



Tracing the Roots of Out-Migration from Bihar: A Historical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Migration has been an important part of Bihar's history from ancient times to the present. It has been shaped by political change, economic conditions, environmental crises, education, and cultural interaction. In ancient Bihar, especially during the Magadha and Mauryan periods, the region attracted scholars, traders, pilgrims, and administrators. During the medieval era, migration increased because of agricultural expansion, political developments, and the spread of Indo-Islamic culture. Under British colonial rule, migration became largely labour-oriented through the indentured labour system and industrial recruitment. After independence, lack of industrial growth, unemployment, agricultural distress, and uneven development led to large-scale migration from Bihar to other Indian states and foreign countries. Today, migration includes seasonal labour movement, professional migration, and overseas migration to Gulf nations. Women are also increasingly participating in migration. Remittances and migration networks now play a major role in Bihar's economy, making migration both a survival strategy and a means of social mobility.

KEY WORDS

Bihar, Migration, Labour Mobility, Out-migration, Colonialism, Economic Development, Social Change.

INTRODUCTION

Migration has long shaped human civilization through movements driven by livelihood, security, education, and social mobility. In India, Bihar holds a distinct position as both a historic centre of civilization and a major source of migrant labour. Despite its rich cultural heritage, the state continues to face poverty, unemployment, weak infrastructure, low industrial growth, and agricultural distress, leading to large-scale out-migration. The roots of migration from Bihar date

back to ancient times, when the region attracted pilgrims, traders, and scholars across Asia. Medieval political transformations and colonial labour systems further expanded migration patterns. In contemporary India, regional inequality has intensified mobility, with migrants working in agriculture, construction, education, professional sectors, and Gulf countries. Migration today significantly influences family life, rural economies, gender relations, and aspirations for social advancement.

This paper provides a historical overview of migration in Bihar from ancient times to the contemporary period. It examines how political, economic, environmental, and social factors influenced migration patterns across different historical phases. The study also explores the long-term consequences of migration and its continuing importance in the socio-economic life of Bihar.

Literature Review

Migration theories explain population movement through economic and structural perspectives. Neoclassical theory (Todaro, 1976) links migration to employment opportunities and wage differences, while the historical-structural approach (Castles and Miller, 2009) highlights inequality and power relations. Research on Bihar migration expanded after the 1980s. Rodgers and Rodgers (2001) emphasized labour migration, caste, and social networks, whereas De Haan (2002) studied seasonal migration and rural livelihoods. Later studies by Karan (2003) and Kumar (2016) examined changing destinations and education-based migration. However, a long-term historical analysis remains limited.

Research Methodology

This study addresses that gap using mixed methods, census records, historical documents, and qualitative narratives. This research uses a mixed-methods strategy that combines quantitative data analysis with historical analysis. Secondary sources include colonial administrative records, census data from 1901 onwards, and government reports. Sources encompass academic publications, newspaper archives, and policy documents. Quantitative analysis utilizes decadal census data to identify migration trends, while qualitative analysis examines personal narratives, oral histories, and policy documents to understand the social and cultural dimensions of migration.

Historical Background of Migration in Bihar

Migration in the Ancient Period

The history of migration in Bihar dates back to the rise of the Magadha kingdom in the sixth century BCE. The fertile plains of the Ganges and Bihar's strategic location encouraged settlement and movement of people. During the Mauryan Empire, especially under Emperor Ashoka, Pataliputra became a major political and commercial centre, attracting administrators, traders, artisans, and scholars from different regions. Bihar also became an important religious centre with the growth of Buddhism and Jainism. Bodhi Gaya attracted pilgrims from many countries, while Nalanda University became a famous centre of learning. Students and scholars from China, Tibet, Korea, and Southeast Asia travelled to Bihar to study philosophy, medicine, and Buddhist theology. Trade routes passing through Bihar further increased the movement of merchants and travellers. Migration during the ancient period was mainly linked to political power, education, trade, and religion rather than economic hardship or unemployment.

Migration During the Medieval Period

During the medieval period, Bihar experienced major political, cultural, and economic changes due to the expansion of Islamic rule from the twelfth century onward. Political conflicts, military campaigns, and administrative changes caused population movements, while the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire encouraged the migration of administrators, soldiers, scholars, traders, and artisans to Bihar. Provincial towns and urban centres expanded under imperial rule. Agricultural growth also increased migration as Mughal land revenue policies promoted cultivation in fertile areas, leading peasants and labourers to establish new villages and farming settlements. Indo-Islamic culture influenced Bihar's architecture, language, music, cuisine, and art, while mosques, madrasas, and markets became centres of cultural interaction.

Colonial Transformation of Migration

Early Colonial Rule and Rural Distress

The colonial period transformed migration patterns further. After British expansion in eastern India, the Permanent Settlement of 1793 strengthened zamindars and increased pressure on peasants through high land revenue demands. Poverty, indebtedness, floods, droughts, and famines forced many labourers to migrate for survival. At the same time, colonial administration created new opportunities for educated Biharis in railways, courts, government offices, and military services. Urban centres like Calcutta attracted migrants seeking clerical and administrative employment, establishing long-term labour migration from Bihar.

Indentured Labour Migration

The nineteenth century marked a painful phase in Bihar's migration history through the indentured labour system. After slavery was abolished in the British Empire, plantation owners recruited cheap labour from India, and Bihar became a major source of workers. Between 1834 and 1920, thousands of poor peasants and labourers migrated to Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, Suriname, and South Africa under misleading promises of better lives. The journey and plantation life were harsh, with exploitation, low wages, and poor living conditions. Despite suffering, migrants preserved Bhojpuri language, festivals, and traditions, creating a lasting global Bihari diaspora connected to colonial economic expansion. This phase transformed migration into a mass labour phenomenon closely connected with colonial capitalism and global economic networks.

Industrial Labour Migration

Industrialization during the colonial period also generated internal migration. The expansion of jute mills in Calcutta, coal mines in eastern India, railway construction, and tea plantations in Assam created a huge demand for labour. Bihari workers migrated seasonally and permanently to industrial centres. Railway networks made travel easier and connected Bihar more closely with other regions. Tea plantations in Assam recruited large numbers of workers from tribal and rural communities in Bihar and neighbouring areas. Similarly, industrial towns attracted migrants willing to work in physically demanding sectors. Migration during this period was largely characterized by economic necessity. Poor wages in agriculture and lack of local employment forced people to seek livelihoods elsewhere.

Migration During the Nationalist Period

The nationalist movement in India influenced migration patterns in Bihar in important ways. Political awareness and anti-colonial struggles encouraged students, activists, and intellectuals to travel across different regions. The Champaran movement led by Mahatma Gandhi brought national attention to peasant exploitation in Bihar. Political mobilization strengthened connections between Bihar and other parts of India. At the same time, economic hardship continued to intensify migration. Agricultural distress, recurring floods, and lack of industrial growth pushed labourers toward cities such as Calcutta. Educational migration also increased during this period. Students from Bihar travelled to universities and educational institutions outside the state for higher education and professional training. Migration during the nationalist era therefore reflected both political awakening and economic struggle.

Migration in Post-Independence India

Partition and Early Developmental Changes

After India gained independence in 1947, migration patterns in Bihar entered a new phase. Although Bihar was not directly divided during Partition, the larger political and economic changes affected the state. Some refugee families from East Bengal settled in Bihar. Administrative restructuring and industrial projects also generated labour mobility. The newly independent Indian state invested in industrial development. Large public sector projects such as steel plants and heavy industries created employment opportunities in different regions. Many workers from Bihar migrated to industrial towns in search of stable incomes. Government expansion also created employment for educated Biharis in administration, education, railways, and public services.

Migration During Planned Development

The decades between 1950 and 1980 witnessed rapid urbanization and economic transformation in India. However, Bihar failed to industrialize at the same pace as several other states. As metropolitan cities expanded, demand for labour increased in construction, transport, manufacturing, and domestic services. Large numbers of

migrants from Bihar moved to Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, and other urban centres. Migration networks became stronger during this period. Relatives and community contacts helped new migrants find work and accommodation. Over time, entire villages developed migration linkages with particular cities. Seasonal migration also increased. Punjab and Haryana experienced agricultural prosperity after the Green Revolution, creating demand for labour during sowing and harvesting seasons. Thousands of workers from Bihar travelled seasonally to these states. Educational migration expanded significantly as students moved to metropolitan centres for professional education.

Migration gradually became embedded within rural household strategies. Income from migrant labour supported families through remittances and helped finance education, healthcare, marriages, and housing.

Economic Stagnation and Intensified Migration

The 1980s represented a difficult period for Bihar's economy. Weak industrial growth, poor governance, rising unemployment, and agricultural distress increased dependence on migration. Floods and natural disasters repeatedly damaged crops and livelihoods. The devastating floods of 1987 displaced millions of people and forced many families to migrate. Political instability and social tensions further weakened economic development. As opportunities declined within the state, migration intensified. During this period, migrant workers from Bihar became increasingly visible in construction sites, factories, hotels, and informal labour markets across India. Migration was no longer an occasional activity. For many rural households, it became a permanent economic necessity.

Liberalization and New Migration Patterns

Economic liberalization in the 1990s transformed India's economy and reshaped migration flows from Bihar. The growth of private industries, information technology, finance, and service sectors created new opportunities in cities such as Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Pune, and Chennai. Educated youth from Bihar migrated to these urban centres for professional careers. At the same time, Bihar continued to face limited industrial development and weak infrastructure. The bifurcation of Bihar and the creation of Jharkhand in 2000 further reduced the state's industrial and mineral resources. As a result, both skilled and unskilled migration increased. This period also witnessed the expansion of international migration. Gulf countries emerged as important destinations for workers from Bihar. Migrants found employment in construction, transport, domestic work, and service sectors abroad. Remittances from migrant workers became increasingly important for household survival and local economies.

Contemporary Migration Trends

Circular and Seasonal Migration

In the contemporary period, migration from Bihar has become more diversified and organized. Improvements in transportation and communication have encouraged circular migration, where workers move temporarily for employment while maintaining close ties with their villages. Many migrants travel repeatedly between Bihar and destination cities depending on labour demand. Seasonal migration remains common among agricultural labourers and construction workers. Circular migration allows migrants to support families through remittances while preserving social and cultural connections with their home communities.

Growth of Professional Migration

Migration today is no longer limited to unskilled labour. Bihar has produced a growing number of engineers, doctors, teachers, administrators, entrepreneurs, and IT professionals. Students from Bihar continue to migrate for higher education, competitive examination preparation, and professional careers. Cities such as Delhi, Kota, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, and Pune have become important educational and employment destinations. Professional migration reflects changing aspirations among the younger generation. Education is increasingly viewed as a pathway to social mobility and economic security.

Women and Migration

Traditionally, migration from Bihar was dominated by male labour migration. However, contemporary trends indicate increasing participation of women in migration streams. Women now migrate for education, healthcare, nursing, domestic work, and professional employment. Female migration has also expanded through marriage-related mobility and urban employment opportunities. This shift reflects broader social changes, including rising literacy rates, changing gender norms, and expanding access to education.

International Migration

International migration from Bihar has grown significantly over the last two decades. Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Kuwait attract both skilled and unskilled workers. Migration to foreign countries is often facilitated by recruitment agents, social networks, and kinship ties. Remittances sent by overseas migrants contribute substantially to household income. Data from emigration clearances and passport applications indicate that Bihar is one of the leading states in international labour migration. However, international migrants also face challenges such as exploitation, unsafe working conditions, legal insecurity, and social isolation.

Emigration Clearance

The emigration clearances at Indian airports provide some indirect evidence regarding international migration; according to this data, Bihar accounted for 15 percent of emigration clearances, the second-highest percentage after Andhra Pradesh (31 percent). The overall scenario is shown in Table -1, which presents state-by-state data on emigration clearances.

Table 1: State wise Emigration Clearances Granted, 2011-16

Rank	State	Percent of Emigration Clearances	Rank	State	Percent of Emigration Clearances
1	Andhra Pradesh	31	06	Uttar Pradesh	7
2	Bihar	15	07	Punjab	7
3	Tamilnadu	11	08	Rajasthan	7
4	Kerala	10	09	Odisha	2
5	West Bengal	08	10	Telangana	2

[Source: MEA data, 2011-16 (Cross references: Indian Labour Migration Update 2018)]

The quantity of passport applications that the Patna Regional Passport Office receives and issues is yet another measure of international migration. The relevant data is shown in table-2 for the year 2015-16 to 2023-24. The first three years show the granted passport is more than received application due to outstanding application of earlier years. It's also noteworthy that over 60% of the applications were from six districts in Bihar: Saran (6.5%), East Champaran (6.8%), West Champaran (6.8%), Patna (10.3%), Gopalganj (13.8%), and Siwan (16.5%). The spatial concentration of foreign migrant workers makes it clear that social networks are important to the migration process.

Table 2

Year	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	Total
Received Application	323.9	296.3	322.6	367.9	286.7	161.0	310.9	565.9	379.354	3014.554
Issued Passport	357.6	296.8	339.1	337.4	305.3	155.8	309.1	554.8	358.138	3014.038

(Source: Ministry of External Affairs, Regional Passport Office, Patna)

Social and Economic Impact of Migration

Migration has deeply influenced the social and economic life of Bihar.

Positive Impacts

One of the most important benefits of migration is remittance income. Money sent by migrants supports household consumption, education, healthcare, housing, and agricultural investment. Migration has also contributed to social mobility. Many families have improved their economic conditions through migrant earnings. Exposure to urban environments and different cultures has influenced social attitudes, educational aspirations, and lifestyle patterns in rural Bihar. Migration networks have created strong connections between Bihar and different regions of India and the world.

Negative Impacts

Despite economic benefits, migration also creates several social challenges. Families are often separated for long periods. Women, children, and elderly family members remain behind in villages, leading to emotional stress and increased domestic responsibilities. Migrant workers frequently experience exploitation, discrimination, poor living conditions, and job insecurity in destination areas. Seasonal migration can interrupt children's education and weaken community life. In some cases, excessive dependence on migration discourages local economic development and reinforces regional inequality.

COVID-19 and Return Migration

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the vulnerability of migrant workers in India. During the nationwide lockdown in 2020, millions of migrant labourers lost employment and were forced to return to their home states. Bihar witnessed one of the largest return migrations in modern Indian history. Workers travelled long distances under extremely difficult conditions. The pandemic exposed the lack of social protection available to migrant workers. It also highlighted how deeply Bihar's economy depends on labour mobility and remittances. At the same time, the crisis generated discussions about employment generation, rural development, and migrant welfare policies.

Migration Networks and Cultural Identity

Migration from Bihar is sustained not only by economic factors but also by social networks. Family members, relatives, neighbours, and community contacts help migrants secure jobs, housing, and social support in destination areas. These networks reduce risks associated with migration and encourage continuous movement.

Cultural identity also remains important among migrant communities. Bhojpuri language, folk music, festivals, and traditional customs continue to connect migrants with their roots. Migrant communities often recreate aspects of village life in urban spaces through community associations and cultural gatherings. Thus, migration is not merely a movement of labour; it is also a movement of memories, relationships, traditions, and aspirations.

CONCLUSION

The historical evolution of migration in Bihar demonstrates that migration has been a continuous and dynamic feature of the region's social and economic life. From ancient centres of learning and pilgrimage to colonial plantation labour systems and modern global labour markets, Bihar's migration history reflects broader historical transformations in South Asia. Ancient migration was associated with knowledge, trade, and religious exchange. Medieval migration reflected administrative expansion and cultural interaction. Colonial rule transformed migration into a system of labour exploitation connected with global capitalism. Post-independence regional inequality, weak industrialization, and agricultural distress intensified labour migration within India and abroad.

In the contemporary period, migration from Bihar has become increasingly diversified. It now includes seasonal labourers, students, professionals, entrepreneurs, and international migrants. Migration has improved livelihoods for many households through remittances and social mobility, but it has also created emotional, social, and economic challenges. The persistence of migration suggests that it is deeply embedded within Bihar's socio-economic structure. Migration today functions both as a survival strategy and as an aspiration for a better future.

Understanding the historical roots of migration is therefore essential for developing inclusive public policies. Policymakers must focus not only on migrant welfare and labour rights but also on generating sustainable employment, improving education, strengthening rural infrastructure, and reducing regional inequalities within Bihar. Ultimately, the story of migration in Bihar is not only a story of hardship and displacement. It is also a story of resilience, adaptation, ambition, and human dignity. Across generations, migrants from Bihar have carried with them the hope of building better lives for themselves and their families. Their journeys continue to shape the economic and cultural landscape of India and beyond.

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