

## 1 Introduction

It is often argued that migrants from rural areas form only a small part of current developing countries' urban population growth. Still, they constitute a significant group for the cities' economies, and, possibly, for poverty reduction policies. And urbanisation is expected to accelerate in countries like India and China, and migration is likely to increase. Moreover, the total number of migrants is much larger than urbanisation and net migration figures suggest. In many developing countries, migration has a 'circular character'; rural-urban migrants do not settle permanently in cities but continue to maintain close links with their areas of origin. They return regularly and after retiring, and remit substantial parts of their income.

Migrants, particularly the ones who continue to move between rural and urban areas, are a difficult group to analyse and to formulate policies for. Although there is a large amount of literature on the background of migrants, conclusions differ. There is agreement that migration is a selective process, that – as in Europe in the nineteenth century – growing cities in Third World countries are full of young male adults (Williamson 1988: 430 ff.). But this apart, contrasting pictures of migrants exist. For example, some of the literature on migration, and popular opinion, portray migrants in Third World cities as destitutes and their migration as a last resort – a forced move from the countryside where they had no alternatives.<sup>1</sup> Other authors see migrants as rational actors, as individuals responding to income incentives in their decisions to migrate.<sup>2</sup> Yet another strand in the literature argues that the poorest cannot migrate.<sup>3</sup> Some authors have concluded that better-off villagers tend to be pulled, and worse-off villagers pushed, and that therefore town-ward migration increases

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Singh 1995; Pamreiter 1995; Firdausy 1994; Chapman and Prothero 1990; Breman 1985 and 1990. Much of the Indian historiography, and indeed colonial reports like the Royal Commission's (1931), stress that it was the poorest who were 'pushed' from the rural areas.

<sup>2</sup> Harriss and Todaro 1970; Stark 1991.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., Chaudhury 1992, for northern India around the turn of the century; Connell *et al.* 1976, for villages in northern India during the 1960s–70s.

# Rural- Urban Migration and Poverty

## *The Case of India*

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inequality.<sup>4</sup> Finally, there is no consensus about why and which women migrate, and whether their migration responses differ from men's (Williams 1990).

Partly because of these disagreements about migrants' characteristics, it is unclear how migration influences urban and rural poverty. If the poor are well-informed and urbanise and do not greatly drive down the urban wage-rate or employment prospect by so doing, the process would reduce poverty. But there are doubts about whether and how much migration contributes to poverty reduction. In a recent paper, Ravallion and Datt argue that in India the process of rural-urban migration has not contributed to poverty reduction. According to their analysis, agricultural growth has been the main cause.<sup>5</sup>

This article looks at the relation between rural-urban migration and poverty: who migrates, from which areas and income groups, how do the migrants compare to non-migrating urban groups, and how do the migrants fare over time? This shows that there is no simple correlation between the two, that different socioeconomic groups migrate for different reasons and that these factors change over time. The analysis focuses on India. It draws on field-work and interviews in an industrial area of Calcutta in the state of West Bengal, mainly amongst migrants from other states (Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa) who in many cases had moved 600 km. or more to come and work in the jute and paper industries (de Haan 1994a). Migrants had been attracted to the unskilled work in these industries in earlier parts of this century; during the last decennia few new jobs have been created. The

article also draws on analysis of survey data, particularly the 43rd NSS round of 1987, referring to India as a whole.

The rest of this article is structured as follows. Section 2 describes the rate of urbanisation in India. Section 3 describes the process of circular migration and the reasons for this form of migration. The following sections look at five issues in the relationship between migration and poverty. Section 4 looks at the role of inequality in migration and workers' personal motivations to migrate. Section 5 discusses the migrants' districts of origin, and Section 6 the background of the migrants, mainly in terms of land ownership. Section 7 raises the question: how does the income of the migrant compare to the non-migrating population, both in their rural area of origin and in the urban environment? Section 8 discusses how migrants fare over time: are they able to improve their income? Section 9 concludes.

## 2 Rate of Urbanisation and Migration in India

In a study on population and food prospects, Dyson expects the 'long anticipated great shaking loose' of the Indian rural peasantry from the villages towards the towns to be pronounced during the next decades.<sup>6</sup> Indeed India is today still largely a rural society. In 1992, 74 per cent of the total population still lived in rural areas, and 62 per cent of the labour force worked in agriculture.<sup>7</sup> Urbanisation has progressed, but at a moderate pace. In 1901 almost 26 million people, or 11 per cent of the Indian population lived in urban areas. In 1991 more than 217 million lived in cities – still only 26

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<sup>4</sup> Lipton 1980. Fielding (this Bulletin) shows that in the UK professionals and managers tend to be highly mobile, and that there is a positive association between geographical mobility and upward social mobility.

<sup>5</sup> Ravallion and Datt 1996. I would argue, however, that their analysis underestimates the effect of earnings in urban areas that are remitted to rural areas. If these are substantial, the contribution of urban economic growth contributes more to the observed decline in rural poverty than their analysis suggest. Little information is available about remittances. Urban-rural remittances are estimated to range from 10 to 13 of urban incomes in Africa, and are thought to be of the same order in Asia (Williamson 1988: 432). During recent field-work in Bihar, I was provided with information about money orders through

the post office. During August 1996, almost 46,000 money orders and 37 million Rupees were sent through Siwan district's head post office, an average of about 18 Rupees per inhabitant. This is of course only a part of the total remittances, since many people will carry their money when going back to the village. Bank transfer is another channel of remittances, and more common among better-off migrants.

<sup>6</sup> Dyson 1996: 182. The quote is from Ashis Bose.

<sup>7</sup> UNDP 1995: 176–77. The share of the labour force in agriculture declined from 73 per cent in 1965 to 62 per cent in 1990–92. During that period the share in industry remained almost the same (12 per cent and 11 per cent respectively). The increase was entirely in the service sector: 15 per cent to 27 per cent.

per cent of the total population. On average, during this century the Indian population growth rate was about 15 per cent per decade, and the growth of the urban population 26 per cent.

Historical explanations of urbanisation in India often point to the decline of old industrial towns like Murshidabad as a result of Imperial import policies, although new urban centres like Bombay and Calcutta emerged. After Independence, urban growth remained slow. During the 1960s and 1970s, India's urbanisation rates were lower than in other, comparable developing countries.<sup>8</sup> According to NSS data, rural-to-urban migration as a proportion of total migration declined between 1963–64 and 1973–74 (Mukherjee and Banerjee 1978: 31).

Population growth in Calcutta illustrates India's slow urbanisation. During this century, Calcutta Metropolitan Corporation, the central part of Calcutta, has grown at less than 20 per cent per decade, i.e. only marginally above India's natural population growth rate and slightly below the rate of urbanisation as a whole. Calcutta Urban Agglomeration, the greater Calcutta area, has grown at 25 per cent per decade. The growth rate for both areas has declined since the 1950s. Analysis of the population growth rates of a specific industrial area within Calcutta shows that immigration followed the cycles of the industry, including periods of substantial net outmigration (de Haan 1994a: 140–2).

But slow urbanisation is not the result of lack of migration, of rural dwellers being tied to their

villages, as the quote from Dyson seems to imply, and as much of the older (colonial) literature had argued.<sup>9</sup> Historical evidence indicates that most of the South Asian rural population has been highly mobile.<sup>10</sup> Studies on the early colonial period show that large groups of people moved over large distances. In the nineteenth century large numbers of people moved to work in seasonal agricultural activities.<sup>11</sup> Although migration towards West Bengal is likely to have declined during the latter part of the twentieth century following the relative economic decline of the state, in 1971 and 1981 still more than 2 million people had migrated from other parts of India (Census figures).

Rates of urbanisation underestimate the number of migrants. So does Census migration data, since it registers only the number of migrants present at a particular date. Both under-report the total flow of migrants to and from the city. This movement has been, and remains, significant, as the following section describes.

### 3 Circular Migration

Rural-urban migration, in India as in many other developing countries, has been, and remains 'circular': generally single male migrants go out for work, they maintain close links with their villages of origin, they return when they can or when forced to, and they aspire to return after retirement. In the case of Calcutta, most migrants came from 'up-country', from eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar, an area about 600 km. to the west of

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<sup>8</sup>Becker *et al.* (1992), using a general equilibrium model, show that India underwent exceptionally rapid city growth in the early 1960s but a slow rate of urbanisation after that. According to Williamson (1988: 430), reacting to earlier assertions of over-urbanisation, Third World urbanisation has been fairly conventional: '... judged by the standards of the First Industrial Revolution, the urban transition associated with ongoing industrial revolution in the Third World hardly seems exceptional.' Third World countries' urban population share rose from 17 to 28 per cent between 1950 and 1975, which is almost identical with the experience of currently developed countries' between 1875 and 1900. English city immigration rates between 1776 and 1806 were not that much lower than they were in the Third World after the Second World War.

<sup>9</sup>Some of the recent literature on indentured migration also (implicitly) assumes an immobile rural population:

the literature strongly emphasises the coercive methods used to make the villagers migrate abroad (de Haan 1995 discusses the Indian labour historiography that emphasises the segmented character of migration under colonial rule).

<sup>10</sup>See, e.g. Habib (1963) for references to migration under Mughal rule.

<sup>11</sup>According to the 1911 Census of Uttar Pradesh, 'there was no single family in the Banares Division which had not at least one member in Bengal, Assam or Bihar' (Census, 1911, Vol 15: 50). Within the province of Bengal, which encompasses the present Indian state West Bengal and Bangladesh, '[n]early 2,000,000 persons of all classes and races were enumerated in 1921 as coming from outside Bengal, including other provinces in India and other countries ...' (Royal Commission of Labour in India 1931, Vol 5: 5, pt.1)

Calcutta. They have not settled permanently in Calcutta, but continue to maintain close links with their villages, and they continue to speak Hindi rather than adopt Bengali.

This pattern has changed surprisingly little during this century, contradicting many expectations. Patterns of circular migration are expected to be 'dependent on the availability of short-term cash-earning opportunities, either in towns or on plantations. This dependence on a particular type of outside employment had led Zelinsky to place circular migration patterns at an early stage of modernization. Certainly, evidence from Africa shows an increasing stabilisation in migration flows. Both Caldwell for West Africa and Gugler in East Africa show a reduced rate of return migration...' (Connell et al. 1976: 9). The change in Calcutta's sex ratio does indeed show signs of stabilisation,<sup>12</sup> but in my opinion this does not indicate a break in the pattern of circular migration. As with rates of urbanisation, the sex ratio only reflects net rates of migration, and under-estimates total flows. Net migration towards Calcutta has declined (as a result of declining employment opportunities) but this is partly due to increasing numbers returning to their villages, or moving to other places within India.

This pattern of circular migration has been stimulated by various factors (de Haan 1994a). First, transport and communication are well developed, and they were so already at the turn of the century.<sup>13</sup> Migrants travel over long distances, but the areas were relatively well connected. Most of the recruiting areas for Calcutta's industries are situated along the main west-east and north-south rail connections. This implies that, compared to migration in earlier rural Europe for example, migration in rural India from 1880 onwards was probably less costly and less time consuming. During this century, transport facilities have further improved.

<sup>12</sup> In 1901, according to Census data, the sex ratio in Titagarh – the industrial area in which I carried out my field research – was 40 (i.e. 40 women per 100 men; the figure for Calcutta City in the same year was 49), in 1981 this had become 63 (71 for Calcutta City).

<sup>13</sup> In the literature there is disagreement about the how distance and migration are related. Connell et al. (1976: 16) argue that in India it is commercialisation not 'nearness', that encourages migration.

<sup>14</sup> During the last decades, agricultural production in

A second contributing factor is the development of rural society, as indicated by the quote from Dyson. The rural structure has continued to be dominated by small land holdings. Rather than being a 'proletariat' (in the Marxist sense), many migrant workers possessed small pieces of land in their villages of origin. Little research has been done on the interaction of urban and rural society, but the two clearly interact: income from work outside the village is used to invest in agricultural production – in the case of the labour migrants from Bihar probably without causing important changes in technology – and hence to counteract proletarianisation. The ownership of a plot of land, even if small, contributes to return migration.<sup>14</sup>

Third, living conditions in urban areas have not been conducive to the creation of a stable working class. There has been a shortage of housing, population density has been high, and few amenities have been provided. Bad living conditions are not only a cause of return migration; in my opinion the form of migration has also been partly responsible for the conditions in the town. If migrants can save, and most can, they invest their money in the village, not in the town. They have invested in improving their village house – as out-migrating areas testify – and improving or maintaining agriculture on their own land. Over time, living conditions have probably improved, but at the same time congestion has increased, and therefore factors pushing the workers back continue to exist.

A fourth issue is whether the pattern of migration has been caused by irregularity of work. During the earlier part of this century, working hours in large-scale industries changed constantly. Large numbers of workers were dismissed during crises<sup>15</sup> and rates of labour turnover were high. But, as I have argued elsewhere, in general, the workers'

these areas has become less irregular, due to irrigation and improvements in agriculture. Therefore, the 'pull' from these areas, and the motives to maintain a pattern of circular migration may have increased. This point was made by Professor P.P. Ghosh, Asian Development Research Institute, Patna.

<sup>15</sup> The jute mills in 1931 encountered few problems in dismissing about one-fifth of their workers. In the words of the Labour Commissioner Gilchrist, 'they "got away" with it. Their dismissed employees melted like snow in summer' (Gilchrist 1932: 23–4).

return was not caused by irregularity of work.<sup>16</sup> Industrial work was hardly seasonal, and certainly the period in which the workers went back to their villages was not dependent on production cycles, but on the workers' wish to return during the summer season when marriages and other social occasions take place. Since the middle of the century, industrial labour relations and rates of labour turnover have undergone big changes (de Haan 1996), but these have not significantly altered the pattern of migration. Gradually, work has become more secure, and it has become more difficult to dismiss workers. But these changes have not changed the pattern of migration. In the first place, improved job security applied only to a small portion of the labour force. Second, and more important for the argument here, I did not observe any difference in patterns of migration between workers with a permanent job, and those without. Both maintained close links with their villages, and a permanent job may even have increased the possibility of maintaining this. Their permanent status makes it difficult to dismiss workers, even if they overstay their leave. In the interviews, the workers said that very often they stayed longer in their village than the permitted one month. That people stay in the village longer than allowed and cheat with doctors' notes is a public secret.

The fifth and last factor which has contributed to the pattern of circular migration is the role of the family. Migration was mainly by single men. The reasons for this are complex, and different groups show variations in this respect, but I will not discuss this in detail here (see for a longer discussion de Haan 1994b). In my opinion, the pattern of single-male migration has not been caused by employers' demand for male labour. Since Independence demand has shifted in favour of men, but the patterns of single-male migration predated this. My argument is that cultural restrictions on female mobility outside the household – prevalent in northern India, less so in the south – has been the

main cause behind this.<sup>17</sup> In any case, men left the women behind, and this provides, perhaps, the most important reason to return. The family has undergone little change during this century; there is no clear trend towards a nuclear family.

Thus, industrialisation and urbanisation in India have not broken the close links between rural and urban areas. Over a long period of time circular migration has continued to be the dominant mode of migration. When ample employment opportunities existed, workers found it easy to leave their job and return after some time. In the case of Calcutta finding a job has become increasingly difficult, but this has not broken the pattern of migration. Influenced by cultural norms regarding female mobility, the predominant pattern of migration has been circular, of single men leaving family and village to earn an income to maintain the family. This aspect of the pattern of migration is crucial for the links between poverty and migration, as the following sections show.

#### 4 Poverty, Inequality and Migration

Economic analyses show that inequality, variously defined, rather than poverty may cause migration. 'Our analysis of data from forty Indian villages suggest that high emigration from a village is intimately associated with unequal distribution of resources (usually land)...'<sup>18</sup> Along similar lines, Stark (1991: 140 ff.) argues that relative deprivation plays an important role in migration decisions. His findings from Mexico show that, for international migration, relatively deprived households are more likely to engage in international migration than are better-off households. For internal migration the perceived risk of relative deprivation in the place of origin (the city) also plays a role. If this risk is perceived to be high, migration ceases to be an effective means for achieving gains with respect to relative deprivation.

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<sup>16</sup> Colonial reports argue that they left of their own accord, and there is little indication that they were dismissed because of seasonality of work. Evidence regarding the workers' reasons for leaving, and the percentage of workers that returned (from the Managers' Reports of a jute mill company) show that although dismissal was an important reason for workers leaving, a large percentage left of their own accord (de Haan 1994a: Appendix 5.9).

<sup>17</sup> From the interviews I concluded that, in the opinion of the male migrants', the urban areas provided more danger to the women's honour than rural areas.

<sup>18</sup> Connell *et al.* 1976: 10. They emphasise that single-factor analyses of land-based determinants of migration are inadequate. Migration may also help to relieve poverty.

This link between inequality and migration does not, however, take into account the migrants' personal reasons for migration. Further, for the migrants as for other people affected by it, 'poverty' is not an objective category. Although the workers' personal accounts almost invariably pointed to poverty, lack of land and/or income as the main reason for migrating, this does not prove a direct link between absolute poverty and migration. Migrants who in absolute and relative terms were better off, owning more land for example, also mentioned poverty as their reason for migration. Therefore, not only poverty, but also inequality, as well as the migrants' (and non-migrants') personal evaluations of these 'objective factors', are determinant causes of migration.

## 5 Poor Districts and Migration

From which areas do the migrants come? Are these the most deprived districts? The evidence available shows quite convincingly that it is not necessarily the poorest districts from which people migrate. Colonial reports in the late nineteenth century show that the out-migrating districts were not necessarily the poorest. For example, Nolan wrote in 1888 that Bihar's inhabitants were more healthy and that agricultural resources had been developed at an earlier period 'so that the population increases without finding an outlet'.<sup>19</sup> In this case, it was the earlier development of these districts, and not poverty or backwardness, that provided conditions for out-migration. As indicated above, the areas from which Calcutta attracted most of its migrants were well connected by railways quite early (and by water in earlier periods), and it is not very likely that these were the poorest districts.<sup>20</sup>

The 'segmentation' of migration streams is important for understanding the link between poverty

and migration.<sup>21</sup> Usually, because of the personal contacts that are essential for successful migration, people from specific areas migrate to specific destinations ('chain migration'). In one jute mill in Calcutta 40 per cent of the workers came from the district Saran in Bihar. Migration from Bihar to Bengal around the turn of the century can be explained with reference to wage differentials between the two areas. But the patterns are more complex. Wage differentials cannot explain why people from Saran went to Calcutta, why people from South Bihar to coal mines or tea plantations, and why from some areas very few people migrated. The consequence of this is that, if migration is successful, it may provide cumulative advantages to certain areas, excluding others.

## 6 Who Migrates?

Who migrates? For the earlier part of this century there is some information on the caste background of migrants in Bengal, since the Census of India collected such data (this was discontinued after Independence). Amongst unskilled industrial workers, most castes were represented. In the jute mills a variety of castes was employed, including Brahmins. Tinker, in his study of indentured migration, concludes: 'The emigration from North India represented an average sample of the rural population, excluding the trading, clerical and priestly castes – and also excluding many of the really downtrodden, the sweeper-folk, the lowest of the Untouchables.' Thus, in this case, it was a broad middle strata that migrated.

There is scarce information on the landownership of migrants, and my own field data is not very reliable (de Haan 1994a: Ch. 6). Most of the migrants I interviewed said that they had migrated because of a shortage of land. However, they were diverse in

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<sup>19</sup> 'The soil in these districts is fertile, there is no want of capital for any enterprise of real promise, the people are industrious and frugal; all the conditions of agricultural prosperity exist except the most essential, that is, the maintenance of a due proportion between the population and the natural resources of the country ...' (Nolan 1888; see also Chaudhury 1992). Population density is often seen as a cause of migration, but the causation might also be the reverse: high population density may be made possible by out-migration.

<sup>20</sup> According to Connell *et al.* (1976: 17) cost of migration may be prohibitive in the poorest villages. They quote evidence for migration following the nineteenth-century Irish famine: the migrants did not come from the poorest villages in the west. According to Tony Fielding, the same is true for migration in Britain in more recent periods. (see Fielding, this Bulletin.)

<sup>21</sup> See also Hatton and Williamson (1994: 17) for a discussion of segmentation of streams of international migrants between 1850 and 1939.

other respects. Many of the migrants did not belong to the poorest section of their village.<sup>22</sup> Migrants are both landowners and people who work on the land. In fact, owners of small plots of land, probably the majority in the western parts of Bihar, work on their own land, combine this with other income sources, and hire in labour in the peak seasons. It is not uncommon that land is given out to sharecroppers. Migrants stated that when they leave they keep the land because they do not want to depend on others.

Other data confirm this diversity. At the end of the 1940s a survey found that 59 per cent of the jute mill workers were landless, and 21 per cent owned less than two-third of an acre (Chattopadhyay 1952). The last large survey among jute workers held around 1970 showed that 42 per cent of the families did not own any land, and 29 per cent owned less than 1 acre (Bhattacharya and Chatterjee 1973). A crucial question, however, is how this compares to the non-migrating population in the areas of origin. I do not have comparable information for the group of jute mill workers. But a survey carried out in Bihar (Oberai *et al.* 1989) in the 1980s showed that 39 per cent of the migrants (thus not only jute workers) were landless, and that 38 per cent had less than 2.5 acres. The landless appeared to be more prone to out-migrate, but the differences were small: the migrants on average had only marginally less land than the total sample population. Thus, as indicated by Connell *et al.* (1976: 19–21), the landless are not the most likely to migrate, but most of the data shows that all strata do migrate.

Conclusions from two studies show that the relationship between land ownership and migration is context specific. First, the study by Oberai quoted above shows that the migration dynamics were different in two other states where surveys were held: in Kerala the middle peasantry migrated more, while in Uttar Pradesh all the landed groups except for the highest size of cultivators had a relatively high propensity to out-migrate (Oberoi *et al.* 1989:

34). Second, data on changes in inequality in Palanpur, a village in western Uttar Pradesh, show that in 1974–75, in a period when the distribution of land was more equal than in other years, 16 out of the 37 villagers with a regular job outside the household came from households in the bottom half of the income distribution. In the other survey years (1957–58, 1962–63, and 1983–84), those who held the well-paying jobs were also those who were well off in total income terms. ‘Where some lower castes had seized the opportunities for outside jobs in earlier years, in 1983/84 the higher castes were more prominently represented and the outside jobs became a source of inequality...’<sup>23</sup>

## 7 Migrants’ Income and Expenditure

My own field-research does not allow a comparison of the migrants’ income position with the non-migrants in the villages of origin. But the study by Oberai *et al.* (1989) presents some evidence. They conclude that the poor have a relatively higher propensity to out-migrate from rural areas. In Bihar, Kerala, and Uttar Pradesh the bottom three deciles accounted for a higher percentage among out-migrants than among the sample population. In Bihar, 15 per cent of the out-migrants belonged to the lowest income class, while 7 per cent of the total sample population belonged to this income group. However, this data on household income excluded remittances; inclusion may radically change the picture. Of the Bihari migrants, 72 per cent remitted to the family, but within the lower income groups, the percentage of remitters was higher: remittances formed 93 per cent of the income of the Bihari out-migrant households in the lowest income group. Hence, the data is not very convincing, but it does show that the poorer groups migrate as well.

How do the migrants compare to other urban groups? It is often stated that migrants do fairly well in the urban labour markets, but this is often due to their higher levels of education or their age

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<sup>22</sup> For example, when Rada Krishna Patro – probably the first migrant from Gurundi in South Orissa – left, he did possess a few acres of land. The family has been able to increase this land significantly, although the land has been divided within the family. Their well-built houses occupy a prominent place on the village market.

<sup>23</sup> Lanjouw and Stern 1989: 17. Fielding (this Bulletin) notes a difference in the mobility of the unemployed in the UK in the two periods studied. Unemployed are averagely mobile, but their mobility was larger in the 1980s than in the 1970s.

cohorts.<sup>24</sup> For example, the comparison of migrants and non-migrants in Bihar, Kerala, and Uttar Pradesh, shows that migrants clearly had more education,<sup>25</sup> and Zachariah shows that higher employment rates for migrants can be explained by the differences in the age cohorts.<sup>26</sup>

My own field research dealt with a specific group in a highly segmented labour market (i.e. particular groups carrying out particular activities). This might imply that the migrants would not be able to enter the more lucrative jobs, and that inequalities may be reinforced over time. But this is not

necessarily the case, and much depends on the time period taken into consideration. At the beginning of this century, local labourers were predominant in the industries, but they were, in a period when the industry expanded rapidly, replaced by migrants.<sup>27</sup> Over time, the socioeconomic situation of the industrial workers (in the 'organised sector') has undergone large changes. In India, and in West Bengal in particular, labour security has increased since Independence, and so have wages. However, since the 1950s employment in the older industries has declined, and since the 1970s, the industries have been in almost continuous crises, with regular closures of whole factories for long periods of time. Yet, in the long run, the position of the industrial workers has improved relative to workers outside the organised industry.

For a quantitative analysis of differences between migrants and non-migrants we can use the National Sample Survey (NSS). The published data makes it possible to compare migrants to the total urban population, for India as a whole. I have analysed per capita expenditure data, in terms of expenditure groups, of the 43rd NSS round (1987).<sup>28</sup> This comparison is presented in Graph 1.

In terms of expenditure, migrants were better off than the total urban population, and hence than the non-migrant population. The average monthly per capita expenditure of migrants was Rs. 295, while it was Rs. 243 for the urban population as a whole.<sup>29</sup> However, we cannot draw many conclusions from this. First, we cannot conclude that the migrants' income is higher – although there is other evidence to that extent – because we would have to control for differences in activity and dependency rates, and take into account the money remitted to the villages. Second, even inferences regarding the per capita expenditure are difficult, because of the possible differences in dependency rates: a comparison of income on this basis would assume that migrants and non-migrants have the same dependency burden. But the migrants' dependency burden is not likely to be lower than that of the non-migrants. Therefore, I conclude that the bias is not likely to distort the picture; the evidence does point in the direction that the migrants' are better-off than the non-migrants urban population.

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<sup>24</sup> However, Firdausy (1994: 73–77) argues that the rising trend of urban poverty in some parts of Indonesia was due to rural-to-urban migration, and that migrants have low levels of education. Stark (1991: 371) presents an alternative explanation of the high mean (and high variance) of (international) migrants' income; this would be due to relative lack of information available to employers about migrants in the receiving country. See also Fielding (this Bulletin) who shows that migration to Britain's South East region has added both to the top and the bottom of the social ladder.

<sup>25</sup> Oberai *et al.* 1989: 27 ff. According to the National Sample Survey (18th round), in 1963–64 migrants in urban areas had a higher percentage (56 per cent) of literacy than the general population (48 per cent). This may reflect migration to obtain schooling.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Becker *et al.* 1994: 114. NSS data for 1963–64 shows that 45 per cent of the male migrants in urban areas belonged to the age-group 18–34 years, while the comparable figure for all urban inhabitants was only 28 per cent.

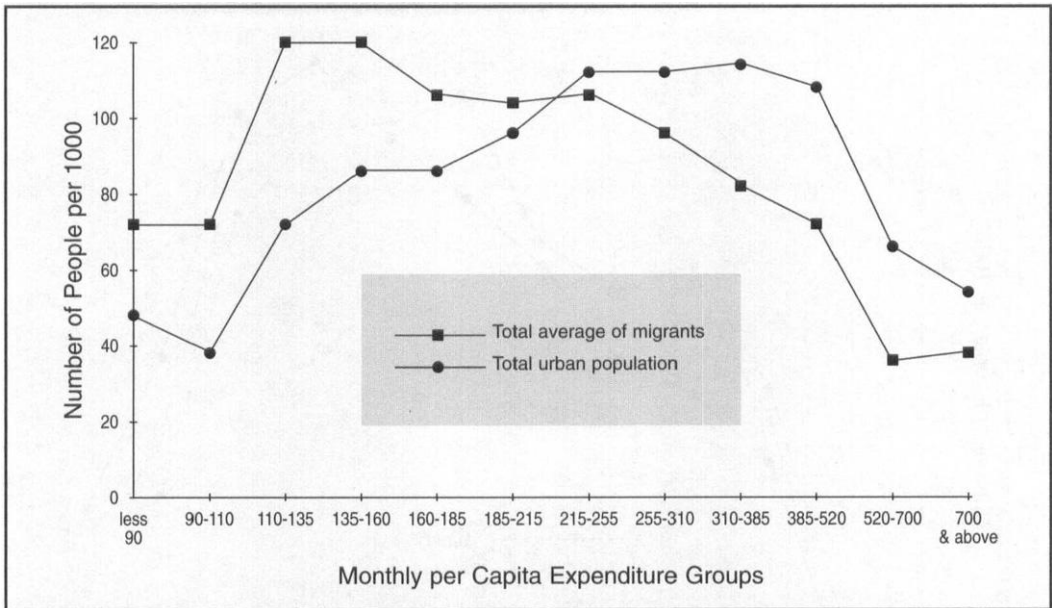
<sup>27</sup> There are contradicting accounts of how and why this happened. Many have argued that this was due to active management strategies, but in my opinion (de Haan 1994a: Chapter 4) local labour left voluntarily, and, in the context of an expanding economy at the beginning of this century, they were able to find other means of livelihood.

<sup>28</sup> Sarvekshana Vol XV No 4, Issue 51, April–June 1992: 30. In this survey, 27,000 men and 37,000 women out of an urban sample of 219,000 were enumerated as migrants. People were classified as migrants if the place of enumeration was different from their last usual place of residence, i.e., the place where she or he stayed for at least 6 months prior to moving. The comparable data for the total urban population are from Sarvekshana Vol XV No 1, Issue 48, July–September 1991. I would like to thank Shakin Yaqub for assistance with this analysis.

<sup>29</sup> Also, unsurprisingly, female migrants are worse off than the male migrants, although it is important to take account of the fact that much female migration is related to marriage (therefore female mobility is very high).



## Percentage Distribution of Urban Population and Migrants by Monthly per Capita Expenditure



### 8 How do Migrants Fare Over Time?

Finally, how do migrants fare in the city? There is a consensus that, although migrants may start off with a somewhat lower income than the native urban workers, differences are eliminated quite rapidly, and that they improve their position over time.<sup>30</sup> The life histories I collected show that, although the labour market is clearly segmented, there is significant mobility: sons often started an occupation other than their fathers' job, workers took up other jobs when they presented themselves, in factories of in the 'informal sector'. Industrial work provided a migrant a relatively secure income and status. But some chose business because jute mill work would be below their status. And there were also cases where people chose rickshaw pulling: at least in the past, it gave them a better income, and it gave them some independence.

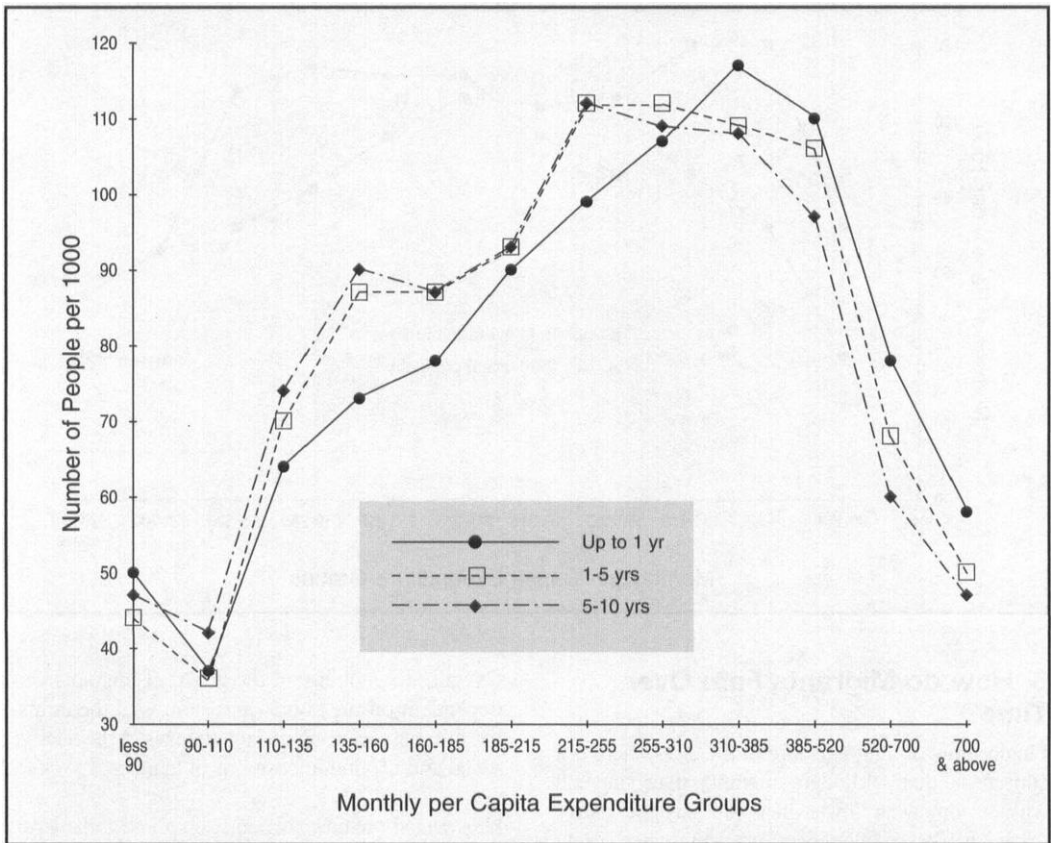
Overall, the mobility of the group of migrants was dependent on the booms and slumps of the industry, but there were significant changes in the relative social and economic positions of families.

NSS data show how migrants, on an all-India level, fare over time. This information distinguishes migrants depending on the period since migration: people who migrated less than one year ago, between one and five years, and between five and ten years. The data show that the average expenditure of migrants who had been in the city for less than one year was slightly higher than that of the people who had been there longer. But the differences are small and probably not statistically significant: migrants who had migrated less than one year ago had an average monthly expenditure of Rs. 306; those who migrated between one and five years ago Rs. 298 (i.e. 3 per cent lower), and those who migrated five to ten years ago Rs. 289 (5.5 per cent lower).

<sup>30</sup> Vijverberg and Zeager (1994), using Tanzanian data. See also Stark (1991: 29). Khundker *et al.* (1994: 13-14) show that the position of migrants in urban areas of Bangladesh improves in terms of skill level, employment status, or occupational mobility: short-term migrants are more often

workers (as compared to owner); 63 per cent of the migrants who came less than five years ago were unskilled, whereas only 35 percent of those who had been in the city more than 15 years were unskilled; and long-term migrants work more often in production rather than sales, construction or transport.

**Graduation: Distribution of Migrants by Period Elapsed since Migrating  
by Monthly per Capita Expenditure Groups**



We can only draw limited conclusion from this data. First, to repeat a point made earlier, the data represent expenditure, not income. Per capita expenditure will be lower when the family size increases (given a fixed number of earners in one family). This might explain the decreasing per capita expenditure of migrants of longer duration. Second, remittances may play a role. Migrants who have been in the city for a longer period, may send more money to their places of origin. Oberai *et al.* (1989: 49) show that Bihari migrants who migrated more than five years ago, remitted on average more than twice as much as those who had migrated less than a year ago. Third, the process of circular migration is likely to play a role: migrants come to the city when wages are high, and leave when low. Finally, people in the higher expenditure groups

may be more likely to leave the city after some time, after they have saved some money. Hence, the data on expenditure do not show that migrants improve their position over time, but the differences are too small to draw certain conclusions. Also, they need to be complemented by data on income; separate evidence on this does suggest that migrants are able to improve.

## 9 Conclusion

This article has raised an old set of questions: is rural-urban migration linked to poverty, and how? But raising these old questions is justified, since there is no consensus about the answers. And raising the issues is important for analyses and policies regarding urban (as well as rural) poverty: for

example, what is the socioeconomic position of migrants compared to other urban groups, how do policies affect migrants, and are there specific policies that can reduce the poverty of migrants without negatively affecting other groups?

Before answering the questions about the links between migration and poverty, two elements of the migration process need to be emphasised. First, whereas migration is a common aspect of most societies (cf. Lucassen and Lucassen, forthcoming), the effects of migration on the areas of origin and of destination may vary. And the effects of migration within one area changes over time: in a period with ample job opportunities, more people will be able to take advantage of the opportunities than when jobs are scarce. This may explain why poor migrants from rural areas in northern India seem to have profited more at the beginning of the century – when industries expanded rapidly – than during 1960–1990, when industrial employment stagnated.

Second, the character of migration streams is important. The most common pattern is single men migrating, leaving family behind. But this is by no means the only pattern: in some cases single women migrate, and in many cases complete families. There is debate about the reasons for specific patterns (which has a bearing on the links between poverty and migration, particularly for women). This article has looked mainly at the pattern of migration common in northern India. Influenced by cultural norms regarding female mobility, this is mainly by single men, who maintain close links with their villages of origin. This has contributed to a relatively slow pace of urbanisation, and has had implications – hitherto largely unexplored – for trends in poverty in urban as well as in rural areas.

The article has discussed five sets of issues relating to the link between poverty and migration. Many of these questions require further research. But the data available does show that the correlation

between migration and poverty is complex. First, both poverty and inequality play a role, and so do the migrants' own interpretation of whether they are poor or not. Second, migrants come from a variety of districts, not necessarily the poorest, and historical reasons often play a crucial role in this. Some areas have developed a tradition of migration, and once certain patterns of migration exist, they do not change easily. Third, migrants come from a variety of backgrounds, and they probably take up different jobs. They belong to various castes, and to both landless and landowner groups. Although there is some evidence that the landless migrate less because they cannot afford the necessary investment, this seems to be context specific: in some areas they migrate less, but this is not necessarily the case in other areas, or in other periods. Fourth, data on expenditure and income of migrants as compared to non-migrants confirm the diversity of migration experiences. Although the poorest in rural areas may find it difficult to migrate, there is data that show that in some areas the poorest do migrate. The comparison with the non-migration population in urban areas shows that migrants are slightly better off. Finally, the scarce data about how migrants fare over time do indicate that they often are able to improve their position; the NSS expenditure data do not confirm this, but the evidence is not strong enough to contradict it either.

Thus, there is a need for more information about migrants, who continue to be a very important group in most societies and determine to a large extent the urbanisation process. Studies that trace changes over time at both ends of the migration streams would be particularly welcome. Migrants are a difficult group to analyse – and therefore to formulate policies for – because of problems in Census enumeration for example, or because their households is divided over two or more places. The available data do indicate that it is difficult to generalise about migrants, and about the relationship between migration and poverty.

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