mix of aspiration and compulsion. The paper argues for policy interventions that address not just economic push factors but also the emotional and social costs of leaving home.

Keywords: Rural-urban migration, focus group discussions, Chandigarh, informal labour, MGNREGA, social networks.

1. Introduction

The society has various reasons for its people to migrate. Sometimes this movement is maintained and perpetuated at one's own free will, and sometimes it is stimulated by external factors over which the population has no control. Politically imbalanced, economically poor and in non-egalitarian societies which are not able to distribute the resources equally to their people result in chaos, and this chaos further leads to certain social changes, and among those changes, one change is people leaving their native place, moving out to the new ones for better opportunities in life. Wars, ethnic cleansing, conflict, globalisation, and a market economy are other reasons for a larger wave of people moving from one place to another. This process of people moving from one place to another is called migration.

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When a young mason from Uttar Pradesh boards a train to Chandigarh, he carries more than a bag of clothes. He carries his father's debt, his mother's tears, and a half-formed dream of sending his daughter to an English-medium school. Migration in India has been studied for decades as a labour-market phenomenon, but the human texture of that movement – the late-night worries, the small victories, the ache of absence – often gets lost in tables and regressions (Deshingkar & Farrington, 2009). This paper tries to recover that texture. Chandigarh, a planned city with a relatively small industrial base, is not the first destination that comes to mind when one thinks of migration. Yet thousands of families from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and West Bengal have made construction sites and street corners their homes. Why do they come to a city with fewer factories than Mumbai or Delhi? What do they leave behind? And once they arrive, how do they remake their lives? To answer these questions, the researcher turned not to surveys alone but to focus group discussions – sitting with people in the evenings, on charpoys under neem trees, recording not just answers but hesitations, laughter, and sometimes angry silences.

2. Research Objectives

1. This study was guided by the following objectives:
2. To identify and understand the primary push and pull factors that lead rural households to migrate to Chandigarh, with special attention to non-economic factors such as social networks and perceptions of urban life.
3. To explore the pre-migration work activity status of migrants and to examine how their expectations from urban employment compare with their actual experiences.
4. To capture the emotional and social impacts of migration – including changes in self-perception, family relationships, and cultural ties with the native village.
5. To generate policy-relevant insights from migrants' own narratives, particularly regarding the effectiveness of rural employment schemes like MGNREGA.

3. Methodology

3.1 Study Design

A qualitative, exploratory design was adopted. Given the deeply personal nature of migration decisions, focus group discussions were chosen over structured interviews. FGDs allow participants to build on each other's stories, challenge one another, and collectively arrive at meanings that an individual interview might miss (Krueger & Casey, 2014).

3.2 Sample and Recruitment



A total of 45 migrant labourers participated in the study, recruited through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. Participants were adults (aged 18–55) who had migrated to Chandigarh from another state and had been living and working in the city for at least one year. Recruitment began at three construction sites, two street vendor clusters (sectors 19 and 22), and one industrial area on the city's periphery.

The sample included:

27 men and 18 women (reflecting the male-dominant pattern of migration, but including women who came as family earners or co-earners)

Age range: 19 to 52 years (median 31 years)

States of origin: Bihar (16), Uttar Pradesh (14), Madhya Pradesh (8), West Bengal (4), Uttarakhand (3)

Occupations in Chandigarh: construction workers (24), street food vendors (10), factory packers (6), domestic help (5)

3.3 Focus Group Discussions

A total of seven FGDs were conducted between February and April 2025, each comprising 5–8 participants. Discussions were held in the evenings at participants' workplaces or nearby community spaces (a temple courtyard, a tea stall, a vacant construction site office). Each session lasted 60–110 minutes.

The discussion guide covered: Life in the village before migration; Reasons for leaving; The journey to Chandigarh and initial days in the city; Current work, income, and living conditions; Relationships with locals and other migrants; Visits to the village and remittance practices; Future plans: to stay or to return?

All discussions were conducted in Hindi, audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and then translated into English for analysis. Thematic analysis was performed using the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006), with themes developed inductively from the data.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed about the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper. Given the low literacy levels, verbal informed consent was obtained. A small honorarium (₹200) and tea/snacks were provided as a gesture of thanks.

4. Theoretical Perspective

As Migration is an old social phenomenon, it has been widely studied by various theorists, and hence, we have diverse approaches, theories, and models that explain it. As Migration is an age-old concept, theories were proposed in the 1950s and 1960s. Those theories were mechanical in nature and explained migration at a structural level, accounting for factors such as poverty and income differentials that drive migration. Whereas in the 1970s, another set of approaches was followed to explain the process of migration, focusing on individual factors and the behavioural aspects of migration. The following account presents different theories of Migration to understand the process holistically. **Ravenstein's Laws of Migration:** Ravenstein (1885) claims that most migrants move only a short distance; each migration flow produces a compensating counterflow. Long-distance migration is undertaken by people who want to move to larger centres of commerce and industry. He also proposed that economic factors are the main factors of migration. Ravenstein's work is of considerable importance to scholars in population studies, but it is criticised on some grounds. For instance, the urban population is less migratory than the rural population, and females predominate among short-distance movers (Richmond, 1988). **Push-Pull factor theory:** This theory was initially propounded by Herberal (1938) and has been strengthened by various scholars over time, and is widely used for analysing migration (Bogue & Zachariah, 1962). Migration has been explained in terms of push and pull factors, i.e., the voluntarist perspective, in which the individual rationally calculates their decision to migrate to another place. Push factors are those that motivate people to move from their place of origin, as in the case of migrant workers who leave because of a lack of opportunities, underemployment, and a poor standard of living. Push factors include conflict, war, and environmental disaster, which push people out of their territory. Myrdal (1968) considers only the push factor as a potent reason for migration, while Trewartha (1969), Sovani (1965), and Bas (1965) explain that migration occurs due to the integration of push and pull factors at the place of origin. **Theory of intervening obstacles:** Stoufer (1940) gave the theory of intervening obstacles. His model suggests that the number of migrants from an origin to a destination is directly proportional to the number of opportunities at the destination and inversely proportional to the number of opportunities along the route between the origin and destination. He also claimed that there is no necessary relationship between mobility and distance. Instead, the decrease in mobility is due to the increase in the number of intervening factors. **Wolpert's theory of migration:** Wolpert (1975) based his theory on the behavioural aspects of individuals rather than

on economic factors or the characteristics of the place of origin and the destination. He has brought an element of subjectivity in the sphere of migration. During 1950-1960, there were shifts away from previous patterns of migration in American society, which led him to introduce the element of subjectivity into migration studies. Both the economic and social structures of a society are interrelated. A society's economy affects its population and migration. So, certain models and theories of economic growth help explain labour migration by showing how the economic structure affects those at the bottom of the pyramid. **Harris-Todaro model:** Todaro (1976) was one of the principal exponents of the neoclassical economic perspective. His model was based on economic factors, and it explained the interplay and relationship between migration, income differentials and employment. Regarding labour migration, Harris and Todaro (1970) argued that labour mobility occurs in direct response to expected wage differentials between rural and urban areas. There are certain parameters of the Todaro model that are criticised. Firstly, it over-emphasised economic reasons for migration, and secondly, it mainly discussed migration from rural to urban areas or from developing or underdeveloped areas to developed areas.

5. Literature Review

MSA Rao (1986) in his “Studies in Migration: Internal and international migration in India” has talked about three major areas of migration: the nature and process of migration, who migrates and what role factors of selectivity, like age, sex, marital status, educational factors, play in migration and the feedback effect of migration. He has discussed migration from an economic perspective, where economic factors have been the primary motivators. P.R. Shukla and S.K. Roy Chowdary (1992) in “Poverty, migration and urban employment” have attempted to bring together a representative cross-section of views, opinions, and arguments on migration. They have discussed the case of tribals in India with special reference to those living in central India, where poverty is shown as a result of the capitalist mode of development, which has resulted in the exploitation of natural resources, forests of the tribal people, resulting in their impoverishment and then how they have migrated out of their places to urban areas in search of employment. A.S. Oberai, P.H. Prasad and M.G. Sardana (1989) in “Determinants and consequences of internal migration in India: Studies in Bihar, Kerala and Uttar Pradesh” have approached migration in a multidimensional way. Along with discussions of the interplay among education, employment, urbanisation, and migration, he has also discussed the development of feasible policy instruments to influence the direction and magnitude of migration, harnessing its positive effects and mitigating the negative consequences and social

disparities resulting from disorderly population distribution. Jefferey H. Cohen & Ibrahim Sirkeci (2011) in “Cultures of Migration” have attempted to shed light on the meso level of migration. The author argues that most of the studies of migration are either at macro level, emphasising political and economic forces which prompt migration or at micro level, discussing personal factors such as one’s desire and psychology to move to a distant place whereas in this book the author argues that at the meso level i.e. at the cultural level of a society, migration of its people is also a determinant. This includes when a household decides on an individual’s migration. Culture and social beliefs of a society, along with social patterns, determine an individual’s migration and influence him to move to distant places.

6. Findings

The findings are organised around four key themes that emerged from the FGDs. Wherever possible, we let the participants speak in their own words.

4.1 “Paise nahi aa rahe hain” – The Broken Promise of MGNREGA

Nearly half of the participants (21 out of 45) had worked as MGNREGA labourers in their villages before migrating. Their stories were strikingly similar. They had registered, received job cards, and initially felt hopeful. But delays in wage payments – sometimes by three or four months – turned hope into disillusionment.

“Sarpanch would say, ‘funds haven’t arrived from Delhi.’ What was I supposed to tell my children when they asked for food? I waited one year, then two. Then I sold my bicycle for train fare to Chandigarh.” – Ramesh, 34, construction labourer.

This finding aligns with earlier critiques of MGNREGA implementation, which found that administrative bottlenecks and delayed disbursements effectively push workers back into migration (Dreze & Sen, 2014; Shah, 2016). For Ramesh and others like him, the scheme was not a failure of design but a failure of delivery – a promise written on paper but not in practice.

4.2 Chandigarh: Not a ‘Mumbai Dream’, But a ‘Possible Reality’

Interestingly, none of our participants described Chandigarh as a land of limitless opportunity. They knew its labour market was smaller than those of Gujarat or Delhi. Yet, they came. Why? The answer was predictability and accessibility.

Construction work in Chandigarh, though irregular, paid ₹350–500 per day – more than the ₹150–200 they earned as farm labourers back home. More importantly, they could find work without a middleman or a formal degree. As one participant put it:

“In Mumbai, you need someone to get you inside a factory. Here, if you can carry bricks, you get to carry bricks. The wages are not huge, but they come” – Sukhlal, 41, tile setter.

This resonates with the concept of “negotiated pull” – migrants are not always chasing the highest wage; they are chasing a wage they can access with their existing skills and networks (Bremen, 1996). For 15 of our 45 participants, the presence of a relative or villager already in Chandigarh was the deciding factor.

4.3 The Gender of Waiting and Moving

Men and women in the FGDs narrated migration differently. Men spoke of “going out to earn.” Women spoke of “being left behind, then called later.” In 12 out of the 18 women participants, the migration journey was not their own decision initially. Their husbands had moved first, sending money and occasional messages. Only when the men felt “settled” – often after 6–12 months – did the women follow.

“He sent me a train ticket. I had never travelled alone. At the station, I held my son’s hand so tightly that he cried. But what could I do? If I stayed, the village would say I am a ‘left-behind woman.’ If I came, at least we are together.” – Meena, 29, vegetable vendor.

This pattern mirrors the “stepwise” and “gendered” migration documented by Keshri and Bhagat (2012), where women’s mobility is mediated by men’s decisions. Yet once in the city, several women in the study had begun earning their own income – a quiet assertion of agency.

4.4 “Bas aise he aa gaye” – The Unexplained Migration

When we asked why they chose Chandigarh, 5 of the 45 participants gave an answer that initially puzzled us: “Bas aise he aa gaye” (Just like that, I came). This was not evasiveness. Over repeated conversations, it emerged as a form of exhaustion with explaining. Their migration had not been a single decision but a gradual drift – a brother who came first, a casual visit, a job that never ended.

“There is no ‘why’. You ask too many questions, sir. The land gave nothing. The canal scheme never reached our field. Then someone said Chandigarh is building

new sectors (Actually, it is New Chandigarh). So I came. What else?” – Anil, 37, construction worker.

This finding challenges purely rationalist models of migration (Harris & Todaro, 1970). For many, migration is not a calculated move but a default path when staying becomes impossible. As De Haan (2011) notes, for the landless poor, migration is often the only livelihood strategy left – not chosen so much as surrendered to.

4.5 Two Visits a Year: *The Rhythm of Return*

Almost all participants (40 of 45) said they visit their village at least twice a year – once during the rice harvest (October–November) and once for Holi or a family wedding. These visits are expensive (train fare, gifts, lost wages), but participants described them as non-negotiable.

“If I don’t go for my sister’s son’s mundan [head shaving ceremony], my mother will not speak to me for a year. Money can be earned again. Shame cannot be washed off.” – Rakesh, 44, fruit vendor.

4.6 Childhood and Migration

“I was 14 years old when I came to Chandigarh along with other villagers from Motihari (Bihar), as it was a common conception that Punjab means a full stomach. Earlier, I used to take care of an older man at the age of 15 years; now I am 37 years old, a professional cook”- Inderjit, a cook in multiple homes.

4.7 “*Phaad mein koi nai reh sakta ab*”- From Hills to Chandigarh

In our Uttarakhand, now villages have vacant houses, mainly on the Almora side and Tehri Garhwal. No one lives there-no medical facility, no paisa (money), very hard life. In Chandigarh, my children are studying free of cost in an English medium government school; everything is available here.” Parvati, 44, a domestic helper, earns Rs. 12, 000 per month and hails from Garhwal-Uttarakhand. She conveyed that migrating to Chandigarh was her priority, as all her family members are already settled here in the catering business. Her husband also migrated here when he was 17, and she followed him after marriage at 18.

These visits serve multiple purposes: maintaining land rights, reaffirming social ties, and performing one’s role in the family even while living away (Gardner, 2009). Migration, for these men and women, is not a break from the village but a long, painful stretch between returns.

7. Discussion

The stories gathered in these focus group discussions remind us of a simple truth: migration is not an abstract flow of ‘labour units’. It is a stream of human beings carrying leaky bags, forgotten wages, and photographs of children they last saw six months ago. Our findings confirm that economic push factors – landlessness, low agricultural productivity, delayed wage payments – remain primary. But we also see the importance of social networks (“my cousin was already here”), of gendered mobility, and of a deep, often heartbreaking, attachment to the village.

One unexpected insight was the acceptance of modest urban wages. Participants did not compare Chandigarh to Mumbai; they compared it to the village. And by that measure – of regular cash, even if small – the city won. This suggests that migration policy should focus less on “maximising urban wages” and more on minimising rural distress and ensuring the portability of social benefits (such as ration cards and health insurance) across state borders (Chandrasekhar & Sharma, 2019).

Another finding with policy implications is MGNREGA's failure to retain workers. While the scheme has reduced distress migration in some states (like Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan), in the present research, implementation failures in participants’ home states (Bihar, UP, and MP) have made it a push factor rather than a safety net. Strengthening wage payment timelines and linking MGNREGA work to skill training could reduce forced migration.

Finally, we note the emotional cost. Migrants in the present study spoke of loneliness, of not being invited to local weddings in Chandigarh, of children who now speak Hindi with a Punjabi accent and no longer know their grandfather’s name. These are not ‘soft’ issues; they are the texture of a life split between two places. Any humane migration policy must acknowledge that.

8. Conclusion

Internal migrants are four times as numerous as cross-border migrants globally (Human Development Report, 2009). In this paper, the experiences of migrant labourers were examined. The living conditions and occupational facilities of the labourers are also a concern. There is a significant difference in the lifestyles of migrant workers depending on the sector they choose to work in. Those who opted to work in industrial units or were self-employed were better off than those who struggled with the cement dust in the construction sector and those who burned their hands in brick kiln units. Women in the labour market have shown progressive

participation in the workforce; there is greater acceptance of women in the job market. Many women have come up to par with men in earning a livelihood. Further, socio-cultural change in the lives of migrant labourers was also studied, shedding light on changes in their outlook towards life post-migration, their rituals, and their ways of observing festivals post-migration. Migration from rural India to cities like Chandigarh is not a single story. It is a thousand stories – of a mason who learned his craft from his father, of a woman who sold her silver anklets for train fare, of a young man who still believes that the city will give him what his village could not. This paper has tried to listen to those stories without reducing them to data points. What this paper revealed was this: people do not leave homes easily. They leave when staying becomes an insult to their hopes. If one wants to manage migration, one must first manage the despair that fuels it.

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