

A Place called Home: Migrant Housing and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Urbanisation and the growth of cities in India, is accompanied by a pressure on basic infrastructure and services like- housing, sanitation and health. The 2011 Census of India reveals that the urban population of the country stood at 31.16 percent of the total population. The 2011 Census indicates that there are about 4.5 lakh houseless families which has a total population of 17.73 lakh living without any support roof cover. Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh are the two states with acute housing crisis.

Though shelter is one of human being's basic needs spatial history of the country shows us that migrant workers live in extremely precarious conditions. Most of the migrants are employed in construction, small industries, hotels, casual work, domestic workers and other informal activities. In case of migrants working in small units, hotels and domestic help their workplace is their place of lodging too. Often such places are unhygienic and poorly ventilated. For construction workers, most of them stay in make shift arrangements. Casual workers sleep under over - bridges and on pavements, often living as a group in unhygienic surroundings.

Given these conditions, how has the pandemic affected housing of migrant workers?

Firstly, when the pandemic struck and the national lockdown was announced most of the workers rushed back home on foot, leaving their temporary abodes behind. The rest of them who were left behind lost their shelter because the workplaces were shut. Migrants living in rented apartments could not maintain social distancing as the spatial allocation and the proportion of people occupying was too high when compared to the size of the room.

In suburban regions where there are a sizeable number of migrants the local population wanted them to vacate houses as soon as the pandemic began citing lack of hygienic conditions in

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these dwellings. Even though most of the state government’ appealed to the house owners to waiver two months of rent, this began mounting up pressure post the cooling off period. Up to 88% migrants reported that they could not pay the rent for the next month, according to a survey conducted by Azim Premji University with 5000 self-employed, casual, and regular wage workers across 12 states of India in April and May 2020. The 2020 Covid-19 lockdown revealed the unpredictable nature of housing for migrant workers.

According to an ILO report of internal labour migrants which presents a roadmap to policy makers to manage internal migration in India in 2020, the absence of dignified housing is further aggravated by a lack of adequate water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities. Even though there has been an installation of public toilets through the call of Swacch Bharat Abhiyaan, their availability may not be adequate in migrant-dense clusters. Migrant workers find housing in slums, often subject to sudden increase in rent and have access only to poorest infrastructure and services.

A Framework to Understand the Rental market and Migrants

The housing scenario of the migrants can be better understood by looking at possible responses of the owners and migrants to the existing conditions. The following table shows those moments when the State cannot abstain from its role of interfering in housing problems of the migrants.

MIGRANT OWNER	Stay (S)	Do Not Stay (DNS)
Provide Housing (PH)	Box 1 (PH, S)	Box 2 (PH, DNS)
Do Not Provide Housing (DNPH)	Box 3 (DNPH, S)	Box 4 (DNPH, DNS)

The matrix shows strategic responses of various stakeholders (owners and migrant tenants) in the context of existing housing conditions. It also reveals the particular conditions in which the state needs to intervene in migrant housing requirements. From the figure the strategy of the owner could be to provide house (PH) to stay (S) or not to provide (DNPH) house to

migrant workers. The strategy of the migrant could be to stay (S) or not to stay (DNS) under the existing housing norms. Given these strategic interactions we have four possibilities. Box1 shows a possibility where the owner provides house and the migrant stays. This is also an optimal condition where rent could evolve for competitive markets for houses and the bargaining process. On the other hand, an extreme condition is shown in the Box4, neither the owner provides the houses nor the migrant is willing to stay. This is the stage where the state might be forced to be involved in the housing market to explore and ease conditions whereby the hurdles are removed. In addition more transparency in the case of contract recruitment may also be necessitated. Box 2 and 3 represents other possibilities where either the migrant is not willing to stay in rented housing or the owner is not ready to provide housing for migrants respectively.

In the context of COVID 19, Box 2 and 3 could be possible scenarios that confront States for reactionary policy making. These possible scenarios also indicate the necessity of coordinated efforts of the State and the Contractors to address housing issues of migrants.

Policy Responses and Migrant Housing

Let us see how policy has responded to the needs of urban poor, especially marginalized migrant workers. The smart cities initiative was launched in June 2015. A smart city is an urban region that is highly advanced in terms of urban infrastructure, sustainable real estate, high density of communication network and a wider market. The Smart Cities Mission identified 100 cities, covering 21% of India's urban population, for a transformation in four rounds starting January 2016. Some of the core infrastructure elements in a Smart City includes proper water supply, assured electricity supply, sanitation, and affordable housing especially for the poor. Government data shows that 49% of 5,196 projects for which work orders were issued across 100 identified smart cities in India remain unfinished. This lag in implementation often raises questions on the efficacy of innovative policy prescriptions. Efforts like the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) launched in 2015 intended to make the process of urbanization smooth, has now recently entered its second phase to make cities water secure and provide better amenities for the marginalised people.

The 20 lakh crore Atmanirbhar Package announced by the government in May 2020 included provisions to extend support to migrants who are gravely affected due to the pandemic

included provision of Affordable Rental Housing Complexes (ARHC) for migrant workers/urban poor. The plan to make this possible is through conversion of government funded housing in the cities into ARHCs through PPPs, and providing incentives to various stake holders to develop ARHCs on their private land and operate them.

While developing social rental housing the state should ensure that the location has proper access to transport networks and quality public services such as education and health care. Initially, the working group by Niti Ayog constituted to study Internal Labour Migrants 2020 recommends that rental housing in the public sector could be expanded through the provision of dormitory accommodation. This would make public housing affordable and reduce the conflict between owners and tenants. Safe and hygienic space to live is a right that every individual has. Action oriented policies alone can improve the lives of the labouring migrants.

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