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Rural-urban migration in Bihar: implications for citizenship in contemporary India

Introduction: study motivation and purpose

The Indian State of Bihar is in the throes of political, social and economic change. Long derided as a basket case, the State has registered high rates of economic growth over the last decade. In this context, the present paper investigates the continuities and changes in the pattern of labour migration from and within rural Bihar.

The project's theoretical framework is informed by debates on the theme of 'transition'. The question of 'transition' from rural to urban, agriculture to industry, traditional to modernity and feudal to capitalist have concerned economists, sociologists, political scientists and historians of different intellectual persuasions. Along these lines, the Harriss-Todero model predicted that urbanization would become a permanent and 'mainstreamed' feature of social life, due to migrants' anticipation of jobs and good quality of life in the cities. In the Indian context, there is agreement among scholars (who otherwise draw on very different intellectual traditions) about the incomplete, lopsided and tortuous nature of India's 'transition' (Bardhan, 2009; Chatterjee, 2008; Government of India, 2009; cf. Gupta, 2005). The presence of an estimated 100 million internal itinerant labour migrants across the country appears to corroborate the notions of incomplete and tortuous 'transition' (Deshingkar and Akter, 2009: 28). Straddling the spatial domains of rural and urban, and the occupational domains of agriculture and industry, they appear to personify the fractured nature of the 'transition'.

Bihar is one of India's most impoverished States (over 40% of its population lives below the national poverty line). People in the State usually find employment as agricultural labourers, although some among them might own tiny parcels of agricultural land. A number of studies have suggested that people from the rural areas of the State migrate to rural areas of prosperous States in Punjab and Haryana. Migration from the State has typically followed a 'rural-rural' trajectory, challenging the prediction that India will inexorably 'urbanise'.

Nevertheless, over the last two decades, scholars and activists have suggested that this trajectory, of a predominantly 'rural-rural' conduit, may be shifting to a combination of 'rural-rural' and 'rural-urban' pathways. In their destinations across northern India, many labour migrants now work in the \$ 157 billion construction industry (figures according to PwC). They find employment either as workers employed during the construction of infrastructure and buildings in Delhi or as workers in the millions of brick kilns that feed into the industry. Others work as street vendors, rickshaw pullers, head-loaders, domestic helps or manual scavengers. Yet others make their way to hire their labour to farmers in north-western India, the States of Punjab and Haryana, as agricultural labourers. Contracts- oral or written- are rare. They spend between two and three months in each of their destination locations, before returning to their villages where they spend between three-to-four months with their families. Typically, then, in any given year, the labour migrants from Bihar work in- iterate between- at least three different locations in the country. It is not uncommon for them to traverse up to 4,000 k.m. each year. An overwhelming majority of them are men, whose wives and children stay back in the

villages, attend to their homes (or farms if they have any), go to school, and sometimes hire their labour out to local employers or on state-funded public works programs if these are operational. A huge majority of these itinerant labour migrants are members of communities that have been historically oppressed and stigmatised as ‘untouchable’ and ‘low caste’. Hindus as well as Muslims from among these communities make up the migrants. Members of privileged communities also migrate, but are less likely to circulate as labour migrants. Migration patterns in neither of the two pathways- ‘rural-rural’ and ‘rural-urban’- is permanent, only complicating the assumption that urbanisation is inevitable.

The key takeaways are as follows:

1. The overwhelming proportion of migrants from rural Bihar are labour migrants.
2. Labour migrants are less interested in agricultural activities, either within the State or outside it. They have shifted from agricultural operations in rural Punjab and Haryana to construction activities and other activities. Delhi is an important, but by no means the only or even most preferred urban destination.
3. Labour migrants are inhibited in their mobility by a restrictive social protection regime which hinges on sedentary, rather than portable, entitlements.

Methods

This paper adopts a sociological approach to the question of migration. The project design was multi-sited, reflecting the multi-locational reality experienced by itinerant labour migrants. Two surveys were implemented under this project, to capture the multiple facets of migration within and outside the State. The surveys gathered primary data from multiple ‘source’ and ‘destination’ locations. These were supplemented by community-level group discussions in select destination locations.

The first set of surveys was a random sample survey based out of ten origin localities located across the State of Bihar. The survey covered households from which at least one member is currently a migrant and resides outside the village for at least one month. The questions in this survey elicited responses on the changing livelihood and migration patterns of the households which rely on migrant workers, the changes in the destination of the migrants, the ways in which they remit cash and the specific employment with which they are engaged . A total of 5,654 households were covered under the survey.

Table 1: Survey coverage across ten districts

Name of district	Frequency	Percentage
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Aurangabad	536	9.48
Bhagalpur	541	9.57
Darbhangha	650	11.50
Jehanabad	528	9.34
Madhubani	642	11.35
Muzaffarpur	525	9.29
Purnea	574	10.15
Saharsa	532	9.41
Siwan	594	10.51
West Champaran	532	9.41

The second set of surveys comprised random sample survey in ten towns. The surveys were implemented at select locations within towns, such as construction sites, brick kilns and *majdoor hats* (street corners where labourers gather in order to ‘advertise’ their availability). This survey was designed to elicit information about the ‘source’ locations of the migrants, their changing livelihood and migration patterns, the skills they have acquired and other destinations where were employed in the past. A total of 2,055 migrant workers were covered under this survey.

Table 2: Survey coverage across ten towns

Name of district	Frequency	Percentage
Begusarai	123	5.99
Bhagalpur	179	8.71
Darbhangha	187	9.10
Gaya	181	8.81
Muzaffarpur	169	8.22
Patna	851	41.41
Purnea	120	5.84

Saharsa	125	6.08
West Champaran	120	5.84

Both surveys were implemented by Asian Development Research Institute, a Patna-based advocacy and research organisation.

Based on the responses from the surveys, group discussions were conducted with migrant workers in different locations across urban north India, especially Jammu, Ludhiana and Delhi. A total of sixteen group discussions were held. These group discussions were convened by the Center for Equity Studies.

Caste profile of migrants

Labour migrants tended to be drawn overwhelmingly from among historically oppressed communities stigmatised as untouchable and low caste. An analysis of the census survey conducted in the localities of origin reveals that members of historically oppressed castes, especially Extremely Backward Classes and Mahadalits, dominated the ranks of labour migrants.

The caste-disaggregated data of the labour migrant population, as contrasted with the caste composition of the State, is presented in Table 3 for rural outmigrants and in Table 4 for urban labour migrants.

Table 3: Caste composition of rural outmigrant households, compared with 1931 caste composition of Bihar State

Name of caste group	% share among migrant households	% share in Bihar State, derived from 1931 census
Hindu Upper Castes	5.50	17.7
Other Backward Classes (OBCs)	18.27	24.8
Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs)	27.22	21.3
Dalits	9.73	5.8

Mahadalits	21.58	12.5
Muslim Upper Castes	5.47	16.8
Muslim Backward Classes	11.69	

Table 4: Caste composition of urban labour migrants, compared with 1931 caste composition of Bihar State

Name of caste group	% share among migrant households	% share in Bihar State, derived from 1931 census
Hindu Upper Castes	5.84	17.7
Other Backward Classes (OBCs)	24.38	24.8
Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs)	33.14	21.3
Dalits	10.36	5.8
Mahadalits	14.45	12.5
Muslim Upper Castes	3.99	16.8
Muslim Backward Classes	7.25	

Destination profile of rural labour migrants

Labour migrants travel to a variety of destinations across India. Delhi is the single most popular destination for labour migrants, but a number of destinations are emerging as important, especially Bangalore and urban areas in Kerala. Language is clearly not a barrier to seeking work.

Table 5.1: Key destinations of rural labour migrants, previous twelve months

Name of destination	Frequency	%
Delhi	2387	40.21

Urban areas in four Southern States	1333	22.45
Mumbai	555	9.35
Urban areas in Punjab, Haryana and J&K	523	8.81

Previous destinations

The survey elicited information about preferred destinations in the previous year, which is presented in Table 5.2. Comparing the data reveals that the proportion of migrants opting for Delhi may have reduced and the proportion headed southwards might be increasing.

Table 5.2: Key destinations of rural labour migrants, previous 24 months- 12 months

Name of destination	Frequency	%
Delhi	2375	43.06
Urban areas in four Southern States	1132	20.52
Mumbai	449	8.09
Urban areas in Punjab, Haryana and J&K	475	8.61

Occupational profile

A large number of migrant workers reported gaining employment as factory workers, employed in such enterprises as flour mills, footwear manufacturing, textiles, and the like. The second largest number was employed in sectors labelled as ‘others’, which includes such diverse activities as brokers of land deals, labour contractors and political mediators.

Migrant labourers work on small-scale factories and other enterprises, such as operating machines in footwear manufacturing firms and cylinder-making factories, operating pulverisers in mills, sewing and tailoring, plumbing, repairing electric faults, hair-cutting, masonry and brick-laying. However, not a single one of them reported undergoing any training or skill-building of any kind.

Table 6: key occupations held by migrants, rural survey

Name of occupation	Frequency	%
Factory work	1866	31.43
Other	1623	27.34
Construction	824	13.88
Shop assistant	260	4.82

Occupational profile of migrants, urban survey

By contrast, the single largest activity in which migrant workers in the urban areas were employed is the construction sector. Of these, over half worked in Patna city alone. Other activities in which migrant workers were employed included rickshaw pulling and hawking wares. Readers will note that activities such as brokerage, political mediation and labour contracting together constitute the largest share of activities in which the labour migrants were employed.

Table 7: Key occupations held by urban migrants

Name of occupation	Frequency	%
Other	542	26.37
Construction	465	22.63
Rickshaw pulling	344	16.74
Hawking wares	182	8.86

Source of food supplies

The survey elicited information about the sources from which respondents procured food. An overwhelming majority of respondents in both the rural and urban surveys relied on purchases from the open market, despite being formally entitled to PDS rations in their home villages. A small number of respondents in both the rural and the urban surveys suggested that they were able to procure food illegally from the PDS (illegal

since their entitlements were linked to their home villages). In a small minority of cases, respondents said that their employer or contractor provisioned food for them.

Table 8: Source of food for labour migrants, rural and urban

Source of food supply	Rural survey (n = 5937)	Urban survey (n = 2055)
Purchase from PDS	1.5	1.65
Purchase in open market	95.10	91.29
Purchase from both PDS and open market	0.20	0.24
Depend on employer or contractor	2.17	6.23
Others	0.79	0.54
No response	0.24	0.05

Health needs

In terms of meeting health care, a majority of respondents approach private practitioners themselves in their destination locations. A large minority approached government practitioners. Nearly 10% of the urban respondents indicated that they returned home when they needed medical care.

Table 9: Method of meeting health needs, rural and urban

Meeting health needs	Rural survey (n = 5937)	Urban survey (n = 2055)
Approach private doctor by themselves	77.9	58.93
Approach government doctor by themselves	16.05	18.78
Taken to private doctor by contractor/ employer	1.38	1.75
Taken to government doctor by contractor/ employer	0.27	1.38

Do something themselves or seek help from others	2.54	8.32
Return home	1.04	10.75

Voting

The electoral participation of migrant workers reveals a disjointed picture. The share of respondents from the rural survey to cast their vote in both the recent elections was less than the State-level rates of electoral participation. However, the picture from the urban survey is different, with a voters from among the urban respondents far outstripping State-level electoral participation rates.

Table 10: Participation in recent elections

Electoral participation	Rural survey (n = 5937)	Urban survey (n = 2055)	State-level participation rate
Vidhan Sabha elections, 2015	49.33%	75.57%	56.8%
Lok Sabha elections, 2014	49.59%	77.96%	56.5%

Takeaways for further research and policy

The data from the survey is hugely relevant to current policy discussions in India about the social and political rights of circular labour migrants. That over 90% of all migrant workers have to rely on the open market to meet their food requirements, rather than avail of their entitlements under the PDS, is a pointer to the high incidence of social exclusion faced by labour migrants. Read alongside the data on caste composition of the migrant populations, it is clear that the social exclusion is particularly high among Dalits and MBC communities. The policy implication for inclusive growth is immense: to ensure the portability of PDS entitlements so that labour migrants are not excluded from their social entitlements when they are not in their villages.

Indeed, the data from the survey has allowed me to intervene in ongoing discussions, as noted here: <http://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/a-combination-of-aspiration-and-desperation-is-fuelling-migration-in-india/story-SCuojVyN7R8n5CkzNSmSvO.html> and

here: <https://www.pressreader.com/india/hindustan-times-delhi/20170220/281496456048255>

Much recent literature has directed attention to the growing mobility among Indians. Indians being on the move is to be welcomed. This is not only because migration might improve people's economic condition. More importantly, migration and mobility enables people to escape local oppression and lead dignified lives, further their social networks, learn new skills and disseminate social and political ideas.

By directing attention to labour migration in and from Bihar, this paper reveals the myriad destinations and occupations in which they are engaged. From the traditional destinations in Punjab and West Bengal, the streams of migration have now diversified to include not only Delhi, but also urban centers of the south.

Many governments strive to keep people in their places, considering their mobility a threat to the polity and economy. In fact, governments should facilitate (though not coerce) people's movements. Although the Indian state does not have in place hukou-type restrictions on the mobility of people, several key sections of India's elites remain suspicious of people's mobility. Indeed, social policies remain predicated upon the assumption that populations are and will remain sedentary. As the data above shows, this implies the effective social and political exclusion of labour migrants.

Research and policy on cities are fixated on the assumption of fixed cities. In fact, cities are flexible entities, with mobile populations. Policies relating to housing, service-provision and physical infrastructure in cities need to be sensitive to the needs of a mobile population.

Furthermore, research and policy need to bridge the glaring deficit of skills in India. Indians today work in a wider variety of sectors than ever before. There is a crying need to fill those deficits and

The study questions the commonplace assumption that populations are migrating permanently from villages to towns. But populations are far from sedentary. Temporary migrants are the engines of growth in emerging economies not only in India but also elsewhere. Research on the dynamics of economic growth needs to consider the vibrant dimensions of migration and respond to empirical conditions of mobility and flexibility rather than be confined to the assumptions of the Westphalian nation-state.