



Language barriers and post-migration workplace challenges among migrant labourers in Delhi/NCR

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Abstract

This research focuses on the impact of language barriers and broader issues in migrants' lives following migration on migrant labourers in Delhi/NCR. The analysis is done based on a cross-sectional survey of 384 migrant workers who were selected by using multistage non-probability sampling technique where convenience samples and snowballing techniques are used. Nine measures for language difficulties and ten for post-migration problems were used in a semi-structured questionnaire. The language-barrier scale had very high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.978$) with a moderate average intensity (grand mean = 2.81). The language domain had the highest language-related mean (3.53), while employment, social integration, isolation and adjustment converged around 2.61–2.72. The general difficulties of the post-migration context, however, consistently had high difficulty (grand mean = 4.15; $\alpha = 0.882$). Issues mentioned by the respondents were related to low income, saving capacity, delay in salary payments, insecure job, workplace discrimination, social isolation, communication, overcrowded dwelling, lack of services and hard-to-pay health services. The results indicate that language is not the only barrier that prevents children from accessing the particular program. Multilingualism is crucial to effective workforce management, alongside wage security, equitable employment practices and a supportive working environment, including accommodation, healthcare and social integration.

Keywords: Migrant labourers, language barriers, workforce management, Delhi/NCR, employment insecurity, social inclusion, migrant welfare

Introduction

While migration is essential to the operation of the large city economy, the process can often involve migrants to work in new economies, new neighbourhoods and new institutions. Delhi/NCR is a particularly important setting both for its size and because it has a fairly large number of skilled migrant workers in construction and the service sector, many of whom, however, speak a range of languages and have adopted various forms of culture. Delhi is heavily oriented toward attracting migrants for employment^[1, 3] and people move here for a variety of reasons, including employment, household, education and other factors, and stay for widely varying lengths of time.

Migration has more than a labour supply element that is important for management. Wages, work schedules, job-related safety information, as well as grievance procedures and employment benefits must be communicated to workers with varied language backgrounds, limited formal education, etc., by the employer and/or the contractor. Meanwhile, migrant also is likely to experience poor compensation, insecure job, delayed payment, inadequate housing, adverse health care and social isolation. Such challenges can impact productivity, absenteeism, retention, and OHS and IR. Migration management is thus a public-policy challenge, as well as a human-resource and organisational-management issue.

Special attention needs to be focused on language as this can be an access barrier. Employers who are not fluent in the principal language of the destination country might be unable to communicate with the workers, perform as a supervisor, access public services or socialise with the

workers. But it's unlikely to be even. Co-workers or contractors might provide support for migrant workers, the concept of relatedness might be part of a migrant's support network, or multilingualism that sees the loss and reduction of language in some areas but with distinct importance in others could be an important source of support. The present study explores this imbalance in studying a brief seven-item language-barrier measure in conjunction with a longer ten-item post-migration challenges measure.

Review of literature

Communication, networks and destination conditions have always been conceptualized as a component of the migration process in migration theory. Lee's framework recognizes intervening barriers between origin to destination, which can include institutional or social barriers to adapting to the journey's destination after transition^[5]. Other types of internal migration studies in India also reveal that linguistic diversity and labour-market differences, and state boundaries can influence the flow of migrants and their choice of destinations^[4, 14].

Recent labour research has focused on how employment insecurity can be a cause of vulnerability when coupled with living situations and access to support systems. The India Employment Report 2024 shares that employment-based migration is a prominent feature with wider issues of finding productive employment opportunities^[1]. ILO's study on internal women migrant workers in the garment sector in India also focuses on the need for gender responsive labour governance, facility for safe labour mobility and protection from exploitative mobility^[2]. In the current pandemic

situation, Choudhari ^[6] highlighted the financial, occupational and psychosocial vulnerability of the internal migrant workers population in India.

There is corroborative evidence for a cumulative-stressor perspective from the migration literature more broadly. The authors of Mak, Zimmerman and Roberts ^[7] discovered that labour migrants can face stressors of workplace, family, recruitment, environmental and legal nature. Gunn, Somani and Muntaner ^[8] highlighted barriers to migrant access of health systems and emphasized an increased research involvement in migrant health. Studies on circular and short-term migration in India also suggest insecure work, employment situation in the rural areas and sectoral concentration relate to the quality of the experience of migration ^[9,10,15].

The literature also gives evidence of needing to read or understand language in the context of a wider framework of settlement circumstances and occupations or conditions of employment. It may take a high level of ability in English at work to have a positive effect, but having very low linguistic proficiency in the local language in the home can mean having a lower ability to have the strongest impact when the worker needs health care, legal assistance or assistance with a formal grievance. The finding in the present study is empirical test of the aforementioned proposition in the context of Delhi/NCR.

Research problem

People migrate because of particular barriers, but these barriers are often considered as a monolith that covers all situations alike. This paper is based on the doctoral survey, and the scale results of this survey show an apparent paradox: expectations of moderate and uneven levels of language problems, but near-universal levels of problems with post-migration aspects of employment, finance, housing, healthcare and communication. The question that must now be answered is where is the language most salient and how must the significance of language be understood, contextualized with the broader set of work-related and settlement issues faced by migrant labourers.

Research objectives

To assess the extent to which language barriers affect migrant labourers after migration to Delhi/NCR.

To identify the major employment, financial, social, housing and healthcare problems experienced after migration.

To obtain workforce-management and/or policy implications from the intersection of language and non-language challenges.

Research hypotheses

H1: There are migrant-language barriers to work, service, communication and social integration, but vary in degree across these domains.

H2: There are significant fees and employment security issues, discrimination, social isolation, housing, basic amenities and healthcare issues for migrant labourers after migration.

Research methodology

A cross-sectional analytical design based on primary data of 384 migrant labourers working in Delhi/NCR is used for the study. A multistage selection of NCR districts, areas that

include development/destination and infrastructure activities and work sites were initially used for the design of the fields. We then used convenience and snowball sampling to recruit respondents. The included sites were thirty-two, and migrant labourers surveyed at each of the sites were 12. Information was gathered by in-depth interviews using a semi-structured questionnaire in 2023-24 and analysed with IBM SPSS Statistics 25.

The language barrier scale consisted of 7 five-point items: Difficulty in finding work due to language, problems with everyday communication, limited access to basic services, challenges in social integration, social isolation, delayed adaptation in the workplace/community, misunderstandings. Daily expenses, saving, delayed salary, and secure job, discrimination, social isolation, communication, housing, basic amenities and health care were the ten items included in the post-migration problems scale. The frequencies, percentages, internal consistency reliability, item level ANOVA and inter item correlations presented in the doctoral dataset were employed in the analysis reported here.

Data analysis and interpretation

Language barriers: moderate overall, but concentrated in particular domains

The language scales are highly internally reliable (7 items). Cronbach's alpha is 0.978 and the standardised alpha is 0.979. Reliability was established using the inter-item correlations ranging from 0.745 to 0.964, suggesting that questionnaires that target one type of language-related problem are likely to be experienced by other language-related problems. Scale mean is 19.65, with a grand item mean of 2.81 for seven items (across scores). The results of the ANOVA across the items yield an F value of 311.877 at $p < 0.001$, indicating that there is a significant difference between the level of difficulty of the seven language dimensions.

Access to vital services is the primary language related issue. Ease of access in the local language to health care or legal services has a mean of 3.53. Lower are the following: difficulty securing a job (2.61); communication (2.72); delayed adjustment (2.71); social integration (2.70); misunderstandings at work or in their community (2.67); and language-related isolation (2.71). This distribution suggests that in its interaction with the world of work, and in the general daily contact with people, language does not present an absolute obstacle; instead, its impact is greater when migrants seek formal or essential services.

Table 1: Language-barrier item statistics

Language-barrier item	Mean	SD	Agree/fully agree
Difficulty securing a job	2.61	0.872	25.6%
Daily communication challenges	2.72	0.972	35.4%
Limited access to essential services	3.53	0.771	35.7%
Difficulty integrating socially	2.70	1.031	26.3%
Isolation due to language	2.71	1.040	27.1%
Delayed adjustment	2.71	1.029	26.8%
Workplace/community misunderstandings	2.67	1.005	24.7%

In fact, close to two thirds disagreed that language had hindered them in landing a job, while a similar percentage did not believe that language differences have considerably

hampered integration into society. About 25-33% of respondents did however report actual issues with language in these areas. For essential services, 35.7% agreed or strongly agreed that limited local-language skills kept people from accessing these services, while 64.3% of the respondents agreed with the neutral option. The results support targeted language support over the view of language exclusion in the life of all migrant laborers.

Problems after the migration: multidimensional and heavy burden

The overall scale for all 10 of the problems following migration has a much higher degree of difficulty. The internal consistency is good with Cronbach's alpha of 0.882 (0.894 for the standardised items). Scale mean = 41.53 and

Grand item mean = 4.15. The analysis of variance (ANOVA) across the ten problems shows that there are differences between the demands in intensity in the problems but that the intensity of all of them is quite high ($F = 21.919, p < 0.001$).

All item means range from 3.98 to 4.21. The highest means are Workplace discrimination and social isolation (4.21 each). All have between 4.20 and 4.60 as a mean value with communication problems being consistent at 4.20, inadequate/overcrowded housing being the same as 4.20, and unaffordable/unavailable healthcare also being at 4.20. Difficulty saving (4.19) and the difficulty in getting stable employment (4.19) both are scored a 4.19. Difficulty dealing with daily costs due to low wages 3.98, lack of basic amenities 4.15 and delayed salary/payment 4.01.

Table 2: Post-migration problem item statistics

Post-migration problem	Mean	SD	Agreement pattern
Managing daily expenses due to low wages	3.98	0.203	99.0% agree
Difficulty saving after basic needs	4.19	0.468	99.0% agree/fully agree
Delayed salary or payments	4.01	0.697	81.3% agree/fully agree
Difficulty getting stable employment	4.19	0.468	99.0% agree/fully agree
Workplace discrimination or bias	4.21	0.432	99.0% agree/fully agree
Social isolation	4.21	0.432	99.0% agree/fully agree
Communication difficulties	4.20	0.471	99.0% agree/fully agree
Inadequate/overcrowded housing	4.20	0.471	99.0% agree/fully agree
Lack of basic amenities	4.15	0.540	93.8% agree/fully agree
Healthcare unaffordable/unavailable	4.20	0.471	99.0% agree/fully agree

Discussion on results

The results can be synthesized to understand that migrants' vulnerability in Delhi/NCR is multi-faceted. Language is important but isn't everything that workers experience due to language. Majorities seemed to be rarely in agreement that language was a major barrier when it came to language in the context of employment or social integration in the dedicated language scale. This could be due to adaptability of migrant networks, pattern of extended use of Hindi and other contact languages, or to the fact of mediation of communication in the workplace by supervisors or co-workers. Kone *et al.* ^[4] show linguistic and state barriers affecting internal migration in India but the present results indicate that internal barriers are not uniform after migrants arrive at their destination.

The latter (stronger effect on access to essential services) requires managerial intervention. Precise communication plays a greater role in functions like healthcare and legal assistance, formal grievance channels and administration. While a person might be familiar with enough words from his or her occupation, he or she might not know all the words in a medical condition, in a legal document, or be able to manoeuvre through a government service. This is similar to the migrant-health literature that focuses on communication and access to institutions as key factors which influence the use of services ^[8].

The post-migration scale indicates a second level of vulnerability at a far greater scale. Financial difficulty, lack of job security, inability to receive pay punctually, discrimination, lack of social supports are all reported at exceedingly high levels, with that of poor housing and poor healthcare being sub-50%. These results are consistent with those of other labour-migration contexts, in which various work, environmental and social issues can interact in negative ways ^[7]. The inter-item correlations for the

doctoral sample also confirm this: The level of employment insecurity correlates highly with difficulties with saving, the level of discrimination correlates high with social isolation, and the housing is inadequate relates closely with lack of basic amenities.

The significance for practice is that communication interventions are not sufficient solutions to address migrant-worker issues. Being offered a multilingual induction and a translated notice is useful, but will be of limited impact with delayed wages, poor accommodation and/or workers feeling discriminated against. Human resources systems must address migrant's welfare as a first-class employment-quality concern.

Managerial implications

There are some action steps that employers and contractors can take to make the findings work for them. First, all the important information about the job should be presented in easily-understood language – in the work language or, if possible, in the main work languages. Oral and written notification of wage rates, overtime, deductions, safety and grievance procedures and emergency contacts should be provided. Employers should consider using a multilingual worker representative or trained peer facilitator to provide communication assistance rather than replacing employers' formal obligations ^[14].

Second, there is a need to tighten up the controls of wage administration. Given the number of people stoing difficulties and reporting that payments are delayed, it seems fair to say that regularity of payment itself is a welfare intervention. Employers should ensure workers are able to easily access their earnings, deductions and ensure their payment is accurate by using documented wage cycles, electronic payment if available, and payslip information.

Third, ensuring a respectful workplace and anti-discrimination practices should make explicit reference to migrant status, language and place of origin. Supervisors to be trained in stereotypes and unequal treatment and grievance procedures available for workers of limited literacy.

Fourth, in circumstances where migrant workers provide workers are employed, companies should consider housing and health insurance as problems related to employee stability. Where they are not specifically offered, employers may keep a register of affordable housing options and organise safe transport from worksites and links with the local health clinic. This can minimize absenteeism, health shocks and turnover.

Last, but not least, social integration is in focus. Make orientation of workers, peer groups, recreational activities and access to counselling happen to minimise isolation. These practices are not tools for replacing fair wages and secure employment, but one step towards developing social support in a new place of work.

Policy implications

Employer-level measures should be complemented by portable and accessible services offered by public agencies. Social-protection and health + food security benefits must go with the workers. There should be multi-lingual information provided in the service centres at the major labour-receiving areas regarding labour rights, health, housing and legal assistance. The pursuit of affordable rental properties, as well as solutions for disposing of trash and access to water and power for temporary employees, are also necessary for urban planning in high-migration regions. It is also important to recognise that there are no homogenous migrant workers and this poses an issue with policy. There is a great deal of variation in the language findings: some workers say they have less language difficulty, other workers say that there are major language difficulties. Support in the areas of language and interpretation then can be provided via work sites, skill centres, health facilities and community organisations in stages rather than in one specific way or through a 'one size fits all' program.

Limitations

This study builds on a non-probability sample of respondents, and does not claim to be representative of the overall migrant labour force in Delhi/NCR. The sample has been predominately male with differences in experience for women migrant workers. All because the cross-sectional design did not facilitate causal inferences and all possible responses were self-reported. The high correlation of some items further indicates the possibility of an overlapping construction which should be explored in future studies by performing factor analysis and/or structural equation modelling analysis. Future studies should be conducted in comparison with other sectors, other languages, lengths of stay and with different employers and they provide a linkage between problems workers report with the actual indicators, including wage records, housing condition and utilization of health services.

Conclusion

The study shows that language barriers are indeed exists but are differential among migrant labourers living in the

Delhi/NCR. They seem to have the greatest impact on access to basic services, and have a more variable effect on working, social participation and routine communication. The wider post-migration context is far less benign with high wage pressures, difficulties of saving, late payments, insecure work, discrimination, isolation, poor housing, poor amenities and health barriers. Now the management lesson is obvious. No integration for migrant workers can be simplified to the translation of the language. Multilingual communication is a component of good workforce management that needs to be reinforced with a reliable payroll system, equitable treatment, safe working environment, housing and health care assistance, as well as user-friendly grievance mechanisms. This combination is important because migrant labour, when managed comprehensively, can then not only be a flexible source of supply to what urban business needs but can also become a secure, stable, well treated and reliable source of labour to the productivity of an organisation.

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