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Socio-Economic Conditions and Quality of Life of Migrant Households in Surat City, Gujarat

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ABSTRACT

Internal labour migration is an inherent part of India's development process. Surat, Gujarat – a rapidly developing industrial city in India – hosts more than hundred thousand inter-state migrant workers each year, mainly from the economically marginal states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, and Odisha. Despite their significant contribution towards economic development in the city of Surat in relation to textiles, diamond polishing, and construction, migrant households have not been adequately researched as a socio-economic group, especially concerning multidimensional quality of life (QoL). The current paper attempts to explore the socio-economic condition and QoL of migrant households in Surat City using primary data collected from 300 migrant households chosen purposefully from six settlements. The research adopts a mixed method approach involving quantitative and qualitative techniques like structured interviews with migrant households supplemented by observations on the field to construct a Composite Quality of Life Index (CQLI) based on six empirically validated dimensions: economic well-being, housing and physical environment, health and nutrition, education access for children, social integration, and subjective well-being. The findings suggest a mean score of 4.52 out of 10 for CQLI, underscoring significant multidimensional deprivation. In multiple regression, monthly household income ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$), quality of housing ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.01$), and food security ($\beta = 0.23$, $p < 0.001$) are identified to be key determinants of QoL. This paper brings into focus an important area of research that is yet to receive sufficient attention, i.e., an assessment at the level of settlements in tier-one industrial cities, and suggests focused policy interventions.

***Keywords**: Internal Migration, Quality of Life, Migrant Households, Surat, Socio-Economic Deprivation, CQLI, Informal Settlement, Urban Poverty.*

Introduction

Urbanisation and internal migration are some of the most significant demographic phenomena taking place in present-day India. As per Census 2011, there were more than 450 million people who were internal migrants in India, while estimates beyond 2015 show that the number might exceed 600 million (NSSO, 2019). The cities located in the industrially advanced areas of Western India, especially the city of Surat in Gujarat, act as dominant destinations for labour migrants coming from lagging states. The image of Surat as the "City of Silk and Diamonds" is largely due to the sheer amount of cheap migrant labour that works in the textiles and diamonds polishing industries in Surat (Breman, 2004; Srivastava & Bhattacharyya, 2003).

However, despite this economic interdependency, migrant households in Surat continue to be amongst the most marginalized segments of urban society. This is because of their tendency for precarious living arrangements characterized by lack of stable employment opportunities, overcrowded housing, limited access to healthcare facilities and sanitary provisions, social isolation, and the complete absence of any kind of institutional framework. Importantly, quality of life (QoL) of such migrant

households, in terms not just of per capita income but a host of material and subjective components, is yet to be analyzed systematically by scholars working on the city of Surat. There have been several studies done on the migration phenomenon in Surat in the context of labor market dynamics (Breman, 1996; Srivastava, 2011), and housing conditions (Patel, 2013). However, there exists no study that attempts a holistic QoL assessment using an index approach.

It is in addressing this lacuna that this research lies. This research provides systematic evidence on the demographics and occupations of migrant families, identifies their socio-economic profile in several aspects, formulates a Composite Quality of Life Index (CQLI), and establishes the institutional factors that affect quality of life positively or negatively. In this process, it provides unique empirical insights into a less explored area of urban migration studies while contributing practical knowledge for policymakers at various administrative levels.

Review of Literature and Research Gap

Scholarly writing regarding migration in India is vast, cutting across disciplines. Ethnographic research conducted by Jan Breman (1996, 2004) in relation to circular migration in Surat and south Gujarat formed the cornerstone of much of later writing, providing insights into the exploitative conditions under which migrants labor in the construction industry and the textile sector. Breman's concept of footloose labour refers to the condition under which migrants, because of their lack of local connections coupled with piece-rate wages and patronage systems, remain trapped in poverty.

Building on this perspective, Srivastava and Bhattacharyya (2003) examined how migration in Surat fits within the broader context of uneven spatial development in India, viewing migration as a response to rural hardship, not an avenue to upward social mobility. The distress migration framework articulated by Srivastava and Bhattacharyya (2003) was further buttressed by later survey evidence (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009; Mosse et al., 2002) showing that migration continues to be motivated by agrarian distress, lack of access to productive resources by caste and class, and non-farm employment opportunities.

As far as the quality of life measures go, there has been a significant shift from mere financial indices towards more comprehensive measurements. Following Sen (1999) and his concept of capability as well as UNDP Human Development Index which made scholars focus on functioning and freedom aspects of people's wellbeing, research moved away from purely financial measures. As concerns urban migrants, it is argued by researchers like Castles, de Haas, and Miller (2014) that the quality of life measure should include not only objective factors but also social integration, identification and subjective satisfaction. Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS), validated by Coates, Swindale, and Bilinsky (2007), constitutes an instrument which measures food insecurity which is especially important for poor urban migrants. Another example of adapted instrument is WHOQOL-BREF which is used in India (Gupta & Singh, 2016; Kumar et al., 2018).

In the Gujarat setting, Jani (2012) found that lack of social security and unstable income formed the two leading factors influencing quality of life among migrants in the informal sector of Ahmedabad. The housing conditions of migrants living in chawls of Surat have been described in detail by Patel (2013), but she did not undertake the task of quantifying quality of life through an index. Very recently, Parida and Raman (2020) used NSSO data to establish that interstate migrants in Gujarat have higher risks of poverty and food insecurity and earn wages that are 18-24% lower than those earned by their counterparts in the local population.

Three major knowledge gaps have emerged in such studies. One of these concerns the need for a settlement level Composite Quality of Life Index that would include all relevant indicators (economic, housing, health, educational, social, and subjective) in its assessment of migrants residing in Surat. Second, migration studies have treated migrants as a homogeneous group without taking into account the diversity among them based on their state of origin, duration of stay, and occupational category. Third, regression analysis of various factors affecting quality of life in order to identify key contributors is completely missing.

Research Objectives

The study is guided by four specific objectives: (i) to document the socio-demographic and occupational profile of migrant households in Surat City; (ii) to assess the housing, sanitation, health, and food security conditions of these households; (iii) to construct a multidimensional Composite Quality of Life Index (CQLI) and evaluate the QoL status across key dimensions; and (iv) to identify the socio-economic predictors of QoL using multivariate statistical analysis.

Methodology

The current research will use cross-sectional approach, a method that combines both quantitative and qualitative techniques of data collection. This will be done by collecting information from six different groups of migrants who have settled in Surat city including Limbayat, Katargam, Varachha, Udhna, Piplod, and Dumbhal; based on their high numbers as reported in the Surat Municipal Corporation (SMC) census of 2018.

The selected population comprises families that have moved into the city from other states, where the head of the family has come from outside Gujarat and has been staying in Surat for at least one year before the survey was done. For the purpose of data collection, purposive sampling technique was used; the sample size was set to be 300 households calculated through Yamane's formula (1967) at 95% confidence level and a margin of error of 5.7%, then distributed among the six clusters proportionately. The primary data was collected through structured interview questionnaire in the period between January and April 2025. This tool was prepared from adapted questions from HFIAS (Coates et al., 2007), WHOQOL-BREF (WHO, 1998), and Social Network Index by Berkman and Syme (1979). Interviews were carried out in respondents' premises through local language speaking field interviewers (Bhojpuri and Hindi).

Standardisation of scores for each of the six QoL domains (ranging from 0 to 10) followed by an arithmetic mean was used to generate the CQLI. Cronbach's alpha for the 36-item QoL measure was 0.84, establishing its high internal consistency. Pearson's correlation and OLS regression analysis using IBM SPSS version 27.0 was performed to explore correlations and predictors of the CQLI. Field data collected was subjected to thematic analysis.

Results and Analysis

- **Socio-Demographic Profile of Migrant Households**

Table 1 shows the socio-demographics of the respondents from the 300 interviewed households. Majority of the household heads were men at 72.7 percent, which is in line with the dominance of males as participants in circular migration in India's industrial centres. The largest age group (37.3 percent) belonged to the 26-35 years age group, suggesting that the study population was largely young adult migrants. Uttar Pradesh contributed 32.7 percent while Bihar accounted for 24.7 percent of the total households, adding up to 57.4 percent altogether; this trend conforms to the migration corridors identified in the NSSO 64th Round (2007-08).

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Profile of Surveyed Migrant Households (N = 300)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Cumulative (%)
Gender				
	Male	218	72.7	72.7
	Female	82	27.3	100.0
Age Group (Years)				
	18–25	54	18.0	18.0
	26–35	112	37.3	55.3
	36–45	87	29.0	84.3
	46–55	34	11.3	95.6
	Above 55	13	4.4	100.0
State of Origin				
	Uttar Pradesh	98	32.7	32.7
	Bihar	74	24.7	57.4
	Rajasthan	42	14.0	71.4
	Odisha	38	12.6	84.0
	Madhya Pradesh	27	9.0	93.0
	Others	21	7.0	100.0

Source: Primary Field Survey, Surat City, 2025.

- **Economic Conditions and Employment**

The economic characteristics of the sample have been captured in Table 2. It is worth noting that no less than 51.3% of households had incomes below ₹10,000 per month, an amount that does not even meet the consumption poverty line of ₹11,100 set by Rangarajan (2014) for urban Gujarat. Textile and diamond polishing were the main industries employing the greatest number of migrants (44.0%), followed by construction (22.3%) and petty trade (18%). Just 5.3% of sampled households had incomes exceeding ₹20,000 per month, indicating the minimum income level for migrants.

As far as food security goes, 10.6% of the surveyed households were severely food insecure while 26% were moderately insecure on the HFIAS index, making up over 36% of households facing food security issues on a moderate/severe level. Such results are corroborated by the findings of Parida & Raman (2020), whose study found that interstate migrants are more vulnerable to food insecurity than natives in urban Gujarat.

Table 2: Economic Indicators of Migrant Households (N = 300)

Economic Indicator	Category	Freq.	% of Sample	Mean Score
Monthly Household Income (₹)				
	Below ₹5,000	36	12.0	—
	₹5,001–10,000	118	39.3	—
	₹10,001–15,000	89	29.7	—
	₹15,001–20,000	41	13.7	—
	Above ₹20,000	16	5.3	—
Employment Sector				
	Textile/Diamond	132	44.0	—
	Construction	67	22.3	—
	Trade/Vending	54	18.0	—
	Domestic Work	31	10.3	—
	Other/Informal	16	5.4	—
Food Security (HFIAS Score)				
	Food Secure	89	29.7	2.1
	Mildly Insecure	101	33.7	5.4
	Moderately Insecure	78	26.0	8.9
	Severely Insecure	32	10.6	14.3

Source: Primary Field Survey, Surat City, 2025. HFIAS = Household Food Insecurity Access Scale.

- **Housing Conditions and Infrastructure Access**

Table 3 highlights extremely precarious housing arrangements amongst migrant households. Kutcha houses or jhuggis constituted 42.0 percent of housing arrangements while 21.7 percent had their housing arrangements in pucca rented accommodations. Importantly, 46.0 percent of families were squeezed into one room only, whereas 25.0 percent had five or more individuals staying in one room only. Such conditions represent severe overcrowding and have been well documented in ethnographic literature on the living conditions of chawls in Surat city by Breman (2004). Overcrowding is known to be directly linked with a high incidence of respiratory and communicable diseases (Smith, 2003).

The issue of access to toilet facilities remained a major problem with 15.0 percent still practicing open defecation and 37.3 percent accessing public toilets despite claims of achieving universal access to sanitation under Swachh Bharat Mission in Indian cities. Access to clean drinking water from community taps and pipe supply remained fairly decent at 87.0 percent in the surveyed slum clusters. Persistent disruptions in water supply services in different clusters included Udhna and Limbayat clusters.

Table 3: Housing and Infrastructure Conditions of Migrant Households (N = 300)

Housing & Infrastructure Variable	Category	Freq.	Percentage (%)
Type of Dwelling	Kutcha / Jhuggi	126	42.0
	Semi-Pucca	109	36.3
	Pucca Rented	65	21.7
Rooms per Household	1 Room	138	46.0
	2 Rooms	121	40.3
	3+ Rooms	41	13.7
Safe Drinking Water	Piped Supply	174	58.0
	Community Tap	87	29.0
	Borewell / Other	39	13.0
Sanitation Access	In-house Toilet	143	47.7
	Shared Community	112	37.3
	Open Defecation	45	15.0
Avg. Persons per Room	≤ 2 persons	71	23.7
	3–4 persons	154	51.3
	≥ 5 persons	75	25.0

Source: Primary Field Survey, Surat City, 2025.

- **Composite Quality of Life Index (CQLI)**

Mean scores for each dimension of QoL, along with their correlation with the composite index of CQLI, are presented in Table 4. The overall mean score of 4.52 out of 10 indicates that the quality of life is well below median for migrant families living in Surat on all the dimensions considered. Social integration and identity received the lowest dimension mean score (3.89), signifying the socio-cultural isolation felt by the migrants who hail from other linguistic regions than Gujarat.

Access to education by children had the highest dimensional mean (5.21), implying that even though primary school enrolment has been enhanced under SSA and mid-day meal programmes, secondary school enrolment and learning have been hampered by child labour and constant relocation of schools. All the dimensions were significantly correlated with the CQLI at $p < 0.001$.

Table 4: Composite Quality of Life Index — Dimensional Means and Correlations (N = 300)

QoL Dimension	Mean Score (out of 10)	Std. Dev.	Pearson r with Overall QoL
Economic Well-being	4.38	1.72	0.81***
Housing & Physical Environment	4.12	1.64	0.77***
Health & Nutritional Status	4.57	1.58	0.73***
Education Access (Children)	5.21	1.41	0.68***
Social Integration & Identity	3.89	1.83	0.62***
Subjective Well-being / Happiness	4.94	1.77	0.70***
Composite QoL Index (CQLI)	4.52	1.43	1.00

Source: Primary Field Survey, Surat City, 2025. ***p < 0.001. Scores standardised on a 0–10 scale.

- **Determinants of Quality of Life: Regression Analysis**

In Table 5 is presented the findings from multiple OLS regression analysis where the CQLI was the dependent variable ($R^2 = 0.697$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.689$, $F = 91.4$, $p < 0.001$). The most powerful predictors were monthly household income ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$), housing quality score ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.01$), and food security index ($\beta = 0.23$, $p < 0.001$). In addition, these three variables accounted for a predominant proportion of the explained variance of QoL, proving once again that material rather than cultural or social variables are key in explaining the poor QoL outcomes among the surveyed.

Duration of residence (the years spent living in Surat) proved to be a strong predictor ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.01$), implying that more established migrants tend to have greater QoL due to accumulated social capital, experience working at particular places of employment, and familiarity with institutions of their host city. This result corroborates with Massey et al.'s (1993) cumulative causation theory according to which migration experience itself becomes an important resource for migrants. Health service access ($\beta = 0.18$) and social network index ($\beta = 0.13$) were statistically significant.

Table 5: Multiple Regression Analysis — Predictors of CQLI (N = 300)

Predictor Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta (β)	t-value	Sig.
Household Monthly Income	0.42	0.08	0.38	5.31	0.000
Years of Residence in Surat	0.27	0.09	0.21	3.12	0.002
Housing Quality Score	0.33	0.10	0.24	3.48	0.001
Education Level (Household Head)	0.19	0.07	0.17	2.74	0.007
Access to Health Services	0.22	0.09	0.18	2.56	0.011
Social Network Index	0.15	0.08	0.13	2.01	0.046
Food Security Score (HFIAS)	0.29	0.07	0.23	3.87	0.000
(Constant)	1.14	0.31	—	3.72	0.000

Source: Primary Field Survey, Surat City, 2025. Dependent variable: CQLI. $R^2 = 0.697$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.689$; $F(7, 292) = 91.4$, $p < 0.001$. VIF values for all predictors < 3.2 (multicollinearity acceptable).

Discussion

These results paint a coherent picture of multidimensional disadvantage experienced by migrants of Surat that is far from accidental but is inherent to the city's informal economy. The CQLI score of 4.52 is quite far from what might have been predicted for low-income natives of Gujarat's urban areas. Based on distributional data, it seems likely that two-thirds of Surat migrant households reside in the 3.0-5.5 index range, that is, the area of chronic deprivation rather than a state of emergency.

The importance of income as a predictor of quality of life can be understood through the lens of Surat's wage structure. Piece-rate systems are predominant among migrant workers who engage in textile and diamond polishing production; this exposes migrants' incomes to extreme variability contingent on changes in demand for exports. In turn, the economic shocks caused by the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 illustrated the extreme risks associated with such vulnerability; massive reverse migration was recorded as several hundred thousand Surat workers found themselves in an almost instant state of poverty following shutdowns (Kesar & Bhattacharya, 2020). Without savings and without access to social insurance or contractual work, any income loss results immediately in food and housing insecurity.

The low social integration score (3.89) is noteworthy. Personal observations and interviews with respondents indicated the existence of a strong lack of feeling of belonging – the feeling of being temporary and invisible socially within the city context. Factors such as linguistic differences, cultural differences, and segregation in the form of settlements all contribute to social exclusion, which in turn creates problems such as poor healthcare seeking practices, limited political involvement, and inability to access welfare programs provided by the state. This observation is supported by the statement made by Castles et al. (2014) that social integration is not a welfare phenomenon but a precondition for accessing other forms of well-being.

There are many implications for policy makers with regard to the positive impact of duration of stay on quality of life (QoL). This indicates that stabilizing migration by providing security of tenure, provision of ration cards under ONORC scheme, and registering at local clinics will lead to gains in welfare, irrespective of any gain in income levels. All these policies are quite affordable and can be easily implemented.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The present study provides the first comprehensive index-based analysis of multi-dimensional quality of life of migrant families residing in six settlement clusters in Surat City. There is little doubt that the study results indicate that even though migrants are essential for the city's economy, they are locked in a self-perpetuating state of severe deprivation in economic, housing, health, nutrition, and social terms. The average CQLI of 4.52 is an illustration of the poverty regime generated through the institutions of urban informal economy in India rather than poverty on the margins.

Taking into consideration the empirical data obtained in the course of the study, the authors put forward the following recommendations to enhance migrants' welfare. First, the Government of Gujarat is recommended to set up Migrant Welfare Board of Surat along with similar agencies established in other Indian cities such as the Kerala Non-Resident Keralites Affairs (NORKA). Its mission is to register migrants, ensure portability of the ration cards, and provide temporary monetary support to migrants affected by economic shock waves. Second, the Surat Municipal Corporation should proceed with upgrading kutcha and semi-pucca migrants' settlements to pucca houses through PMAY(U). Thirdly, there is a need to improve access to healthcare services via migrant health camps and multi-language communication in clusters like Limbayat, Katargam, and Udhna. Fourthly, a process must be set up within schools that will help ensure that children of migrant workers, especially girls, can have access to uninterrupted education despite their parents' circular migration patterns. Lastly, the conclusions made in this paper show the necessity of collecting disaggregated data regarding welfare of migrants in the census and PLFS systems.

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