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Q5

Why do large cities tend to attract more migrants than smaller towns? Discuss in the light of conditions in developing countries.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · GS I · 10 marks · World's Physical Geography

Salient features of world's physical geography.

Core demand of the question

- Explain why large cities attract more migrants than smaller towns
- Discuss this in the light of conditions in developing countries

Revision summary

Migrants follow expected work, services and kin. They do not follow town size as a slogan.

Large cities offer thick labour markets and a huge informal sector that still beats village slack.

Hospitals, universities and airports are stacked in metros in developing countries.

Harris-Todaro and **chain migration** explain why people come even when open urban unemployment exists.

Colonial ports, state capitals and later service hubs created **urban primacy**.

Small towns pull only when they have a real bundle of jobs and public goods.

Introduction

People do not move toward a pin on the map. They move toward **work, wages, schools, hospitals and a relative who already has a room**. In developing countries those goods are **stacked in a few large cities**. They are not spread evenly through small towns. The result is **urban primacy**. Mumbai, Lagos, Dhaka or Mexico City pull harder than the district headquarters down the road.

Body

Why the large city attracts more migrants

Agglomeration is the dry word for a thick labour market. A big city offers many employers, so a lost job is not the end. Informal work - construction, street trade, domestic service, gig tasks - still pays more, in expectation, than a slack village. **Harris-Todaro** taught that people migrate on **expected** urban income, even if open unemployment exists, because the prize of a formal job is high. **Cumulative causation** then runs. Each newcomer spends. That spending creates another stall. The stall then calls another relative.

Public goods are skewed. Tertiary hospitals, universities, courts, airports and English-medium coaching sit in metros. In developing countries the small town often has a bus stand and a weak municipality. It often does not have a functioning industrial estate. **Networks** lower risk. A chawl, a jhuggi, a language cluster, a church or a caste lodge is an arrival kit that a small town rarely matches at scale.

- **Jobs:** Diverse formal markets and thick informal markets beat a single mill town.
- **Services:** Education and specialist health are metropolitan.
- **Chain migration:** Information and credit travel along kin, so the big city reproduces itself.

Developing-country conditions

Colonial and post-colonial **transport** was built to ports and capitals. **Import-substituting industry** and then **services and IT** clustered where power, ports and the state already were. Rural **distress** - tiny holdings, monsoon risk, agrarian underemployment - pushes people out. The metro **pulls** them in. Land and housing shortages create slums, but slums are still a foothold. Small towns may grow, yet they often lack **water, sewage, colleges and non-farm jobs**. They therefore become stepping stones, or they are skipped.

Gender and youth matter. Young men enter construction. Young women enter garments, care and BPO. Both groups target large labour markets. Climate shocks and conflict add pulses of movement toward the city that can absorb people, even if it absorbs them badly.

- **Primacy:** One or two cities dominate national urban population in many poor and middle-income states.
- **Informality:** The shock-absorber is the unorganised sector, not a Western welfare city.
- **Policy skew:** Investment, elite schools and tertiary care follow the large city. That city then looks even more rational to the next migrant.

The small town will attract more people only when it offers a **credible bundle** of work and services. Until then, developing-country migration is a choice for the metro. It is not a failure of rural character.

Flow diagram

Rural distress -> Migrant
 Agglomeration jobs -> Migrant
 Hospitals colleges networks -> Migrant
 Migrant -> Large city primacy
 Weak small town services -> skipped or stepped through Large city primacy

Conclusion

Large cities attract more migrants because they concentrate expected income, public services and social networks. In developing countries that concentration is extreme. Primacy and slums are therefore the form of urbanisation. Balanced regional development is the policy name for giving the small town a reason to be chosen.

Facts & figures

Harris-Todaro

A model of rural-urban migration based on expected urban wages, including the chance of a formal job, not only the wage already in hand.

Urban primacy

The dominance of one or a few cities in a country's urban system, common where infrastructure and industry were historically concentrated.

Agglomeration economies

Productivity and matching gains when firms and workers cluster, which raise the pull of already-large cities.

Chain migration

Movement along family and community networks that lowers the cost and risk of arriving in a known neighbourhood.

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