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From Guest Workers to Ghost Workers: The Electoral Exclusion of India's Migrants

By: Namrata Raju

Migrants are often unable to cast their votes due to systemic exclusions and economic constraints. This has made them invisible as a vote-bank and heightened their marginalisation.

The ghosts of migrant workers haunting the facades of the buildings they once constructed makes for striking imagery. It is also true that the invisibilisation of migrant workers is just that extreme. Whether in literary fiction such as Deepak Unnikrishnan's *Temporary People*, or scholarship like anthropologist Andrea Wright's *Between Dreams and Ghosts*, it is no coincidence that literature and academia are replete with parallels between migrants and ghosts. Being of and from different places, migrants are archetypally included neither here nor there: a fractured citizenship exacerbated by electoral exclusion in their home states.

This is even more true of low-wage migrants. Suspended between two parallel worlds whilst battling economic want, they continually navigate their selfhood in their current places of residence, whilst still yearning for their old selves left behind at home. Undergirding the socio-cultural otherness that migrant workers face is the issue of *systemic* otherness. This comprises the practical exclusion of these workers both, in their places of origin and destination, including basic rights and services ranging from healthcare and social security to the access to vote. If migrants in India and overseas were to be described across a spectrum of socio-economic inequality, those at the lower end are the most invisibilised in terms of the translation of their rights into practice. Voting is no different.

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Typically, policy discourse on migration brackets international and internal migrants into disparate groups for study. While the wide-ranging demographic makeup of India's migrants necessitates this approach, it is simultaneously essential to consider all migrants as a polity. This is due to the plethora of ways in which different migrant groups can be subjected to wide-ranging exclusions, being rendered invisible both at home and in their current places of destination. The nature of a migrant worker's vulnerability often plays out in the specific type of exclusion they face.

The Covid-19 pandemic exemplified this point, placing the invisibility of migrants on graphic display. Based on their specific vulnerabilities and where they fell within the socioeconomic ladder, migrants faced different types of invisibilisation and exclusion. For instance, gender- based violence and harassment spiked during the pandemic. In the workplace, this meant that groups such as residential domestic workers, several of whom are women migrants within India and overseas, faced even more confinement to the homes of employers perpetrating violence, owing to the pandemic's mobility restrictions.

A 2021 ILO report illustrates just how wide-ranging the types of exclusions faced by migrant workers can be, depending on their specific circumstances and vulnerabilities: "Migrant workers often found themselves stranded due to lockdowns and border closures. Others were suddenly repatriated, without operational systems and protocols in place. In some instances, public health law was used to justify their expulsion. Returnees were then often stigmatized and subject to long periods of compulsory quarantine because they were considered to be carriers of COVID-19."

In India, inter-state migrants country-wide were seen returning to their home states by traversing thousands of kilometres on foot, whilst also grappling with wage losses, state border closures and not having rations as a bolster when on the move. International migrants, on the other hand, were also rendered in fraught circumstances by the dystopia of the pandemic. Desolate and with their families inaccessible, suicides were seen spiking amongst low-wage migrants in geographies such as the Arab Gulf: many of those dying by suicide were single men isolated from their loved ones. Low-wage migrants overseas were sandwiched between illegal wage deductions by employers and being unable to afford life overseas, whilst simultaneously unable to return home. Thousands of migrants stranded overseas were typically unable to return home even after the initiation of Vande Bharat flights: most could not afford the air fares. This made it amply clear that migrant concerns were a low priority for political parties.

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These myriad exclusions faced by different groups of low-wage migrants render the act of ensuring that their votes are banked and their demands represented by political parties even more imperative. Despite the trials faced by internal migrants during the pandemic, and a temporary surge in public concern for their welfare, Rajiv Khandelwal notes, "[Ultimately], workers' rights and welfare returned to the realm of discretionary policy or populistic schemes but failed to become a political agenda calling for sustainable, structural change."

Invisiblised at the polling booth

To most migrants, voting is a democratic assertion of selfhood; a reiteration of one's connection to the soils of home. This is even more salient for migrant workers who face exclusions in their current places of residence, away from home. Noting that the research on established migration corridors shows that most inter-state migration in India is temporary, short term or circular in nature, Arindam Banerjee, Co-founder of the Policy Development and Advisory Group (PDAG), observes: "Most social welfare programmes, schemes and social security entitlements are domicile-specific with inter-state portability applicable only for the Public Distribution System (PDS) through the One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC) scheme. [Internal] Labour Migrants, most of them with their families left behind in home districts, find better utility in source states to not replace their voting cards to ensure continuous receipt of such welfare schemes." He says that despite the Election Commission of India's (ECI) efforts, migrant workers adding themselves to the voter list in destination constituencies is a time-consuming and difficult effort.

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These observations also hold true for international migrants, for whom the portability of social security has been a longstanding issue raised by civil society and workers alike.

In every election since 1951, at least one-third of the Indian electorate has not voted, This gap is equivalent to as much as twice the population of Russia. There are miscellaneous considerations due to which the missing third may have not voted, but migration remains a key reason.

Currently, neither international migrants nor internal migrants have access to remote voting facilities.

"Internal migration is one of the assessed important reasons required to be addressed to improve voter turnout in low voter turnout states. This is likely because the internal migrants or broadly the voters who are absent at their home locations on the day of polling, even if they wish to vote at their home location, they are unable to travel to home location to vote due to various reasons," the Election Commission of India wrote in a letter to political parties in 2022.

General Elections to the Lok Sabha

Year of election	Registered Electors (Crores)	Voter turnout (%)
1951	17.32	45.67
1957	19.37	47.74
1962	21.64	55.42
2009	71.70	58.21
2014	83.40	66.44
2019	91.20	67.40

Early in 2023, the ECI floated a discussion on a prototype Remote Electronic Voting Machine (RVM), to address this lacuna on internal migrant voters. Yet, in March 2023, the government informed parliament that there was no proposal to introduce remote voting for internal migrants. This exclusion is unfortunate.

"The well-educated and white-collar job voters here are not interested to vote, although they are available. But the people with less income are more interested to vote. Whenever they can, they are coming home to vote," notes Bheem Reddy Mandha, President of the Emigrants Welfare Forum in Telangana. There is a higher cost, though, for those employed in the informal sector: "Migrants working far away from the village will come by bus or train to vote, but they have to lose their wages for 3-4 days and also bear the travel expenses."

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The story of international migrants possesses both likenesses and differences with that of internal migrants. On the heels of a 2010 amendment to Section 20 A of the Representation of People Act, 1950, international migrants can register online to vote. The downside, however, is that they need to be physically present in their home constituency on voting day: a rather exorbitant ballot comprising a return ticket, amongst other expenses. Although piecemeal initiatives exist to bolster migrant voting, such as a Kerala expat organisation's recent efforts to charter flights for Gulf migrants to vote in the general election, most-low wage workers remain unable to afford the air fares, thus remaining electorally invisibilised.

Enabling remote voting for international migrants is a critical part of breathing continued life into India's democratic processes. Noting that non-resident Indians (NRIs) contribute immensely to India's growth story both socially and economically, Divya Balan, who researches Indian migrants in the Gulf and is an assistant professor of international studies at FLAME University, observes the following. "Due to the current rules for the physical presence of NRIs in polling booths for voting, their turnout is low, and the parties tend not to consider them as a major vote bank. This will prompt the parties to disregard them and their issues, such as dual citizenship, wage theft, and reintegration on return, from both, party agendas and mainstream policy discourse. Enabling remote voting to enfranchise NRIs is critical to empower them and make their demands heard."

Implementation questions

For international and internal migrants alike, part of the solution lies in remote voting. Already, service voters such as members of the armed forces can participate in general elections via postal ballot. Yet even remote voting is not without its convolutions: it requires an agreed approach and model underpinning its implementation.

In a 2020 paper, Victoria Finn suggests that one model to consider the different bands of in voting in the case of international migrants would be to look at migrants "here" (in India); "there" (in an overseas destination state); everywhere (dual transnational voting); or nowhere (abstention). She recounts the example of Chile, which "granted universal national-level voting rights to immigrants in the

Constitution of 1980 (Article 14) and since 2012 has automatically granted these rights to immigrants after five years of residence. In 2017, this group represented about 2% of the electorate." In the Chilean context, both, non-citizen residents who have been in the country for five years or more, together with Chilean citizens overseas, can vote in general elections.

> Political systems around the world are as varied as the people and migrants that inhabit it. Policy interventions, therefore, both in approach and implementation, must consider this.

If this were extrapolated to India's internal migrants, the vital question is where migrants may be enabled to vote. Given that internal migrants wrestle with the issue of going home in person to vote, they should be provided the option to themselves choose between voting from their origin state and current state of residence. While this issue can be swiftly politicised, mainstream narratives habitually jettison the fact that migrants have layered identities: many have strong social and economic ties to their home state, also resulting in a profound investment in its political processes. Still other migrants may feel more assimilated into the states to which they migrated: can one not call a place their home after living there for a decade or even more?

Once the model underpinning the voting process for both international and internal migrants is decided, the question of implementation arises. Many submit that technology will address the issue of geographical spread: "People send money electronically home all the time but they can't vote the same way: we can implement the Electronically Transmitted Postal Ballot System (ETPBS) [for overseas migrants]," said Bheem Reddy Mandha, President of the Emigrants Welfare Forum, Telangana.

Yet, even this implementation process must be carefully evaluated: "A lot of the championing for NRI voting rights is from the perspective of the voters, but does not account for the differences in political systems where Indians are based. This is less of an issue in countries which are themselves democracies," said a former diplomat interviewed for this article. "Do not treat the world as one: have the sophistication to have different systems if required. A person with an H1-B visa is clearly different from someone living in a worker village. So, build in something about local laws and local requirements rather than a one size fits all approach."

> The fact that migrant workers are often not wholly integrated into their places of destination reaffirms the need to capture migrant votes in their origin states, should they so desire.

This holds a lot of veracity. Political systems around the world are as varied as the people and migrants that inhabit it. Policy interventions, therefore, both in approach and implementation, must consider this. Even if India were to enable remote voting, overseas workers in labour camps would encounter far more access hurdles to even reaching their embassies: on the off chance that they were given a day off, sans wage deductions, to vote; there would likely be no subsidised transport to get them there. While bussing voters to the booth on election day can be enabled within India, various tensions arise when political participation is encouraged outside of the country's sovereign borders; more so in countries where their own citizens do not have universal suffrage.

Adding democratic vitality

The movement of migrants in search of better livelihoods results in them inhabiting several worlds at once. The alienation that migrant workers feel, particularly in their initial days, is captured eloquently by the writer Benyamin in Jasmine Days: "You know how it is when you arrive in a new place and feel like you don't belong there? That hesitation to reckon with a new geography. That knowledge that this place is not mine, these ways of talking are not mine, these silences are not mine, this etiquette is not mine. So many new things to absorb. And the place also takes a little time to accept the new person. Often you have to meet the place on its own terms. Sometimes you have to work hard to earn your little corner in it. Till that place become yours, till you find your own equilibrium, there will be a gap between you and the place."

The fact that migrant workers are often not wholly integrated into their places of destination reaffirms the need to capture migrant votes in their origin states, should they so desire. Many international migrants struggle with being treated as second-tier citizens, despite the significant role that they play in the economic progress of both, their destination and origin countries. Indian workers in the Gulf states, for example, often face various conditions of forced labour and modern-day slavery in their workplaces. Owing to the employer-tied visa sponsorship system, they seldom receive equal rights as citizens even after being residents for decades.

Despite the staggering obstacles faced by migrant workers, their exposure to new places and experiences are extremely beneficial to both, their places of origin and destination. The process of exploring new geographies and cultures whilst still closely tethered to extant ones also has implications for political identity. The political scientist Finn suggests, "Being in two political communities allows

international migrants the chance to develop multiple political identities through learning in two countries, in the transnational space, and within the migratory system." Aside from enabling access to voting being something migrant workers are owed, contested selfhoods often translate into pluralism, and a greater richness of ideas. This would only add to a state's democratic vitality.

As of 2020, India had the largest number of migrants amongst any country in the world residing overseas, numbering 18 million. India also receives the highest remittances of any country worldwide. On the internal migration front, the number of internal migrants was 450 million Indians during the 2011 census, indicating that at the time 37 % of the Indian population were internal migrants. These various migrant worker groups are hence inarguably key contributors to the country's economic fabric.

For all the considerations to be weighed, India's migrants must be included in its electoral net. Whether sending hard-earned monthly remittances home, or constructing Indian roads in extreme temperatures, migrants are the backbone of this country and an integral part of its rich social fabric. They should have their demands heard. From any policy lens, migrants should never be rendered ghosts.

Namrata Raju is an independent labour and public policy researcher.