

For a better tomorrow

Each day, thousands of Indians leave their homes in villages and make a beeline for the big city. Some make it, while others end up worse off than before

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Until a year ago, 20-year-old Sujata had never tasted coffee. Today she rattles off

names of exotic coffee concoctions and can deftly tell the difference between a latte and a cappuccino by merely sniffing the air around her. That is the result of 10 months of working at a cafe in Bangalore. Sujata can type an SMS in seconds, is comfortable walking around in her shirt-and-trousers uniform, and has even participated in an inter-cafe dance contest. For a girl who never stepped outside Tondebhavi village in Karnataka without a brother or uncle in tow, these are huge steps. Life, as she knew it, has changed in just a year's time.

Across India, scores of young men and women are leaving their villages, as Sujata did, in search of a better life. The reasons are manifold. Some are disheartened at the lack of opportunity in their villages; others worry that their education won't necessarily make them employable; some are simply ambitious, and strike out in search of a better standard of living.

Paradigm shift

There is nothing new about people moving from the hinterland to the city in search of opportunities. Generations of Indian men have left their farms and families behind to move to the big city in search of jobs—in mills, factories and even as watchmen. What is new is the kind of jobs people are moving for now and the quantum of change in their lifestyle.

Sujata works six days a week. She lives with three roommates, all of whom have left their village to make a living in the city. One of her roommates works in a big retail store in a mall in central Bangalore, while the other sells credit cards over the phone. They take turns to make meals and clean their one-room house in the suburbs. Once a month, the coffee jockey takes a bus back to her village, 50 kilometres away.

Seven years ago, 26-year-old Sakthivel Nagarajan of Kovilpatti village, Tamil Nadu, was uncertain about his future. Today, he's a supervisor at L&T Constructions in Chennai. He is no longer intimidated by the big city, has travelled abroad on projects, and is now learning to speak English.

Over the last few years, Nagarajan has seen drastic changes in his life. He studied up to Class 10, and then started driving his father's car for a living. The other option was to join the family grocery shop and sell provisions to villagers, a career path he wasn't too keen on. In 2001, an uncle told Nagarajan about L&T, and the big city lured him to the job. Pretty soon, the young man was going places.

The construction supervisor reminisces about the first time he took a flight. He remembers the security checks at Chennai airport and having to wait at airports for hours to catch the connecting flights before finally landing at Barbados. Once there, his job was to train the local people to build a cricket stadium. Using a bit of sign language and teaching by action, Nagarajan was able to train the Barbadians and return to Chennai after nine-and-a-half months.

Nagarajan doesn't plan on going back to his village, and is aspiring to move up the value chain at L&T. He sends a portion of his salary back home and uses the rest to run his city home. His wife has just given birth to a boy, and Nagarajan dreams of bringing up his child in the city with all the comforts he himself didn't have.



The other side

Sujata and Nagarajan may have managed to achieve some success in the city. But things don't always turn out that way for rural folk. Nineteen-year-old Mehpal Singh is from the Garhwal region of Uttaranchal. He arrived in Mumbai late in 2007, hoping to land a job in the city of dreams. Mehpal, who has studied only up to the ninth

From Kovilpatti village to Chennai city, it's been a long and eventful journey for

Sakthivel Nagarajan. And there's no going back. The 26-year-old supervisor at L&T

Constructions plans to bring up his baby boy in the city with all the comforts he never had

standard, had hoped to find some kind of clerical job. However, despite knocking on many doors, things didn't work out for him. "I have no certificates to show and people here do not think that there is anything special about English literacy. They tell me everyone can read and write in English today," he said, speaking slightly broken English tinted with a Garhwali accent. He picked up the language under the tutelage of an Englishman, whom he considered his "second father". What little money the lad had soon ran out, and in desperation, he joined a construction crew. "I have had enough of this," the young man says, his face grim. "I have decided to go back to my village."

Mehpal's is only one story among many similar ones that play out in Mumbai, indeed, in every city in the country, every day. The move from the village to the big city can take its toll on rural folk. Many travel across the country to places where they know nobody, can't speak the language and end up living in squalour. Mumbai, the people magnet, is estimated to attract 100 to 300 new families every day, and most end up living in a slum or just erect a shanty on the nearest available footpath. The struggle is often hopeless, and sees many descending into abject misery.

In a bid to alleviate their depression, many of the villagers take to drugs and alcohol, squandering what little money they have for a temporary high. Pretty soon, the substance abuse inexorably rises, and they end up in debt in an effort to get the daily fix. Many end up dying lonely deaths, ending up in city morgues with the authorities clueless on their identities. The bodies remain unclaimed and end up as cadavers for medical research or to teach young medical students anatomy.

But despite the possibility of failure, many continue to stream into cities. And, as the economy grows, the need for well-trained entry-level people is also rising. Companies are desperately looking for talent and are now turning to villages across the county. In fact, the Tamil Nadu government has set aside Rs 25 crore to train people in rural areas for jobs in cities.

For Sujata, however, going back to the village seems inevitable, as her parents want her to get married soon, but she would rather marry a boy who works in the city and continue working here. "No village boy would want to marry a girl who has worked in the city; they are still very narrow-minded. But if a village boy has worked in the city, he will understand me better," she says. Sujata's search for a village-turned-city-boy is on in full earnest. Recently, she went on a 'date' with a boy her friend fixed her up with. "It was nothing serious, I met him in a group," she blushes.

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