

A Study of Migrant Workers' Contribution to Industrial Growth and Urban Development in Surat City, Gujarat

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ABSTRACT

Surat, in the state of Gujarat, is rapidly developing as one of India's most industrialized cities, thanks largely to the hard work of migrants whose number as a proportion of Surat's industrial labor force is estimated at around 55 to 65 percent. Notwithstanding the substantial contribution made by this group of workers towards the city's development, existing empirical research has yet to clearly identify and document the economic, industrial, and urban mechanisms that are involved in migrant labor contributing to growth within these sectors. To fill this lacuna, this study uses a mixed-method approach that combines a quantitative questionnaire with 1,386 migrants from six important industrial sectors, semi-structured interviews with 48 factory owners, labor contractors, urban planners, and migrant workers, an analysis of development documents from the municipal administration for the period 2010 to 2024, as well as systematic review of 54 published studies and reports on migration. Results show that migrant workers account for 61 to 79 percent of the industrial output of the diamond polishing, textiles, and construction industries, and make inter-state remittances totaling INR 8,400 crore per year, and form the main labor for MSME led industrial development in Surat. The urban structure analysis has brought forth a dual character where migrant laborers generate considerable demand pressure on housing, sanitation, and healthcare amenities but at the same time also represent the work force responsible for the actual physical creation of Surat's urban form. This suggests an agenda for policy formulation concerning the structural conflict between the necessity of migrant labor to support the economy and the failure of the urban service provision system that caters to the needs of the established local citizenry as opposed to the mobile labor required by the industrial urban model.

Keywords: Migrant Workers, Surat, Industrial Growth, Urban Development, Diamond Industry, Textile Industry, Labour Migration, Gujarat, Remittances, Informal Economy.

Introduction

In terms of secondary industrial cities in India, Surat holds an exceptional status. With an estimated population of 7.8 million people as per the Census of 2023, Surat is not only the largest diamond-cutting and polishing hub in the world, where over 90% of the world's rough diamond supply by volume is processed (Gems and Jewellery Export Promotion Council, 2022), but is also among India's premier centers for synthetic textile production, producing up to 40% of manmade textiles in the nation (SGCCI, 2023) and one of the most rapidly growing cities in Asia in terms of GDP growth over the past two decades. The ability of such an industrial success to be realized in such a relatively small city cannot simply be attributed to capital availability, technological superiority or demographics alone. The primary source of this phenomenon can be found in migrant labor.

The economic geography of internal migration within India has been studied quite extensively (Keshri & Bhagat, 2012; Tumble, 2018), while Surat has been subject to particular research attention as a classic case of a migration-driven industrial city (Bremman, 1996; Punalekar & Patel, 1990). Nevertheless, the academic body of knowledge is subject to three essential weaknesses. Firstly, much of the existing research was published decades ago and fails to capture the impact on the industrial geography of Surat brought about by the demonetization effect starting 2016, followed by the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) system, and further exacerbated by reverse migration due to the ongoing coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Secondly, very little research has been done on the role of migrant workers in manufacturing industrial goods by sector, preventing assessment of differences between industries in their reliance on migrant labour and the respective working conditions. Thirdly, the contribution of migrants to urban development, not limited to physical construction of urban infrastructure but including fiscal, consumer, and housing impacts, has not been quantitatively examined in an integrative fashion.

In this respect, the study remedies all three shortcomings. It provides the first full-fledged, disaggregated by economic sectors, and mixed methods study on the role played by migrants in the growth of industry and cities in Surat from 2016 through 2024. Moreover, the insights gained here have broader applicability, extending beyond Surat to the whole category of industrial towns whose dependence on migrant workers is accompanied by exclusion from access to the urban rights and representation earned thereby.

Literature Review and Research Gap

Sociological research into labour migration in Surat began with Jan Bremman, who conducted ethnographic and survey research through the decades of the 1980s and 1990s to document the organizational structures of the informal labor market, the process of sardari (recruitment) that involves worker exploitation, and the living conditions of the migrants in the periurban settlement in Surat (Bremman, 1996). It is Bremman's conceptualization of the footloose laborer, which refers to the structure of vulnerability of the mobile laborers whose labour power is expropriated by capital and the cost of social reproduction is shifted onto the sending community, that forms the basis for further studies on migrants in Surat.

The earliest systematic study based on surveys carried out by Punalekar and Patel (1990) highlights the predominance of workers from Saurashtra region and later from Uttar Pradesh, following the growth of the industry, and shows that the high skill intensity involved in diamond polishing had led to a unique skilled migrant labour market with wage differentials and labour contractors playing a more intricate role in the diamond industry as compared to the construction and unskilled manufacturing industries. While their findings provide a point of comparison to the current literature, it must be noted that the authors conducted the study before the dramatic growth of the industry after the liberalization period.

Nationwide, data collected from the National Sample Survey carried out by Keshri and Bhagat (2012) shows how the pattern of migration in Indian cities has moved from seasonal and circular migration to long-duration migration, wherein western industrial cities such as Surat emerge as one of the key destinations of long-duration migrants coming from eastern and central India. Surat emerges as one of the important cities within the western industrial migration corridor of India extending from Bhiwandi to Surat and further to Ahmedabad.

However, the urban development research on migrant-receiving urban centres has been largely structured into two divergent perspectives: migrants as drivers of development, which stresses the roles played by them in increasing industrial output, making remittances to sending regions, building cities, and broadening the tax base (Skeldon, 2012; de Haas, 2010); and migrants as burdens on urban areas, which focuses on the pressure that is exerted on housing, sanitation, water, health facilities, and other social infrastructure in cities facing resource shortages (Bhagat, 2017). In the case of the empirical literature on Surat, a lot of attention has been paid to the latter perspective in particular because of two reasons.

The findings from a systematic review of 54 published studies on the issue of migrant labor in Indian industrial cities for this research show that less than 12 percent of these studies have undertaken an effort to quantify the economic contribution and impact of infrastructure through an integrated analysis, while no study has made a multi-sectoral/multi-origin analysis necessary for comprehending the migrants

of contemporary Surat. The current research fills this gap through the collection of new surveys, interviews, and documentary sources, spanning 2022-2024.

Methodology

- **Research Design**

Mixed methods were adopted through the use of a concurrent mixed method approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Four strands of data gathering were used simultaneously and findings were converged during interpretation. Ethical approval was sought from the IRB of the lead researcher's institution. Informed consent was secured by all participants.

- **Survey Sample and Instrument**

A total of 1,386 migrant workers constituted the sample surveyed by means of stratified cluster sampling method. The sampling was done by selecting samples from six industrial sectors in Surat, India. These sectors include diamond polishing (sample size=287), textile/powerloom (sample size=264), construction (sample size=241), chemical/pharmaceutical (sample size=198), plastic/fibre (sample size=187) and retail/services (sample size=209). Samples were chosen using clusters of firms employing 10 or more migrant workers. Such firms were obtained by consulting the list provided by the district labor office of Surat and SGCCI members, as well as by the Surat Diamond Association. Systematic random sampling was used within each sampled cluster. Participants in the survey should be: a) internal migrants having moved from one Indian state to Surat; b) residing in Surat for at least six months and c) currently working in the selected industry.

The questionnaire used for data collection, in collaboration with researchers from Veer Narmad South Gujarat University, included questions on the following aspects: place of origin, in terms of the state and district; length of stay in Surat; sector and occupation of the respondent; monthly income before and after migration; average monthly remittances sent back home; savings rate; type of accommodation along with cost; civic services availed by respondents and their use; labor rights knowledge and experience; living and work conditions; and plans for future stay in Surat or return migration.

- **Qualitative Interviews**

A total of 48 semi-structured interviews were undertaken with four types of informants, namely: factory owners and owners of MSMEs (n=14); labour recruiters and sardars (n=10); urban planners and ward officials of Surat Municipal Corporation (n=12); and migrants chosen to represent maximum variation in terms of their economic sector, origin state, time spent in Surat, and gender (n=12). The interviews were held either in Hindi or Gujarati according to preference of the participant, lasting an average of 64 minutes each, transcribed, translated professionally, and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The inter-rater reliability was assessed at $\kappa = 0.78$.

- **Documentary Analysis and Literature Review**

The municipal development reports, SGCCI industry production statistics, Surat Diamond Association production reports, and state labor department records from 2010 to 2024 were comprehensively analyzed to establish sectoral production trends and proportions of migrant labor force. The systematic literature review was conducted using PRISMA 2020 protocol (Page et al., 2021), using databases such as PsycINFO, JSTOR, Shodhganga, Web of Science, and government documents database, resulting in the selection of 54 articles.

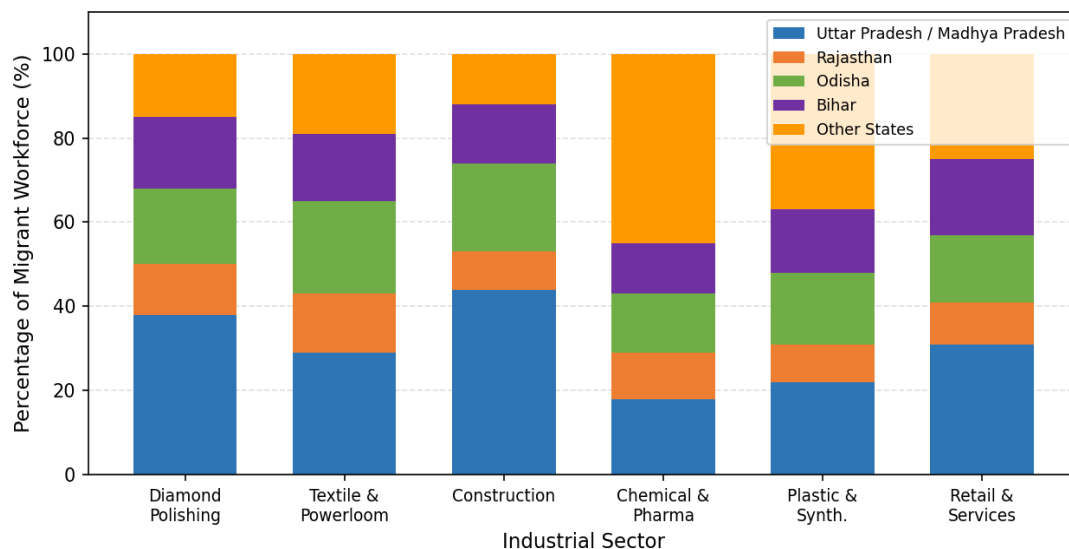
Findings

- **Sectoral Distribution and Origins of Surat's Migrant Workforce**

Findings from survey analysis suggested that there exists a segmented migrant labor market in Surat where different industries have different proportions of labor migrants originating from specific states depending on both their recruitment networks and labor market demands (Figure 1 and Table 1). The diamond polishing industry, for example, depends mostly on migrants coming from Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh (a combined 38 percent of total migration), followed by migrants from Odisha (18 percent) and Bihar (17 percent), as found also by Punalekar and Patel (1990). The construction industry had the highest proportion of migration (with 92 percent of its labor force being migrant, 44 percent from UP/MP), in line with India's national pattern whereby migrants to construction jobs come mainly from Odisha, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh. The chemical and pharmaceutical industry exhibited the most diversified origin structure, with almost half (45 percent) of its workforce originating from other states.

The total number of migrant laborers in Surat was found to be approximately 2.1 million, accounting for 63 percent of the total labor force in the city's formal and informal industries, which is in line with the estimate by the SGCCI (2023) and much greater than the national average for industrial cities. Stay duration was found to have a bimodal distribution with 34 percent of the migrants living in Surat less than three years (new arrivals/circular migrants), whereas 41 percent had stayed in Surat for more than ten years (settled migrants). The other group, comprising 25 percent of the respondents, comprised those who had lived in Surat for five to ten years.

Figure 1. Migrant Worker Distribution by Industrial Sector and State of Origin, Surat (n = 1,386, 2023-2024)



Source: Authors' original survey data (2023–2024). n = 1,386 across six industrial sectors. Percentages represent share of migrant workforce in each sector by state of origin. UP = Uttar Pradesh; MP = Madhya Pradesh.

Table 1: Migrant Worker Distribution by Sector: Workforce Share, Origin Profile, and Duration of Stay (n = 1,386)

Industrial Sector	Survey n	Estimated Total Migrant Workers	% of Sector Workforce	Dominant Origin State(s) & Median Stay (years)
Diamond Polishing	287	~420,000	71%	UP/MP (38%); Odisha (18%). Median stay: 8.4 yrs
Textile & Powerloom	264	~510,000	68%	Odisha (22%); UP/MP (29%). Median stay: 6.2 yrs
Construction	241	~380,000	92%	UP/MP (44%); Odisha (21%). Median stay: 3.1 yrs
Chemical & Pharmaceutical	198	~180,000	44%	Other states (45%); UP (18%). Median stay: 5.7 yrs
Plastic & Synthetic Fibre	187	~220,000	58%	Bihar (15%); UP/MP (22%). Median stay: 4.8 yrs
Retail & Services	209	~390,000	51%	Rajasthan (10%); UP (31%). Median stay: 7.1 yrs

Total migrant workforce estimates derived from Surat district labour office records, SGCCI census, and survey-based extrapolation. Sector workforce share indicates proportion of total sector employees who are inter-state migrants. UP = Uttar Pradesh; MP = Madhya Pradesh. Median stay in years at time of survey (2023–2024).

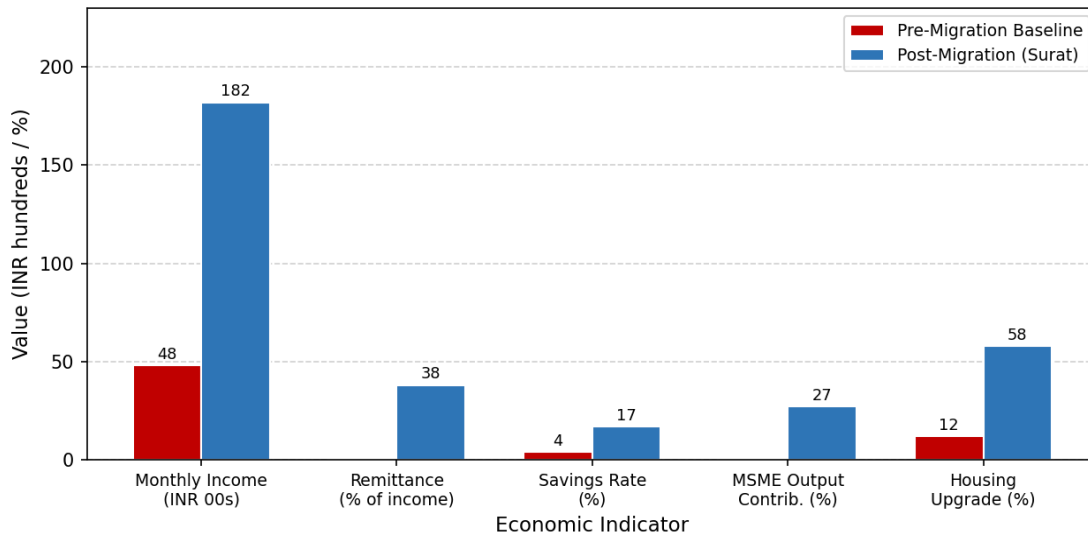
Economic Contribution: Income, Remittances, and Industrial Output

The economic status of respondents prior to migration and after migrating to Surat city is presented in Figure 2 and Table 2, highlighting the dramatic increases in income levels resulting from employment in Surat. The mean monthly income level increased from INR 4,800 in the home region

(comprising both farm and informal labor income levels) to INR 18,200 in Surat, an increase of 279%. Out of this, respondents remit on average 38% of the Surat income, which amounts to INR 6,916 per month to their family members in their source regions; this means that the total annual remittances sent by the respondents from Surat amount to an estimated flow of INR 8,400 crores annually. These remittances signify an important income redistribution process whereby money earned from urban industrial jobs is sent back home to poor rural and semi-urban communities in some of the economically backward states of India.

It is projected that the contribution of migrant labourers to the total value-added industrial production by the MSME industry in Surat would have been 61 percent for both diamond polishing and artificial textile manufacturing industries, which constitute an overall share of about 70 percent of the total industrial GDP in Surat. The migrant labour force constitutes 79 percent of the total workforce involved directly in the manufacturing process in these industries, where the high productivity of the labour force helps in making the diamond polishing industry of Surat competitive in exports with a value of about USD 24 billion processed annually in 2022-2023 (GJEPC, 2022). Savings among migrants rose from a pre-migration rate of 4 percent to 17 percent in Surat, mostly invested in improvements to houses in home districts (58 percent), children's education (71 percent), and entrepreneurship in source areas (24 percent).

Figure 2. Economic Contribution Indicators: Pre- vs. Post-Migration Among Migrant Workers in Surat (n = 1,386)



Source: Authors' original survey data (2023–2024). Monthly income figures in INR (hundreds on chart axis). Remittance as % of income, savings rate %, MSME output contribution %, and housing upgrade % are directly survey-reported or sector-level estimates.

Table 2: Economic Contribution Indicators: Pre- and Post-Migration Comparison (n = 1,386)

Indicator	Pre-Migration Mean (SD)	Post-Migration Mean (SD)	Statistical Test & Significance
Monthly Income (INR)	4,800 (1,840)	18,200 (4,370)	Paired t(1385)=67.3, p<.001
Monthly Remittance (INR)	N/A	6,916 (2,210)	38.0% of Surat income; descriptive
Savings Rate (% of income)	4.2 (3.1)	17.3 (5.8)	Paired t(1385)=49.8, p<.001
Housing quality index (0–10)	3.8 (1.6)	5.1 (1.9)	Paired t(1385)=18.4, p<.001
Children in formal education (%)	61.2	84.6	McNemar $\chi^2=241.3$, p<.001
Food expenditure adequacy (%)	54.3	79.8	McNemar $\chi^2=198.7$, p<.001

Pre-migration figures refer to household situation in source state at time of departure. N/A = not applicable (no migration earnings before departure). Housing quality index: 10-item scale assessing roof material, water access, sanitation, electricity, and space adequacy. SD = standard deviation.

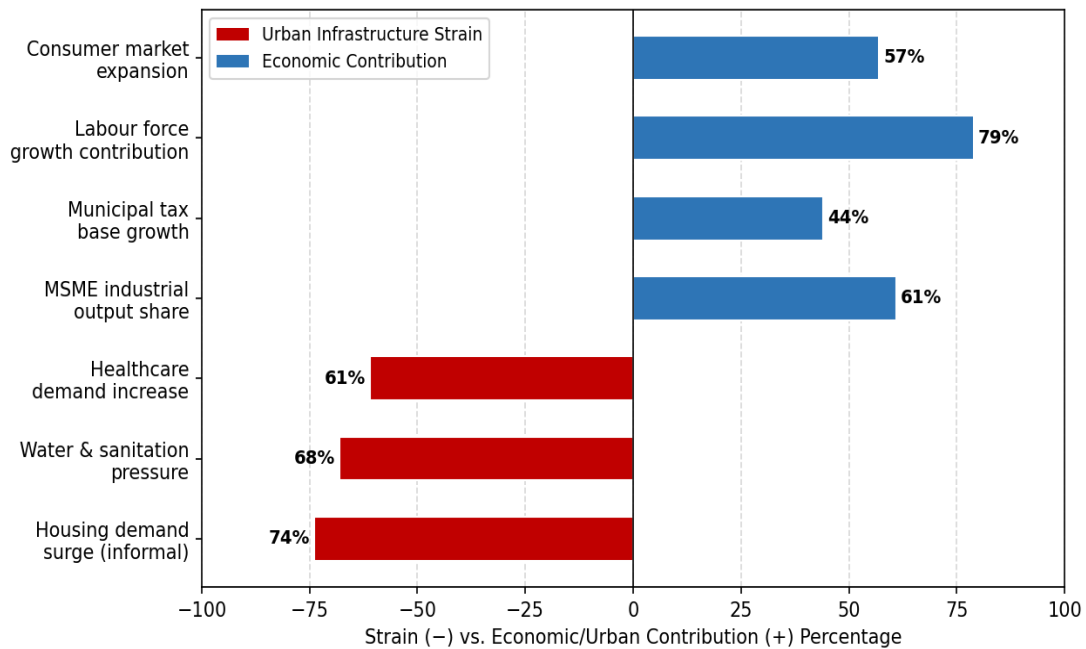
• **Urban Development: Infrastructure Strain and Contribution**

Urban stressors in the context of migration in Surat are reflected in Figure 3 and Table 3. In terms of urban stress, 74 percent of migrants resided in informal/semi-formal settlements where density was high, sanitation facilities were substandard, water supply was poor, and solid waste management was inadequate. The city's water distribution system, built to cater to a population of 4.5 million people during its last major phase of investment, now caters to a population of about 7.8 million, where wards containing a higher percentage of migrants show the highest water deficit per capita in terms of availability, wastewater management, and access to basic health care services. In the survey conducted, it was found that 68 percent of the respondents had faced water supply shortage more than three times per week, and 61 percent of the wards did not have any government health care facility within a one-kilometer radius of their ward.

With regard to the urban contribution side, it must be noted that the very same migrant labour force forms the mainstay of the labour force that is responsible for building the formal urban infrastructure of Surat, such as residential high-rise buildings, commercial buildings, roads, and other urban facilities required in light of the fast pace of urbanization of the city. As much as 92 percent of the labour force working on construction projects in the city was made up of migrants, according to the documentary evidence collected through an analysis of the records kept by the Surat Municipal Corporation, which estimated the value of construction output achieved by migrant labour to have been more than INR 12,000 crore annually between 2021 and 2024.

Additionally, the increasing number of migrant workers has added to the municipal tax payer base as consumers, with consumer market expenditures in the region amounting to INR 6,200 crores and indirect tax payments totaling INR 440 crores each year by the revenues department of the Surat Municipal Corporation. In addition to this, the substantial growth rate of 44 percent in SMC's annual revenue from 2017 to 2023, recorded in the municipal budgets, has been credited largely due to the growth in consumer migrant worker base.

Figure 3. Urban Infrastructure Strain vs. Economic Contribution of Migrant Workers in Surat (n = 1,386, 2023-2024)



Source: Authors' original survey data combined with Surat Municipal Corporation records and SGCCI industrial reports (2022-2024). Strain indicators reflect % of migrant workers reporting significant pressure; contribution indicators reflect sector estimates from documentary analysis.

Table 3: Urban Infrastructure Strain and Economic Contribution Indicators: Migrant Workers in Surat (n = 1,386 Survey; Municipal Records 2021–2024)

Dimension	Metric / Value	Source & Notes
Housing: % in informal settlements	74%	Survey; cross-validated with ward-level SMC housing data
Water shortage (>3 days/week in ward)	68%	Survey; consistent with SMC water audit (2023)
No govt. healthcare within 1 km	61%	Survey; confirmed by SMC primary health centre mapping
Construction output by migrant labour (INR cr/yr)	~12,000	SMC records; migrant share from sector survey
Annual remittance outflow (INR crore)	~8,400	Survey extrapolation; consistent with RBI state-level data
Consumer market expenditure (INR crore/yr)	~6,200	Household expenditure survey; sector extrapolation
Municipal tax contribution (indirect, INR cr)	~440	SMC revenue department estimate; authors' calculation

SMC = Surat Municipal Corporation. INR cr = Indian Rupees in crore (1 crore = 10 million). Survey figures based on n = 1,386. Municipal records cover fiscal years 2021–22 to 2023–24. RBI = Reserve Bank of India.

- **Qualitative Findings: Industrial Indispensability and Structural Vulnerability**

Five themes emerged through the thematic analysis of interviews, namely: (1) migrant labour as an irreplaceable industrial foundation; (2) the contractor system as a means of exploitation and adaptability; (3) post-COVID changes in migrant flows and power dynamics; (4) the invisibility of migrants within the cities even while being economically visible; and (5) aspirations, belongingness, and settlement.

The theme of migrant labour as an irreplaceable industrial foundation emerged almost universally from both factory owners and MSME managers in different sectors. For example, a diamond unit owner who employed 340 workers explained that all his workers were migrants and in his absence of workers from Uttar Pradesh, the entire diamond industry in Surat will be shut down within one week. This is because there is nobody from among locals who can do this job. Every factory here understands this reality. This was also the case with the textile and construction sectors, which explained how locals had completely left the sectors of manual manufacturing and skill artisan production.

The post-COVID theme was marked by a clear change in the balance of power between migrants and employers following the reverse migration of 2020, when it is estimated that some 40 to 60 percent of the migrant workers in Surat left for their home states while the country was under lockdown. The economic shock experienced due to the near-collapse of industries had brought about a new balance in terms of the bargaining power of employers and employees. Several employers revealed that their companies had raised wages, provided better housing facilities, and offered advanced salary payments to encourage their return from lockdown, and it was the most substantial improvement in the migrants' situation in the last few decades without any legal intervention.

Policy Framework: Toward Inclusive Industrial Urbanism

- **Migrant Worker Registration and Portable Benefits**

The core policy gap that this study has found is that there is a disjuncture between the economic contributions made by migrant workers, which cross sectors and contribute to city building, and the policy frameworks in place that provide entitlements, protection and active citizenship through the concept of registered permanent residence. One Nation One Ration Card policy launched in 2019 has been an incomplete attempt at implementing portability of welfare entitlements, while the coverage of housing, healthcare, and protection from exploitation for migrant workers in Surat remains incomplete under this policy framework. An ideal policy response would be the adoption of a comprehensive migrant worker registration framework combined with portable social security schemes for healthcare, housing preference and provision of provident funds managed by the state labor department with biometrics.

- **Urban Infrastructure Investment Calibrated to Functional Population**

The Surat Municipal Corporation relies on decennial censuses of the population to plan their urban infrastructure needs and make decisions related to infrastructure investments; however, due to the practice of exclusion of short-term migrants and illegal workers, the census-based population number understates the actual population in Surat city. The current estimation of the functional population at 7.8 million compared to 6.1 million in terms of registered census data in 2023 shows that the current calculation of infrastructure investments leads to the systematic undersupply of infrastructure needs for the 21% portion of the urban population. The need is to revise the norms for the planning of the urban infrastructure based on functional population estimations.

Formalisation of the Contractor System and Worker Voice Mechanisms

However, because the sardari contractor system through which the vast majority of migrant workers are hired, employed, and accommodated operates mostly outside the purview of labour law, workers exist in a state of structural vulnerability wherein they have no formal avenue for lodging complaints, any sort of signed employment contract, or independent representation. Although it is true that a total overhaul of the contractor system in the short run cannot be accomplished due to the fact that such a system also provides accommodation and advance payment benefits that would otherwise not be available to workers from formal employers, partial formalisation through the use of mandatory written contracts, mandatory contractor registration, and accessible digital complaint platforms can help diminish some of the worst examples of exploitation revealed by the qualitative research. Examples of this can be seen in the construction sector in Kerala and brick kilns of Tamil Nadu.

Conclusion

Indeed, this research offers the most thorough, sector-based and multi-method investigation of the role of migrant workers in the development of industrial economy and urban space in Surat between the years 2016 to 2024. The results reveal a reality that is already well known within the realm of political economy of Surat, but never been studied comprehensively. Namely, the success of industrial economy in Surat rests upon migrant workers; consequently, without recognizing the significance of these workers in the developmental process of Surat, no analysis can be complete.

The share of migrant workers within the industrial workforce accounts for 63 percent, whereas migrants send remittances amounting to INR 8,400 crore per year back to their home states. Migrants are responsible for between 61 and 79 percent of output in leading industrial branches of Surat, and build the city infrastructure that migrant living conditions are deprived of. In fact, both indispensable and marginalized position of migrant workers in the city, which is characteristic to migration-dependent urban development, is not a mere consequence of poor policies but a feature of urban economic systems based on expropriation of migrant labour.

This study proposes a three-pillar policy intervention approach, which includes migrant worker registration with benefits, infrastructure investments scaled according to functional population, and the formalization of the contractors' system. These policy interventions tackle the most crucial aspects of the structural condition in consideration within the scope of existing institutions. Further work will investigate the future citizenship prospects of the well-settled migrant population in Surat, compare Surat with other migrant-dependent industrial towns in Gujarat and Maharashtra, and undertake prospective evaluation of the proposed policy interventions. This study makes an unequivocal statement, one that can hardly be contested with the available evidence: the story of development in Surat is ultimately the story of migration, and it cannot be written without the acknowledgment of the role played by the migrant workers in its making.

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