

Understanding the Psychological Barriers of Migration

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Abstract

Internal migration, involving movement within a country, presents significant social and psychological challenges for individuals. Migrants moving from rural to urban areas or between cities often face cultural displacement and identity crises, leading to feelings of alienation and difficulty in forming new social networks. These individuals may encounter discrimination or stigmatization, further disrupting their sense of belonging and social cohesion. The fragmentation of traditional community ties leaves migrants in a state of social void, exacerbating their challenges. Psychologically, the stress associated with relocation can result in anxiety about job security, housing, and financial stability. The emotional burden of leaving familiar support systems and adapting to a new environment can lead to mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. Effective adjustment depends on individual coping mechanisms, resilience, and access to psychological support services. Addressing these dilemmas requires a multifaceted approach that includes enhancing social support systems, fostering inclusive community policies, and providing mental health resources tailored to the needs of internal migrants. Understanding these social and psychological challenges is crucial for developing effective interventions and promoting the well-being of internal migrants as they navigate their new lives. This paper aims to address the significant gap in understanding internal migration in India, offering insights that contribute to academic discussions and inform policy-making and interventions to support internal migrants.

INTRODUCTION

Migration is a universal phenomenon that exists with the subsistence of human beings on earth. People migrate from one place to another for several reasons, but the goal or main reason behind changing residence would be to improve their living conditions or to escape from debts and poverty. Migration is also a social phenomenon that influences human life and the environment around it. Hence, migration has a great impact on any geographical area and it is known as one of the basic components of population growth of any particular region. Many times, lack of preparedness, difficulties in adjusting to the new environment, the complexity of the local system, language difficulties, cultural disparities, and adverse experiences would cause distress to the migrants. Moreover, subsequently, it has a negative impact on the mental

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well-being of such population. Due to globalization, modernization, improved technologies, and developments in all sectors, migration and its impact on human well-being is a contemporary issue; hence, here is an attempt to understand migration and its impact on the mental health of the migrants.

Understanding Migration

Migrations are of two types, i.e., internal and external (international). Internal migration is the form of migration that happens within a nation and the different forms of internal migration are intra-district, inter-district and inter-state migration. Internal (Inward) migration refers to the movement of people within a country, resulting in a more efficient allocation of human resources to sectors and regions where they are better utilized. In India, as in most countries, there are generally no restrictions on internal movement. The number of internal migrants in India was 450 million, as per the most recent 2011 census. This is an increase of 45% over the 309 million recorded in 2001. This far exceeds the population growth rate of 18% from 2001-2011. Internal migrants as a percentage of the population increased from 30% in 2001 to 37% in 2011 (Chandramouli & General, 2011). Migration, especially internal migration, contributes significantly to the growth of Indian cities. The process of internal migration in India is not a new phenomenon. It exists historically and it is a continuous process. Nevertheless, in response to socio-economic changes, the pattern of migration changes over time. Studies on internal migration based on the Census as well as NSSO, inform stagnancy in population mobility till the early 1990s (Kundu, 1996; Singh, 1998; Srivastava, 1998; Bhagat, 2010), while the post-reform period shows evidence of an increase in the internal population movement. The latest NSSO figure (2007/08) shows internal migration in India has increased to 29 percent in 2007/08 from 25 percent in 1993. The estimates from the 2011 Census indicate that internal migration in India is expected to reach 400 million, which comprises 1/3rd of the population of the country. Niti Aayog recommends facilitating migration and asserts that migration should be acknowledged as an integral part of development and that government policies must not hinder but seek to facilitate

internal migration. On the other hand, outward migration occurs when people leave a state to move to other states within the same country (Brar & Seo, 2021). The evolution of migration has been studied extensively by different scholars seeking answers to different questions. In India, the study of out-migration has always overshadowed the study of internal migration and its effect on the Indian economy.

The Census of India has been collecting data on migration since 1971, focusing on migration by birthplace and last place of residence, along with the underlying reasons for migration. These reasons range from work or employment, business, education, marriage, moving after birth, moving with household, to others. Studies show that a majority of rural migrants move to urban areas for reasons of employment (Bhagat, 2011). They move from states such as Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh mainly to Delhi and cities in Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Punjab (Behera, 2018). However, businesses and industries are increasingly recognizing the need to address diversity and multicultural issues in workplace practices (Fekedulegn, Alterman, Charles, Kershaw, Safford, Howard & MacDonald, 2019; Pascoe, Smart Richman, 2009; Daly, 1998) but for many people from different ethnic groups, the experience of prejudice and discrimination is part of everyday life. It is also a fact that, whatever the reasons, the world continues to witness the recurring instances of discrimination ranging from its worst forms to the subtlest. Due to its pervasiveness, discrimination has been a focus of moral, political and empirical discourse for at least a century.

Social and Psychological Underpinnings of Migration

The social composition of the migrant community is varied. It includes a significant number of historically disadvantaged groups, such as scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and other backward castes. However, official statistics also show a higher rate of long-term migration among higher-income households (Rsajan, 2014). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has compiled a report on the Social Inclusion of Internal

Migrants in India as part of the Internal Migration in India Initiative. This report provides valuable insights into the state of affairs for migrants, highlighting the need for policies and measures to ensure their social inclusion and well-being. Internal migration is deeply influenced by various social factors that shape individuals' decisions and experiences. These social underpinnings are crucial for understanding the patterns and impacts of internal migration.

One significant social factor is economic opportunity. Migrants often relocate from rural areas to urban centers in search of better job prospects, higher wages, and improved living standards. Economic disparities between regions drive this movement as people seek to escape poverty or enhance their quality of life. However, this economic shift can also lead to social stratification, where newly arrived migrants face challenges in integrating into their new communities due to differences in education, skills, or economic status.

Family dynamics play a critical role as well. Family ties and obligations frequently influence migration decisions. For instance, individuals may move to join relatives in urban areas or relocate to provide better opportunities for their children. Conversely, the migration process can strain family relationships, particularly when individuals are separated from their extended families or when family members face difficulties adjusting to new environments.

Social networks and community ties also impact internal migration. Pre-existing connections in destination areas can facilitate migration by providing social support, housing, and employment opportunities. Migrants often rely on these networks to ease their transition and reduce feelings of isolation. Conversely, the absence of such networks can exacerbate the challenges of migration, making it harder for individuals to integrate into their new communities.

Cultural factors further influence migration patterns. Differences in cultural practices, values, and norms between origin and destination regions can affect how migrants adapt and integrate. The experience of cultural dissonance or the struggle to maintain one's cultural identity can impact migrants' social well-being and their sense of belonging.

Understanding these social underpinnings is essential for developing policies and programs that

support internal migrants, promote social cohesion, and address the challenges associated with migration.

Prejudice, Social Exclusion, Perceived Discrimination among Migrants

Migration is often driven by aspirations for better opportunities or escaping adverse conditions; however, comes with a complex array of psychological impacts. Key among these are experiences of prejudice, social exclusion, and perceived discrimination, which contribute significantly to distress and anxiety. Understanding these psychological effects is crucial for developing effective support systems to aid migrants in their transition and integration processes.

Prejudice

Prejudice, or preconceived opinions and attitudes about individuals based on their group identity, significantly impacts migrants' psychological well-being. Prejudice manifests in various forms, including xenophobia, racism, and ethnocentrism. Migrants face negative stereotypes and biased attitudes from the host community, which leads to experiences of social exclusion and marginalization.

Studies indicate that urban residents often perceive migrant workers as threats to urban society, attributing various social problems such as unemployment, congestion, environmental degradation, and crime to their presence. This perception is deeply rooted in prejudice and negative stereotypes, which can be linked to the migrants' accents, appearance, and public behavior (Gu *et al.*, 2016). For example, urban residents frequently use derogatory terms like "cheat," "stupid," "thief," and "ignorant" to describe migrant workers, reflecting a broader trend of negative stereotyping (Wong *et al.*, 2007; Gu *et al.*, 2016). These stereotypes are not only harmful but also perpetuate a cycle of exclusion and marginalization.

Migrant workers, in turn, often feel the sting of these prejudiced attitudes. They perceive urban residents as looking down upon them and viewing them as inferior, which can significantly affect

their self-esteem and mental well-being (Wong *et al.*, 2007). This sense of being demeaned is compounded by the challenges they face in adapting to new environments, including securing stable employment and accessing essential services.

Internal migrants who move within their own country face prejudiced attitudes. They may encounter discrimination based on their rural origins or socio-economic status, which exacerbates their difficulties in integrating into urban settings. Internal migrants are often stereotyped as less educated or less skilled compared to their urban counterparts, further fueling negative perceptions. This prejudice can lead to social exclusion and hinder their opportunities for economic advancement and social integration (Jiang, Duan, & Tang, 2023).

Overall, the prejudice faced by both migrant workers and internal migrants highlights the need for interventions that address these negative perceptions. Promoting understanding and empathy, improving educational and employment opportunities, and fostering inclusive community policies are crucial steps toward mitigating these biases and supporting the successful integration of migrants into urban societies (Jiang, Duan, & Tang, 2023).

Social exclusion

Social exclusion refers to being systematically marginalized or prevented from participating in mainstream social, economic, and cultural activities. For migrants, this exclusion often occurs in various settings, such as workplaces, schools, and community organizations, frequently stemming from prejudice. This lack of access to essential resources and opportunities can severely impact their self-esteem and mental health. Migrants facing prejudice and social exclusion struggle with forming social connections and integrating into their new environments. The absence of supportive relationships and social networks exacerbates feelings of isolation and loneliness, leading to increased psychological distress.

Research has demonstrated that perceptions of status-based rejection—such as those related to race or ethnicity—can provoke intense negative reactions, including social exclusion, anger, and dejection (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Jones, 1997). These negative responses are evident when

individuals perceive themselves as devalued due to their social status. For instance, McNeilly, Anderson, Robinson, McManus, Armstead and Clark (1996) found that such perceptions could lead to significant emotional distress.

Expectations of rejection, particularly among individuals labeled with mental illness or women anticipating gender stigmatization, can hinder personal and social goals. Link, Cullen, Frank, & Wozniak (1987) showed that anxiety about being stigmatized undermines well-being and social functioning, independent of actual psychiatric symptoms. Similarly, stigma consciousness—the anticipation of being stigmatized regardless of behavior—has been linked to avoidance of potentially stigmatizing situations (Pinel, 1999). Stephan & Stephan (1996) noted that among low-status groups, intergroup anxiety often leads to greater wariness in interactions with out-group members. Terrell & Terrell (1981) found that mistrust of White individuals among African Americans correlated with poorer academic performance and reduced utilization of support services in predominantly White institutions.

Allen & Badcock (2003) proposed a social risk theory of depression, suggesting that individuals who experience chronic social exclusion perceive their social value as low, making them highly sensitive to potential rejection. This heightened sensitivity can lead to avoidance of social interactions, driven by fear of total exclusion. Consequently, depression may function as a defense mechanism against further social risks. Cacioppo & Hawkley (2005) similarly argue that individuals experiencing deep loneliness often display learned helplessness and alienation. Studies by Baumeister and colleagues (2002, 2005, 2006) liken social exclusion to a blunt instrument, resulting in temporary cognitive deconstruction, similar to the affective state preceding suicidal behavior. This comparison underscores the profound impact of social exclusion on cognitive and emotional states.

Theories suggest that humans are driven to seek inclusion and avoid exclusion (Ainsworth, 1989; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bowlby, 1969). Empirical evidence supports this, showing that social exclusion can lead to anxiety (Baumeister & Tice, 1990), depression (Fable, 1993), and reduced self-esteem (Leary

et al., 1995; Solomon *et al.*, 1991). Feelings of cultural estrangement are linked to lower self-esteem, life satisfaction, and higher depression and anxiety (Cozzarelli & Karafa, 1998). Williams *et al.* (1998) found that receiving the “silent treatment” diminished self-esteem, control, and sense of belonging. Durkheim (1897) argued that severe rejection and alienation can predict suicide.

Perceived Discrimination

Perceived discrimination refers to the belief that one is being treated unfairly or unjustly due to personal characteristics such as race, ethnicity, or nationality. Migrants often perceive discrimination in various aspects of life, including employment, housing, and interactions with public services. This perceived discrimination is a significant source of psychological stress and impacts overall well-being.

Discrimination, manifesting globally in various forms, from overt acts to subtle behaviors, is a pervasive social issue designed to limit opportunities for certain groups. This discrimination is driven by prejudices and stereotypes across aesthetic, economic, social, religious, and cultural domains (Bobo & Fox, 2003; Quillian, 2006; Olmo, 2009). These biases create negative social contexts that individuals navigate, significantly influencing their health and well-being (Schnittker & McLeod, 2005). Perception plays a crucial role in this experience; while perceived discrimination may not fully capture systemic forms of discrimination, it is sensitive to subtler symbolic dimensions, which can be equally damaging (Clark *et al.*, 1999; Brondolo *et al.*, 2003).

Discrimination is categorized into real and perceived types. Real discrimination is often observable through discriminatory conduct or statistical disparities in income, education, and employment among ethnic groups. Perceived discrimination, however, reflects an individual's sense of being unfairly treated due to group affiliation, such as race or household registration (Major *et al.*, 2002; Pascoe & Richman, 2009). The impact of discrimination is profound, affecting both psychological and social well-being. Victims of discrimination often experience mental health issues, decreased life quality, loneliness, and reduced trust in society (Fibbi *et al.*, 2021). Discrimination can lead to activism or withdrawal from socio-po-

litical life, depending on its source (Lashley, 2022). Societal effects include erosion of social cohesion, increased political conflict, and jeopardized social harmony (Castaneda *et al.*, 2015). Understanding the impact of discrimination is essential for managers and society to foster ethical practices and address its detrimental effects on the organizational and societal fabric (Oskooii, 2015). Experiences and consequences of discrimination vary among and within social groups, with visibility factors such as skin color or language influencing susceptibility (Carter, 2007; Lee, 2005; Thoits, 2010). Although the expression of outright discrimination has been greatly reduced in recent decades, more subtle and chronic forms of discrimination are still very real for certain groups in our society. A number of comprehensive literature reviews find substantial evidence—from both laboratory and community studies—for the harmful health effects of discrimination across a range of mental health outcomes, including depression, psychological distress, anxiety, and well-being (Williams, Neighbors & Jackson, 2003; Paradies, 2006). Perceived discrimination has also been linked to specific types of physical health problems, such as hypertension, self-reported poor health, and breast cancer, as well as potential risk factors for disease, such as obesity, high blood pressure, and substance use (Williams & Mohammed, 2009).

Hence, the impact of perceived discrimination is profound. It leads to a range of emotional responses, including frustration, anger, and helplessness. Over time, persistent experiences of perceived discrimination contribute to chronic stress and exacerbate mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. The psychological burden of feeling constantly judged or marginalized can erode self-worth and hinder successful adaptation to the new environment.

Psychological Impacts of Perceived Discrimination Among Migrants: Understanding the Mental Health Consequences

Life Satisfaction

Discrimination significantly impacts various facets of life, particularly affecting the experiences of migrants. In recent years, researchers have shown

their interest in linking perceived discrimination and life satisfaction. Research indicates that perceived discrimination is linked to lower life satisfaction and decreased well-being. Studies show that individuals who experience higher levels of discrimination report diminished life satisfaction and overall well-being (Kim & Won, 2015; Hashemi *et al.*, 2020; Zhang *et al.*, 2020). Structural equation modeling reveals that perceived discrimination negatively impacts life satisfaction, primarily through its effects on national identity and sense of community, particularly within Chinese culture (Yao *et al.*, 2018). Acculturative stress and perceived discrimination also individually impair life satisfaction among student migrants from India, both domestically and internationally (Benita, 2021). Life satisfaction is crucial as it influences various personal, behavioral, psychological, and social outcomes and higher satisfaction levels are associated with better social progression and coping mechanisms (Lyubomirsky *et al.*, 2005; Diener *et al.*, 1999). Conversely, lower life satisfaction is linked to increased victimization and adverse experiences such as bullying and harm (Arseneault *et al.*, 2010; Valois *et al.*, 2001).

Psychological distress

Migrants frequently encounter multiple stressors that contribute to overall emotional distress. A sense of loss can accompany the process of migration as individuals leave behind their homes, families, and familiar support systems. The stress of adapting to a new environment, coupled with the challenges of navigating different social and economic systems, can lead to feelings of overwhelm and emotional exhaustion.

Research extensively examines the effects of perceived discrimination on migrants, highlighting significant mental health impacts. Studies consistently show that perceived discrimination correlates positively with psychological distress, including lower quality of life, higher PTSD symptoms, and general psychological distress (Claudius, 2018; Faran & Slonim-Nevo, 2022). Additionally, perceived discrimination negatively affects physical health (Martos-Méndez *et al.*, 2020) and is linked to psychiatric disturbances such as depression, psychosis, and externalizing behaviors (Lewis *et al.*, 2015). This

discrimination is inversely related to self-esteem, life satisfaction, and psychological adaptation (De Freitas *et al.*, 2018).

Structural equation modeling has revealed that high perceived discrimination correlates with increased psychological distress and various cultural orientations, including hybrid, monocultural, alternating, and conflicted orientations (Firat & Noels, 2021). Education moderates this relationship, indicating that the impact of discrimination on psychological distress varies with educational level (Zhang & Hong, 2012). Ethnic identity also plays a protective role, being negatively correlated with both discrimination and psychological distress (Okolie & Manyeruke, 2024). Overall, discrimination has a profoundly detrimental effect on mental health (Ojeda & Piña-Watson, 2013).

Psychological well-being

Studies highlight the significant impact of perceived discrimination on migrants' psychological well-being. Those who perceive discrimination often experience increased anxiety, depressive symptoms, lower psychological well-being, and diminished satisfaction with their migration decision (George & Sridevi, 2022; Giuliani *et al.*, 2018). Meta-analyses reveal a consistent negative correlation between perceived discrimination and psychological well-being, particularly affecting disadvantaged groups and children (Schmitt *et al.*, 2014). Perceived discrimination hampers integration and enhances in-group identification. However, a strong sense of community (SOC) can mitigate these negative effects, improving psychological distress life satisfaction and reducing social exclusion (Hombrados-Mendieta *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, self-esteem and belief in a just world can buffer the adverse impacts of perceived discrimination on well-being (Liu *et al.*, 2021; Urzúa *et al.*, 2018). Addressing these factors is crucial for enhancing migrants' mental health and integration processes.

Job satisfaction and Self -Esteem

Perceived discrimination significantly impacts workplace outcomes and the overall well-being of migrants. High levels of perceived discrimination are linked to lower job satisfaction and organizational

injustice (Lamarre, 2021; Tabor & Dalton, 2021). Education has been found to act as a protective factor against perceived discrimination, and self-esteem mediates the relationship between discrimination and subjective well-being (Siddiq *et al.*, 2023; Liu *et al.*, 2021). Social support also moderates the impact of perceived discrimination on well-being (Hashemi *et al.*, 2020). Self-esteem further mediates the relationship between perceived ethnic discrimination and commitment to the organization (Espinosa, 2021). Discrimination undermines self-esteem, life satisfaction, and psychological adaptation (Crocker & Major, 1989; De Freitas *et al.*, 2018). Studies highlight that discrimination and rejection in the host country are major stressors, leading to significant mental and physical health issues, deteriorated self-esteem, and feelings of alienation (Allport *et al.*, 1954; Paradies, 2006; Schmitt *et al.*, 2014). Perceived discrimination is associated with increased mental health problems and lower overall well-being for migrants and refugees (Spaas *et al.*, 2022). These findings underscore the urgent need to address the negative impacts of discrimination on migrants' mental health.

Strategies for Thriving: Resilience in Migrant Life

Despite the psychological challenges associated with migration, many individuals demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptive coping strategies. Resilience refers to the ability to bounce back from adversity and maintain psychological well-being in the face of stressors. Migrants often employ various coping mechanisms to manage their distress and anxiety, such as, building and maintaining *social networks* can provide emotional support, practical assistance, and a sense of belonging. Connections with family, friends, or community organizations can help mitigate the negative impacts of prejudice, exclusion, and discrimination. *Cultural adaptation* is another way to engage with and learn about the new culture, which can facilitate integration and reduce feelings of isolation. Developing cultural competence and finding ways to blend one's own cultural identity with the new environment can enhance resilience. Further, *utilizing available resources*, such as mental health

services, support groups, and community programs, can provide essential support and guidance during the migration process. Culturally sensitive services that understand and address the unique experiences of migrants can be particularly beneficial. Moreover, maintaining a *positive outlook and sense of self-efficacy* can enhance resilience. Believing in one's ability to overcome challenges and achieve personal goals can buffer against the negative psychological impacts of migration.

Implications and Recommendations

The present paper addresses the psychological impacts of migration for policymakers and practitioners. It suggests the following implications and recommendations that can be implemented as strategies to support migrants throughout the migration process:

Enforcing and promoting *anti-discrimination policies* can help reduce prejudice and ensure equal treatment for migrants. Legal protections against discrimination in employment, housing, and public services are essential for fostering an inclusive environment. Developing and supporting *integration programs* that provide cultural orientation, language training, and practical assistance can facilitate smoother adaptation and reduce feelings of isolation. Programs that promote social inclusion and community engagement are crucial for building social networks and reducing exclusion. Providing accessible and *culturally sensitive mental health services* is vital for addressing the psychological needs of migrants. Services should be designed to recognize and respond to the unique stressors and experiences associated with migration. Encouraging *community support* and local initiatives to support migrants can enhance social integration and provide a network of support. Initiatives that promote intercultural understanding and cooperation can help bridge gaps between migrants and the host community.

CONCLUSION

Research from various global regions indicates that migration is a multifaceted phenomenon with diverse impacts on individuals. However, there is

very little research related to the social and psychological dilemmas of migrants, especially in the context of India. Migration has profound psychological impacts, including experiences of prejudice, social exclusion, perceived discrimination, distress, and anxiety. Understanding these impacts is essential for developing effective support systems and policies that promote the well-being of migrants. By addressing the challenges associated with migration and fostering an inclusive and supportive environment, it is possible to mitigate the negative psychological effects and facilitate successful adaptation and integration for migrants.

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