



Labourer on the Move: The Aspiration Trap, Structural Inequality, and the Crisis of Capability under Capitalist Accumulation

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Abstract

The movement of capital beyond the national boundaries has created new conditions for labour mobility. Economic activities and technological progressions have simplified the development of a transnational space for capital flow. The changes brought about by international trade were expected to be managed through the internal movement of labour and capital across different social classes and occupations. Internal migration, which involves movement within a country's borders, significantly surpasses international migration in terms of the number of people affected. Migration studies have remained largely under-theorized within social inquiry; most of the migration theories engrossed on solely generalised explanation of migration. Despite extensive theoretical discussions from various disciplinary perspectives in the field of migration studies, certain aspects still remain underexplored or lack sufficient theorization to cover up labourer migration occurred within a national boundary. In this context, we adopt the 'aspiration-capability framework' to examine internal labourer migration through a different lens. Here we would specifically emphasize 'aspiration' with sociological insights and 'capabilities' from a political-economic standpoint. Our analysis explores labourer migration as an 'aspiration-capability dynamic in capitalist accumulation.'

Keywords: - Labour migration, Aspiration-Capability, Structural Inequality, Capitalist Accumulation

Introduction

The movement of capital beyond the national boundaries has created new conditions for labour mobility. Economic activities and technological progressions have simplified the development of a transnational space for capital flow. In the late nineteenth century, prominent political economists debated on how free trade influenced the global movement of labour and capital. Eighteenth-century theory was based on the assumption that factors of production were immobile across nations, treating the international exchange of goods as distinct from the mobility of labour and capital. It was believed that these factors could move only within a country. The changes brought about by international trade were expected to be managed through the internal movement of labour and capital across different social classes and occupations (Sassen, 1988). Globalization, characterized by liberalization and privatization, has significantly transformed the global landscape, politically and economically. The political economic perspectives on labour migration emphasize the profound socio-economic changes triggered by globalization since the 1970s. These changes include rapid technological advancements, growing disparities in capital accumulation,

greater capital mobility, the rising influence of transnational corporations, and the expanding spatial division of labour (Rumsby, 2024). Similarly, global politics has been adapting to these shifts- relying on minimal intervention and less regulations on economic activities by the state. These changes have profoundly influenced regional intergovernmental cooperation. Over the past few decades, the trend of forming regional alliances for trade and commerce were gained momentum. The flow of capital across national borders has sparked discussions on economic transformations and the interconnected political relationships within regions. Consequently, production processes have transcended national boundaries, incorporating outsourcing, subcontracting, and the relocation of labour-intensive manufacturing to developing countries, where labour costs are comparatively lower (Rumsby, 2024). Migration of people within the territory is very important and rapidly practiced phenomenon in this instant; especially the labourer migration. Internal migration, which involves movement within a country's borders, significantly surpasses international migration in terms of the number of people affected (Choda, 2012; Deshingkar & Grimm, 2005). However, it does not attract the same level of attention from researchers, international organizations, or funding agencies, policy makers as cross-border migration does. Similarly, migration governance has found to failed or ill-able to manage the circumstances as it need to be. Many states of third world economies have no such policy to regulate or even to recognise the moves of labourer within the territory (Ahmed & Javed, 2017; Priyadarshini, 2020). Nevertheless, People in rural areas in the South Asian Countries mainly rely on agriculture for their livelihood, but agricultural land alone does not provide adequate income. The inability to earn a sufficient living encourages individuals to migrate within the country as a means of supporting their livelihood. This is too similar in rural areas of Bangladesh (Nabi, 1992; Mahmud, 2023) where two-third of its population are internal migrants (Alam & Mamun, 2022), Bhutan (Gosai & Sulewski, 2023; Choda, 2012; Gosaia & Sulewski, 2013), India (Bhukta, 2007; Keshri & Bhagat, 2013; Islam, Kashem, Morshed, Rahman, & Das, 2019) Pakistan (Ahmed & Javed, 2017; Gazdar, 2003) and many other countries.

Internal migration, as a complex phenomenon of research, is rarely studied in third-world countries due to incomplete and often unreliable and poor data set (Nabi, 1992; Bell, et al., 2015; Alam & Mamun, 2022; Irfan, 1986; Gosai & Sulewski, 2023; Choda, 2012). However, researches that explored the field with such limitations, often do micro level empirical studies focussing on optimistic livelihood strategy, benefit and development of individual and family (Haan, 2011; Bhagat, 2018; Deshingkar & Grimm, 2005), economic aspirations (Islam, Kashem, Morshed, Rahman, & Das, 2019), remittance (Czaika & Hass, 2017) and structural inequalities (Radhakrishnan, Saxena, & Sharma, 2019) which contribute to the spectrum of functionalist economic theory. On the other hand, study results supporting historical-structural paradigm, much similar to the Marxist perspective examines how dominant elites oppress and exploit marginalized and vulnerable groups (Jain & Sharma, 2018). It highlights how capital actively seeks to recruit and manipulate labourer for its benefit, while ideology and religion serve to legitimize this exploitation by portraying it as a natural and inevitable part of social structure (Hass, 2021). This theory often talked on trans-border migration rather migration occurred within national borders. The gap, which remain largely untouched within historical-structural perspective is to explore internal or domestic migration: which occur within national borders.

Workers on the move: Theories, Perspectives and Realities

Migration studies have remained largely under-theorized within social inquiry; most of the migration theories engrossed on solely generalised explanation of migration. (Mingot, 2023). Migration study has dignified with different empirical research on fact checking; but research on its development of theory building lack sufficient research. This is unfortunate, as a deeper understanding of migration can only emerge when it is viewed as an integral part of the broader social transformations. Much of the discourse on migration still relies, either implicitly or explicitly, on simplistic push-pull models or neo-classical assumptions of individual income maximization, despite their evident limitations in explaining the complex realities of migration patterns and processes (Hass, 2021). Migrants are individuals with actions, hope and goals. Along with migrants are an important capital input in economic system. When governments, at all geographical levels failed in governance the issue, it become more problematic and has negative outcomes in wellbeing. Impact of internal migration on economy, society and individual are gaining the focus in the academia. Ever since the down of mass migration, well over a century ago, scholars have striven to provide general explanations for the phenomenon of human migration, more or less abstracted from its specific manifestation. Efforts has made from sociology, geography and economics disciplinary field to provide general theoretical discourse. The source can be traced from Adam Smith, the celebrated author of the classic book '*The Wealth of Nations*' had advocated free mobility and circulation of labourer in both geographical as well as occupational terms. Labour should not be hindered to move from one location to another and from one occupation to another. Such reallocation of labourer today is considered as labourer migration (Rauhut, 2010; Zlotnik, 2005). Adam Smith had highlighted that the laws in England restricting the movement of the poor between localities and limiting their ability to change trades perpetuated regional inequalities. He argued for removing these barriers to enable workers to naturally migrate from low-wage to high-wage areas. Such mobility, he believed, would drive economic growth in both the workers' regions of origin and their destinations, while also improving the migrants' conditions. Smith strongly supported unrestricted international movement of capital, goods, and labour, emphasizing that free market forces would maximize economic growth and alleviate poverty (Zlotnik, 2005).

From an economic standpoint, migration serves as a means of redistributing labour. It involves the movement of individuals who are actively engaged in economic activities. Worker migration occurs due to variations in labour supply and demand across different regions. While economic factors play a significant role in migration decisions; yet, the non-economic factors also have driving contribution in labour migration. Economic theories of migration are often considered too limited, as they fail to fully explain movements driven by non-economic factors. Similar to economic theories of migration, sociological perspectives have increasingly acknowledged the family's crucial role as both a decision-making unit and an institution. Migration often includes entire family groups rather than just individual workers, as economic theories typically suggest. Demographers identify migration as the third key component of demographic change. The process of modernization is linked to the demographic transition, which involves a shift from high to low mortality and fertility rates. More recently, this transition has also come to include mobility changes, known as the mobility transition. Nevertheless, established theories portraits migration as a development and beneficial process; labour migration occurs due to a variety of reasons.

While it is true that economic factors often play a significant role as a primary driver of migration, with individuals typically moving to regions offering better living standards, this explanation alone is insufficient to understand migration patterns at all. It highlights the importance of factors such as nation-states, geographical proximity, institutions, social networks, and cultural and historical influences in shaping and creating new migration trends (Salt, 1987; Hass, 2010). Domestic migration in third world countries like India always been seen as development for both the origin and destination places. Because, economic progress involves changes in how resources are allocated. A crucial aspect of economic transformation is the continuing shift of production factors from the primary sector to the secondary and tertiary sectors. This movement of resources, including labour and capital, often requires geographic relocation due to imbalances such as shortages or surpluses, often described as demand and supply. In this context, migration plays a significant role by moving surplus labour from rural agricultural areas to urban industrial sectors, contributing to economic development (Irfan, 1986). However, this view often misguided to understand the facts; *first*, the moving workforce is always not the surplus segment of rural areas; and *second*, development in general sense is a complex and multifaceted process that requires structural social, political, and institutional reforms, which cannot be achieved solely through individual migration or remittances. While migration and remittances can bring significant benefits to individuals, households, and communities, they are not a solution to deeper structural developmental challenges. Without active state intervention and comprehensive social and economic reforms, migration and remittances alone are unlikely to drive sustainable development (Hass, 2010). Because, migrants are not equally flutters from the origin place and not evenly employed in destination place, immediate effect of this is to increase inequality (Echeverria, 2020). Labour migration has a great potential to development, if it can regulate through proper governance and policy implementation. Migration and economic growth continuously influence each other, creating an ongoing dynamic relationship. The impact of human mobility on society and the economy is largely shaped by the movement of human resources and income, as well as the adjustments required in both sending and receiving regions. The scale, composition, and regional or sectorial distribution of these labour flows influence the structure of labour markets, productivity levels, and even technological advancements. Additionally, income and capital transfers, particularly through remittances, affect consumption patterns, investment decisions, labour-leisure preferences, and human capital development (Irfan, 1986). Structural imbalance often placed, but market equilibrium theory offers it as an equal balancing of labourer between demand and supply; to some extent it is true, but result varies based on the perspective of investigations. Perspective of investigations to mean, what the study tries to reveal- not being biased; the lens of investigation on which ends the researcher approaching. The economic perspective on migration that support demand and supply theory for mobility, in which another perspective remains silent, that is the mobility and hierarchical placement of laborer in the labor market during that trajectory, between the demand and supply binary. However, liberal thinkers often made a mistake or consciously ignore the issue of exploitation of labourer in this process. They always advocated labourer migration as a means of benefit and development. Recent argument for a theoretical explanation on Labourer migration has developed that, whether the moves are voluntary or forced migration- gaining momentum. Taking a view of 'Aspirations-Capabilities Framework' of migration (Carling, 2002; Hass, 2021); migration is driven by individuals'

aspirations and their ability to migrate within perceived geographical opportunity structures. Aspirations for migration are shaped by broader life goals and the available opportunities in different locations. The capability to migrate depends on both positive liberties ('freedom to' migrate) and negative liberties ('freedom from' constraints on migration) (Hass, 2021).

Despite extensive theoretical discussions from various disciplinary perspectives in the field of migration studies, certain aspects still remain underexplored or lack sufficient theorization to cover up labourer migration occurred within a national boundary. In this context, we adopt the '*aspiration-capability framework*' to examine internal labourer migration through a different lens. Here we would specifically emphasize '*aspiration*' with sociological insights and '*capabilities*' from a political-economic standpoint. Our analysis will explore labourer migration as an '*aspiration-capability dynamic in capitalist accumulation*.'

Labourer Migration as aspiration-capability dynamic in capitalist accumulation

The desire to migrate is a necessary first step in the migration process, and overcoming the obstacles to migration is essential for it to actually occur. Although migration and non-migration represent two aspects of the same issue, but the later has lack sufficient explanations. Traditional migration theories- apart from a few exceptions, has largely looked explanations for why people choose to migrate (Carling, 2002). In the labourer migration study, this question has been answered with more or less similar explanations. Especially in the context of internal labourer migration, it is a political economic consequence; labourer moves while incapable to sustain their life at villages or localities, to find better option of earnings to sustain desired livelihood. The aspiration-capabilities framework projects desire to move as '*aspiration*' and ability to overcome the obstacles to migration is '*capability*'. Nevertheless, decision to migrate is not the aspiration itself, as aspiration-capability framework advocated; rather, the '*aspiration*' is to secure a better livelihood. When individuals find themselves unable to achieve this aspiration while staying at their home region, they seek to enhance their capabilities by relocating. Migration, therefore, become a means to expand their opportunities and fulfil their aspirations of a better life. Capability under democratic polity is fundamentally political-economic manifestation confronted to the individuals. It refers the ability to do something, which inherently involves economic support within a given political structure. The aspiration to achieve a dignified life and economic security remains constant, but the ability or capability to fulfil that aspiration is shaped by broader political and economic structures (Sen, 1999). Economics facilitates human collaboration in production by providing the necessary resources, where people manage subsistence; meanwhile politics establishes the framework within which this collaboration operates. The development of capabilities depends on both an individual's economic stability and the extent to which the political system supports sustainable economic growth. Enhancing capabilities can lead to higher aspirations. As societies undergo social transformation, typically linked to capitalist development and modernization, individual preferences evolve. This progression often results in growing materialistic and consumerist desires, reflecting broader changes in societal expectations and economic opportunities (Hass, 2021). As we have backed earlier, we will examine this aspiration-capabilities through a different lens. Actually, we set to explore *aspiration- (in)-capability* with in the capitalist accumulation.

Capitalism and Migration: Labour Mobility, Exploitation, and Accumulation

Most of the South Asian countries achieved their independence from the colonial rule and developed their own structure of polity during transition phase of capitalism through the globalization. Capitalism refers to an economic system where markets, competition, private ownership, and individual economic initiatives are essential. This model also known as market capitalism, varies across nations in terms of government involvement through regulations, taxation, and public expenditure. Capitalism is never confined to a single nation, as global markets provide numerous opportunities for profitable trade and exchange (Wolf, 2023). So, the countries steps with to develop economic to political structure following the path of globalization. Where, bourgeoisie relies on state power to control wages, always attempted to ensure and fix them within the levels that sustain profitability. It also uses state influence to extend the working day and maintain the worker's dependence, securing a steady supply of labour under conditions favourable to capital accumulation. State expenditure serves as a key driver of capitalist accumulation. It stimulates economic activity both directly, by creating demand through government purchases, and indirectly, by generating employment and income, which further boosts demand. This, in turn, encourages private investment (Chandrasekhar & Ghosh, 2023). Capitalism not only endorse private investment; it also relies on private ownership on means of production. Capitalism through globalization intends to limitless expansion of economic activities and placed all institutional relations in a more competitive market relation. The hidden language of this effort relies on maximum extraction of profit and capital accumulation.

Taking reference from the history, unlike in feudalism, where the slave owner or feudal lord exercises control over the labourer through bondage and coercion, capitalism presents a different dynamic. Here, the worker is regarded as the owner of their labour power and has the freedom to choose their employer. However, since labour power represents the ability to work, the labourer must also be both willing and in a position to sell this capacity to the capitalist in exchange for wages; otherwise, they have nothing to arrange substance just because ownership of social production belongs to bourgeoisies. Migration has intensive relation with capitalism since its early days of wends. The capitalist social system accelerates the migration process in general and labourer migration in particular. Capitalism breaks down the feudal system for its own necessities and frees up people from feudal slavery, settlement Act and poor laws to work in industry at the age of industrial revolution. Though migration also had existence in feudal society, but it was posing a different character due to its agricultural economic activity and barrier imposed by the then social order. Being free up from feudal slavery workers got the chance of choice where they use to work. Though it was not similar as migration is today, it was a perfect mobility of labourer between different occupations. Migrant labourers are vital to capitalist accumulation as they provide cheap labour, essential for maximizing profits. In a capitalist system, labour is treated as a commodity, workers create wealth but do not own it. Capitalists reinvest their profits to maintain accumulation, relying on migrant workers who face low wages and precarious conditions, enabling maximum surplus value extraction. Although they are the primary wealth producers, labourer remain deprived of its benefits. The labour market, controlled by capitalist interests, offers slightly higher wages than their hometowns but lacks fair bargaining power due to weak union representation. Crony capitalism favours monopoly capitalists over labourers, with weak labour laws and poor enforcement allowing unchecked exploitation.

Following economic policy reforms, there has been a substantial overhaul of agricultural, industrial, and trade sectors, primarily geared toward integrating the national economy with global markets. These reforms were designed to reduce restrictions and promote the free operation of market forces. A central feature of this transition has been the weakened role of the state, with a strong focus on deregulating key economic activities such as production and trade (Harvey, 2003). However, its impact on the rural economy has been deeply exploitative and uneven. Capitalism has reshaped rural life by creating artificial crises across economic, environmental, and social dimensions, compelling rural populations to migrate under distress (Breman, 1996). This trend is especially prominent in countries of the Global South, where rural populations are increasingly dispossessed and absorbed into precarious urban labour markets (Harvey, 2003). Migration may open new vistas for many, but along with it opens a new and more structured way of exploitation. Those who takes part on it has been entered into a more exploitative work relation from a less exploitative one. Yet people participate on it; question remains why? Aspiration-capability is one of the explanations to this. Studies have proven lack of employment, insufficient wage, overalls high cost of livelihood and incapability to arrange subsistence, distress people to relocate to fulfil their aspirations. Migrants and non-migrants are the two side of the same coin to understand the fact. Migrants and non-migrant belong from the same region operated under similar market relations and bear the same cost for livelihood. But decision differs on between to move or not to move. This is a sociological act of choice varies- from individual to individual due to divers' reasons. Family support, educational achievements, peer groups, kinship, social status etc. contributes on shaping the 'social aspiration' as well as individual aspiration; aspiration unconditionally attracts capability. And capability varies and inherently connected with economic structure governed under very political structure. Capitalist accumulation is fundamentally driven by the pursuit of profit maximization, often structuring economic activities, particularly production and commerce, according to the convenience and interests of capital. Internal labour migration, especially to distant urban centres, is integrally linked to this broader lucidity of accumulation. While urban areas may have an existing pool of local labourers, employers often prefer hiring migrant workers. This preference is not incidental; it aligns with the imperative to reduce production costs and enhance profitability. Migrant workers are typically willing to work for lower wages than their local counterparts. Moreover, employing local labourers at higher wages can generate upward pressure on wage structures across the labour market, creating a ripple effect that increases the overall cost of production. Capitalist economies, concerned with maximizing surplus value, seek to avoid such wage escalations, as they pose a potential constraint on the process of capital accumulation. Capitalism has significantly restructured the rural economy, often resulting in what can be termed as artificial market failures (Patnaik, 2007). These failures are not accidental but are shaped by policies and practices that prioritize capital over community welfare. As a consequence, the cost of living in rural areas has increased, while local economic opportunities have diminished, thereby weakening individuals' capabilities to sustain livelihoods within their own communities. Simultaneously, a social imaginary is constructed, through media, migration networks, and policy discourses that portrays urban or distant destinations as spaces of prosperity and opportunity (Haan, 1999). This narrative reinforces and shapes the aspirations of rural populations, making migration appear not only necessary but also desirable. Thus, both the

erosion of rural capability and the construction of urban aspiration work in tandem to feed the cycle of labour migration under capitalist accumulation (Harvey, 2003; Breman, 1996).

Conclusion

Labourer migration, when examined through the lens of the aspiration-capability framework, reveals a deeper structural dynamic rooted in the political economy of capitalist accumulation. While traditional migration theories have focused largely on individual decisions to move, this analysis highlights that such decisions are not isolated choices but responses to systemic pressures generated by capitalist restructuring. In the context of the Global South, where neoliberal reforms have weakened the rural economy and dismantled protective state mechanisms, migration becomes less of an opportunity and more of a compulsion. Capitalism, in its quest for endless profit accumulation, manufactures artificial crises on economic, ecological, and social that push individuals out of their localities in search of livelihood. The aspiration to achieve a dignified life and economic security remains constant, but the ability or capability to fulfil that aspiration is shaped by broader political and economic structures. These structures are inherently unequal, privileging capital over labour, and profit over people. Migration, therefore, is not merely a movement across space but a socio-economic act of survival within an exploitative system. Migrant workers embody the contradictions of capitalism, they are essential to the process of accumulation, yet are systematically dispossessed and excluded from its benefits. The divergence between migrants and non-migrants, despite originating in similar contexts, underscores the uneven distribution of capabilities shaped by factors like education, social networks, and class status. Ultimately, understanding labourer migration requires moving beyond individualistic frameworks to confront the systemic realities of capitalist exploitation. It demands a rethinking of how aspirations are formed, how capabilities are denied, and how structural inequalities force mobility as a means of survival. Addressing these challenges requires not only policy interventions but a critical examination of the economic model that sustains and reproduces such inequality.

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