

Peak Oil and Reverse Migration in India

T. Vijayendra

What is peak oil?

Peak oil is the simplest label for the problem of energy resource depletion, or more specifically, the peak in global oil production. Oil is a finite, non-renewable resource, one that has powered phenomenal economic and population growth over the last century and a half. The rate of oil 'production', meaning extraction and refining (currently about 84 million barrels/day), has grown almost every year of the last century. Once we have used up about half of the original reserves, oil production becomes ever more likely stop growing and begins a terminal decline, hence 'peak'. The peak in oil production does not signify 'running out of oil', but it does mean the end of cheap oil, as we switch from a buyers' to a sellers' market. For economies leveraged on ever increasing quantities of cheap oil, the consequences may be dire. Without significant successful cultural reform, severe economic and social consequences seem inevitable.

From all the evidence available, peak oil has already occurred. It is affecting our society through shortages of petroleum products and all round increase in prices. In this article we will specifically look at reverse migration in India, though in some cases such as coal mining rural migration will continue to increase.

Migration and Reverse Migration

We will consider migration under following heads:

1. Normal/voluntary rural urban migration
2. Seasonal Migration
3. Forced Migration (Regulated)
4. Forced Migration (unregulated)
5. White Collar
6. Warlord, brigands and floating population

Normal/Voluntary Rural Urban Migration

India has an urban population of 300 million, greater than the population of USA or for that matter greater than any country except China. They live in a total of 400 urban agglomerates. 180 million people live in 35 cities that have a population greater than a million. The three metros, Mumbai, Kolkata and Delhi have more than 10 million whereas Hyderabad and Bengaluru have more than 5 million.

Most of urban population growth, apart from normal population growth has been contributed by rural urban migration in the twentieth century. It has been distributed over industry (jute and cotton to begin with and later in the manufacturing sector), mining, service (including transport-such as rickshaw pullers, tongawallahs and now drivers). Very often the new migrant begins in service sector and then some of them move onto industry. Some of the 'higher' jobs are obtained by the second generation and the third, fourth and so on. These are not in that sense migrants. Tea and coffee estates are special cases of rural-rural migration of permanent nature.

Reverse migration has been mainly due to 'reforms' or 'structural changes' in capital after the post liberalisation era in the 1990s. However even before that the traditional sectors of cotton and jute went through these processes and a large number of workers migrated back to rural areas. In West Bengal this process started even earlier, after the recession of 66-67 and continued through 'flight of capital' during the first decade of the left regime.

Post liberalisation saw a massive decline of manufacturing sector all over the country and job losses. However by this time the capacity of rural areas to take them has shrunk because the reforms have affected the rural areas too with large scale farmers suicide being reported from large areas throughout the country. True service, IT and garment export sectors increased but in terms of number of persons employed there was net a decline.

With Peak Oil there will be a decline in road transport industry leading to all round recession and job loss. It will affect all sectors. However reverse migration will occur only among those sections of population who have a relatively secure base in the rural areas. These will be largely those who had permanent jobs in the organised sector. Even then the stress in rural areas will be great in terms of water and cooking fuel. Massive transformation in agricultural practices will occur. Chemical fertilisers and pesticides will vanish rapidly. ground water will be unavailable because of fall in level and lack of electricity for the pumps. Draught animals will increase. As we said above some migration will continue in power sector, particularly in coal.

Seasonal Migration

Both rural-urban and rural-rural migration occur. As a rule almost all first generation migrant visit their villages during harvest/festival season. The bulk of seasonal migration is in construction industry with specific groups like brick kiln workers having a fairly well established calendar. Rural-rural migration takes place from Bihar, U. P., Chhatisgarh, Orissa etc. to farms in Panjab and Haryana.

In post liberalisation period there has been a boom in this sort of migration first due to boom in the construction industry and secondly the 'push' factor in the rural sector increased considerably due to adverse terms of trade in rural-urban exchange.

Post Peak oil will definitely witness a huge decline in this kind of migration. The down trend in the construction industry is already visible. With the tendency of 'relocalisation' of agriculture due to increase in transport costs rural-rural migration will also decline. In terms of number this will be in terms of millions and will pose the biggest challenge to the rural sector.

Forced Migration (Regulated)

These are what has come to be known as 'development oustees'. That is they are those rural people whose lands have been acquired for some development project (dams, mines, firing range, industry etc.) and have been given a 'rehabilitation package'. These can include land, money, job or being relocated in an urban slum. In practically all cases these people have to leave their homes against their wishes (hence forced) but some semblance of compensation is tried (hence regulated). In most cases their lives are shattered, they face economic, social,

cultural and health insecurities and end up living at a level far below what they were used to live.

Post liberalisation has seen a dramatic increase in their numbers because the state got enormous liberty added by the middle class consent and the parliament and the judiciary being silent/vocal supporter of this gross violation of human rights.

Post Peak Oil probably will see a decrease in their numbers as many of the projects will simply get abandoned and new projects will not even get a head start. Except in the power sector, especially in coal sector.

Forced Migration (Unregulated)

These are actually results of 'resource wars' in the post Peak Oil era and will increase with increasing ferocity and human misery. Salwa Judam is a prime example. As is well known it is not just a vigilante movement to fight the Naxalites and the State outsourcing its police needs. It is to control and use the natural resources of the region. The tribals living in the camps or worse still who had to migrate to Andhra Pradesh are war refugees, except that they are not being recognised so and they get no relief. Now on there will not be any rehabilitation package but just war on people to get access to mineral resources, be it coal, iron ore, uranium, nickel and copper and so on. These all have peaked or about to peak and there will be a desperate struggle to get control of them.

White Collar

These are not so large in number but are highly visible and will suffer in a big way in the post Peak Oil era. Their numbers dramatically increased due to boom in the IT sector and finance sector and sub prime consumerism a la USA. A huge sub prime consumer economy came into being in the metros. So salesmen, shops and malls, restaurants came into being. They will face a collapse and they will have nowhere to go. Foreclosures, bankruptcies and suicides will increase with the associated miseries.

Warlords, Brigands and Floating Population

Unless planned corrective measure are taken right away and a ordered transition to a low energy consumption society is planned and executed the future looks very bleak. And there is no sign that either the Indian state or the civil society is even aware of the problem. So the immediate future looks grim. As Irfan Habib described in Mughal India, after the death of Aurangzeb in 1707 India plunged into a lawless society. As agriculture became unviable, the peasants left their land and joined Shivaji's army to get one fourth of the produce of other peasants' land. But then those peasants too left the land and joined the army and so on. A period of complete chaos began marked by local warlords and the 'thugees' (way side brigands) till 1757 when the Company won the Plassey war and got the Bengal Diwani. So also may be by 2030 or 2040 the society may stabilise at a lower level of energy consumption.

30. 07. 2008

Word: 1478

t.vijayendra@gmail.com, vijayendrat@yahoo.com

+91 94907 05634, 08258 205340