

A state of migration

- Khushboo Garg and Anjali Taneja

Karnataka—the seventh most urbanised state in India—has witnessed significant urbanisation in recent decades. From 2001 to 2011, the proportion of the rural population shifted from 66% to 61%, and that of the urban population shifted from 34% to 39%.

While urbanisation symbolises economic growth, its implications for the overall development of the country, particularly in rural areas, should be carefully considered. Further, similar to the rest of India, Karnataka is experiencing the impacts of climate change. Over the past decade, extreme weather events have resulted in the loss of life and critical infrastructure. Triggered by these challenges, there has been a noticeable trend in the migration of residents from north to south Karnataka.

Age and gender factors: Data on migration during 2011–2021, based on the state’s recorded birth and death numbers, provide insights into net migration flows in Karnataka. During this period, the state witnessed the highest inflow of working-age population (15–64 years), possibly owing to the diverse employment opportunities.

Over the years, migration has been predominantly observed within two age groups, 1–4 and 5–14 years, indicating household relocations for better healthcare and education facilities. As shown in the figure below, a gender disaggregation of the population shows a male-dominated migration trend, reinforcing the traditional role of men as primary breadwinners who relocate to financially support their families.

Geographical factors: Our estimates reveal a distinct outflow from the agrarian districts of North Karnataka, such as Raichur and Kalaburagi, to the coastal and southern regions, such as Udupi, Dakshina Kannada, and Bengaluru. North Karnataka, situated in a dry agro-climatic zone, is particularly climate-vulnerable due to its reliance on rainfed agriculture. In the last decade, the region has witnessed unpredictable monsoons and climate extremes such as droughts and floods. The gendered migration patterns indicate a less-known aspect of climate adaptation, which is the immobility of women and the elderly in response to climate change.

This north-to-south migration in Karnataka could also be attributed to job opportunities—a trend particularly evident in 2020. The nationwide pandemic-induced lockdown, which forced migrants to move back to their hometowns, caused a reverse migration in most districts, but Dakshina Kannada experienced a heavy outflow.

Climate and urbanisation interplay: The interplay between climate and urbanisation in Karnataka is quite evident. Extreme climate events over the past decade have disrupted normal temperature and rainfall patterns, impacting agricultural production. In 2023, the state witnessed a monsoon deficiency of 34%, increasing the risk of extreme drought conditions. Rural communities, being more vulnerable to such climate risks, often seek refuge in urban areas.

Meanwhile, the regional disparity in urbanisation across the state highlights the differences in development between the primarily agrarian north, struggling with challenges in sustaining livelihoods, and the thriving south, with better infrastructure and employment opportunities,

especially in the construction sector. This contrast likely drives the north-to-south migration in Karnataka.

Thus, while climate events push rural inhabitants to urban areas for refuge, the urban-rural divide in development aggravates the phenomenon of migration.

Balanced rural-urban interdependencies are the way forward. India accounts for 17%–18% of the world's total population, while its global urban share is almost 11%–12%. Despite the opportunities for economic growth, urbanisation-induced migration strains urban infrastructure and resources, exacerbating the risk of urban poverty.

Therefore, prioritising self-reliance and sustainability in rural areas is vital for ensuring food security and providing basic facilities for all, in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals. Focusing on micro, small, and medium enterprises can help transform rural areas into dynamic entrepreneurial hubs to promote local production and employment.

Considering Karnataka's intra-regional differences, a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to climate action might be inefficient. A decentralised approach must be adopted, giving districts the autonomy to collaborate and devise a holistic solution to coerced rural migration. In cases where migration is considered a governance issue, it must be tackled from an infrastructural development standpoint. Research and development efforts are needed for a better understanding of spatial inequality (the nature of migration flows, the origin and destination locations of migrations, and the socio-economic impacts of these movements). This would require updated state-level census data, which could help dissect rural-urban transitions.

Regenerating the rural economy is paramount amid climate-induced and urbanisation-driven migration. Promoting balanced interdependencies between rural and urban areas is critical for sustainable development. By investing in natural resource conservation and infrastructure development in the rural sector, equitable growth could be ensured, maintaining a balanced flow of migration.

(The writers work at the Centre for Study of Science, Technology, and Policy, a research-based think tank)