

# Migration of Labourers in Bihar: A Geographical Study

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## Abstract

Migration of labour has long shaped the socio-economic landscape of Bihar. Despite its abundant human resources, the state continues to witness large-scale out-migration due to ecological stress, lack of industrial development, and limited livelihood opportunities. This paper explores the geographical dimensions of labour migration in Bihar, tracing historical roots, identifying present-day patterns, and assessing socio-economic consequences. Using secondary data sources such as the Census of India (2001, 2011), NSSO reports, PLFS 2019–20, and the Economic Survey of Bihar 2021–22, the study analyses district-wise trends, push-pull factors, and COVID-19 reverse migration. Findings indicate that while migration supports household income through remittances, it simultaneously drains Bihar of its productive workforce. The discussion emphasizes geographical disparities, remittance dependence, and the pandemic's lessons for sustainable employment. Recommendations include rural industrialization, skill development, and policy support to reduce distress migration.

## Keywords

Migration, Bihar, labour mobility, remittances, push-pull factors, COVID-19

## Introduction

Migration has been a defining socio-economic experience for Bihar's population for more than a century. From the colonial-era indentured system to present-day flows towards Delhi, Mumbai, Surat, and Punjab, migration has become deeply embedded in the livelihood strategies of Bihari households. According to Census 2011, Bihar recorded one of the highest out-migration rates in India. North Bihar, in particular, is prone to seasonal floods and agricultural stress, compelling large numbers of labourers to seek work elsewhere. Despite modest improvements reflected in the Economic Survey of Bihar 2021–22, the state still lacks sufficient industrialization to retain its workforce.

## Objectives

1. Trace the historical evolution of labour migration in Bihar.
2. Identify district-wise and regional migration patterns.
3. Examine push and pull factors driving labour migration.
4. Assess the socio-economic consequences for Bihar and destination regions.
5. Study the impact of COVID-19 reverse migration.
6. Suggest policy measures for reducing distress-driven migration.

## Methodology

This paper is based on secondary data sources including Census of India (2001, 2011), National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) reports, Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS 2019–20), and Economic Survey of Bihar 2021–22. District Statistical Handbooks, scholarly articles, and reports by NITI Aayog and the World Bank have also been consulted. Tables, charts, maps, and diagrams have been generated to represent data visually, ensuring clarity and geographical analysis.

## Results and Discussion



### Historical Background

Labour migration from Bihar has colonial roots. During the 19th century, large numbers of Biharis were sent to Mauritius, Fiji, and the Caribbean as indentured labourers. Post-independence, the closure of sugar mills, weak industrial base, and environmental challenges pushed workers towards Indian cities. By the late 20th century, migration became a permanent survival strategy. The historical trajectory shows that migration is not only economic but also deeply social, as households began to depend on remittances for survival, embedding migration into Bihar's socio-economic fabric.

Map 1: Leading Districts of Out-migrants in Bihar (2011)

Table 1: District-wise Patterns of Migration

District	Out-migrants (lakh)	Share of State Total (%)
Sitamarhi	7.5	6.2
Madhubani	8.1	6.7
Darbhangha	7.0	5.8
Gopalganj	6.8	5.6
Purnea	7.4	6.1
Muzaffarpur	6.5	5.4

Source: Census of India 2011

Table 1 presents the district-wise out-migration from Bihar, showing that Sitamarhi, Madhubani, and Darbhanga are the leading districts in terms of labour outflow. These districts, located in North Bihar, face recurring floods, land

fragmentation, and weak industrial development, pushing people to migrate. In contrast, districts like Rohtas and Patna (not shown here) record relatively lower migration due to local economic opportunities and better urbanization. The bar chart below visually represents these differences, highlighting how migration is geographically concentrated in North Bihar.

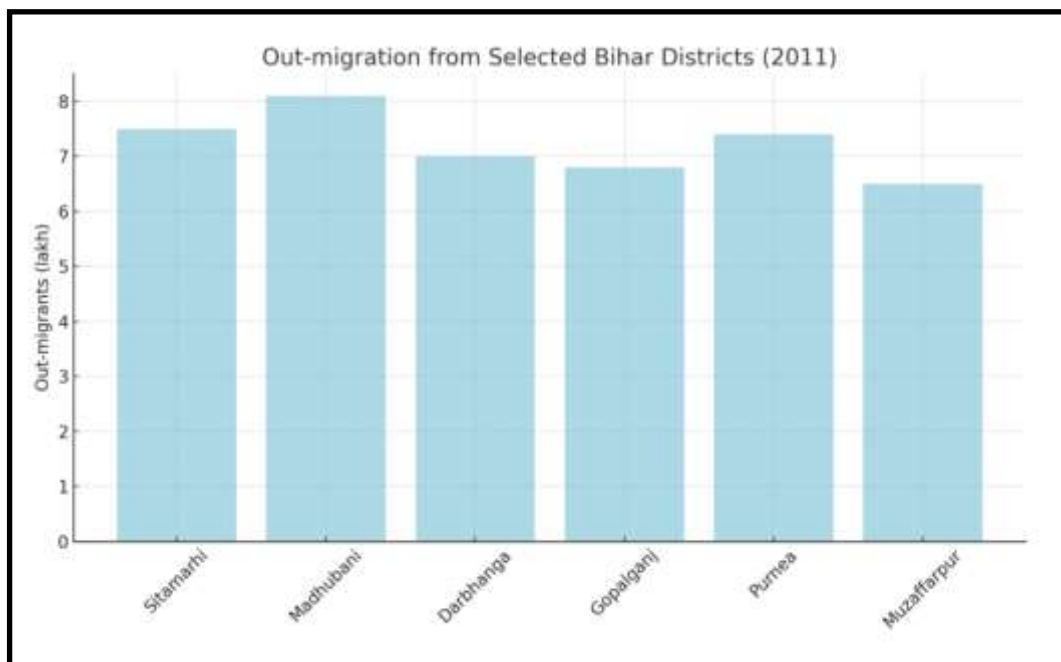


Fig. 1: Out-migration from Selected Bihar Districts (2011)

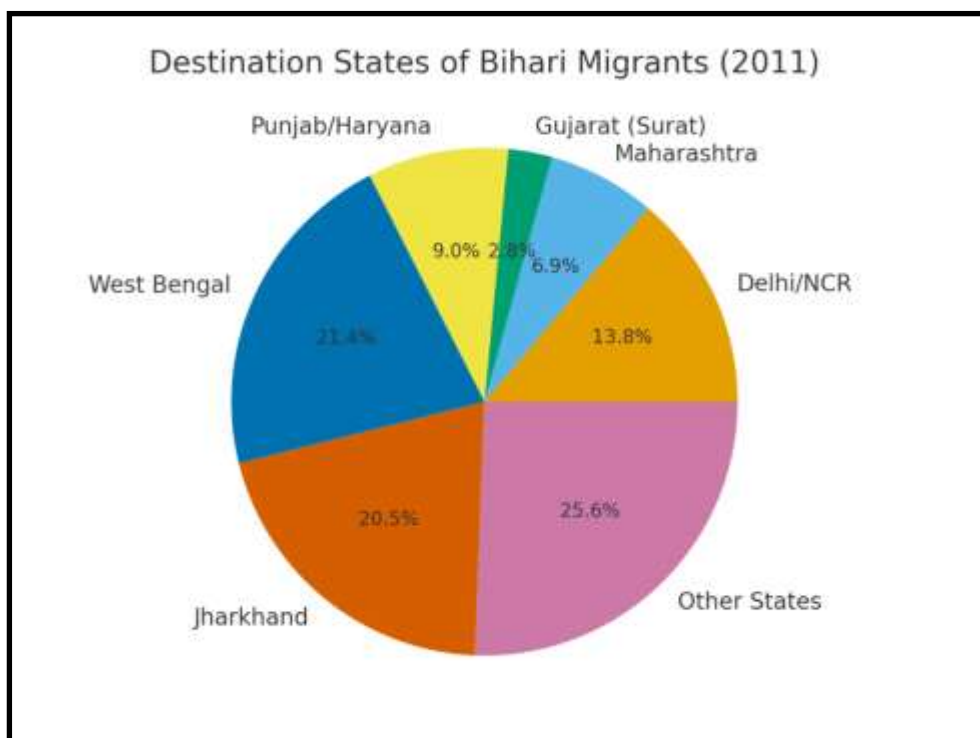
Figure 1 shows that Madhubani leads with over 8 lakh migrants, closely followed by Sitamarhi and Purnea. This pattern reflects both demographic pressure and environmental push factors, with recurrent floods in the Kosi and Gandak basins being a major driver of migration. The bar chart also illustrates how migration is not uniform but varies significantly across districts, underlining the regional disparity in labour mobility.

Table 2: Destination States and Corridors

Destination State	% of Migrants
Delhi/NCR	13.8
Maharashtra	6.9
Gujarat (Surat)	2.8
Punjab/Haryana	9.0
West Bengal	21.4
Jharkhand	20.5
Other States	25.6

Source: Census 2011, NSSO Migration Surveys

Table 2 indicates the main destinations of Bihari migrants. West Bengal and Jharkhand together account for over 40% of migration due to geographical proximity and employment opportunities in construction and mining. Delhi/NCR attracts almost 14% of migrants, primarily for construction and informal services, while Gujarat's Surat has emerged as a hub for textile and diamond industries. The distribution reflects a mix of historical linkages and contemporary economic pull



factors.

Fig. 2 : Destination States of Bihari Migrants (2011)

Figure 2 illustrates the proportion of Bihari migrants by destination state. West Bengal emerges as the largest recipient, reflecting historical migration ties and ease of connectivity. Jharkhand follows closely due to industrial opportunities. The pie chart also shows the importance of Delhi and Maharashtra, which together host nearly 21% of Bihar's migrants. This highlights the national-scale reach of Bihar's labour migration networks.

### Push-Pull Factors of Migration in Bihar

Environmental stress (floods in North Bihar and droughts in South Bihar), alongside poverty, unemployment, and land fragmentation, pushes people out of their villages. Pull factors such as higher wages, urban job markets, and established migrant networks attract workers to cities like Delhi, Mumbai, and Surat. The combination of push and pull dynamics makes migration almost inevitable for rural households in Bihar.

Table 3: COVID-19 and Reverse Migration

Wave of Return	Estimated Returnees (lakh)	Registered under Govt. Schemes
First wave (Apr–Jul 2020)	25–30	23 lakh
Second wave (Apr–Jun 2021)	10–12	8 lakh
Total (2020–21)	35–40	—

Source: Govt. of Bihar, Economic Survey 2021–22; Ministry of Labour reports

Table 3 presents the return migration during COVID-19. Between April and July 2020, around 25–30 lakh migrants returned to Bihar, followed by 10–12 lakh in the second wave of 2021. The state government registered nearly 23 lakh workers in the first wave under relief schemes. This sudden influx of returnees created immense pressure on rural livelihoods and highlighted Bihar's dependence on external labour markets.

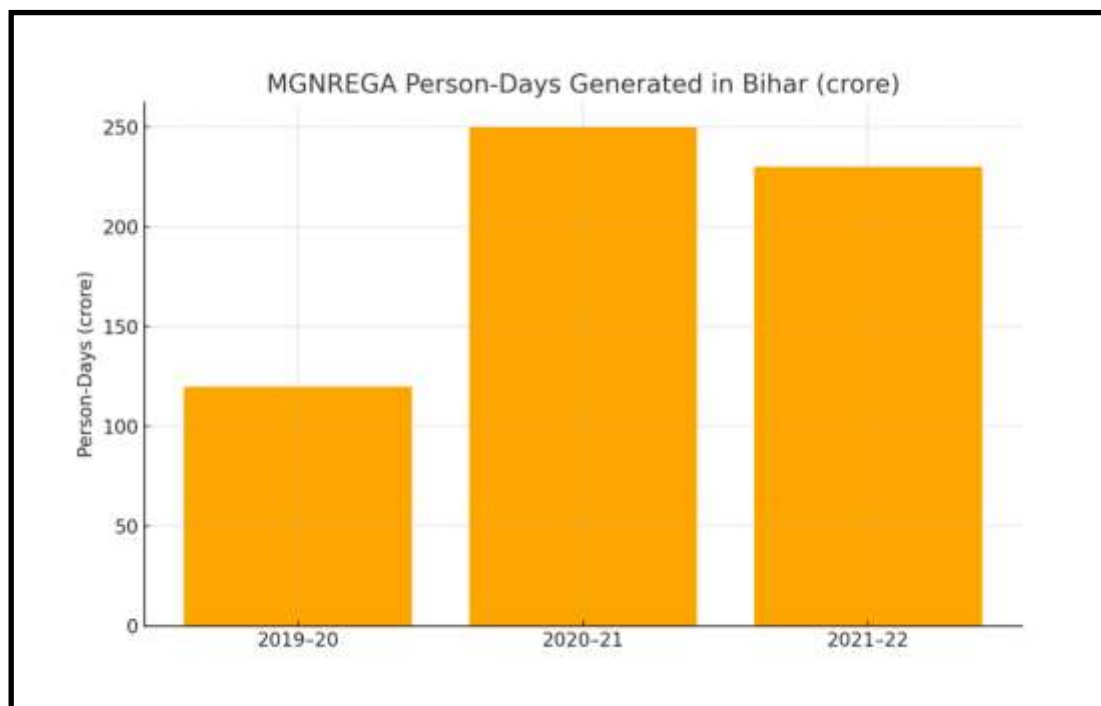


Fig. 3.: MGNREGA Person-Days Generated in Bihar (crore)

Figure 3 shows the surge in MGNREGA employment during the pandemic. In 2019–20, about 120 crore person-days were generated, but this doubled to 250 crore in 2020–21 as returning migrants sought local work. Though the scheme cushioned some of the shock, it was not enough to absorb all returnees. By 2021–22, demand declined slightly as many workers re-migrated, reflecting Bihar's structural dependence on migration.

## Conclusion

Labour migration from Bihar is both an opportunity and a challenge. While remittances sustain household consumption and improve social indicators, the continuous outflow of young labour drains the state of its productive capacity. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the vulnerabilities of migrant workers and the urgent need for local employment opportunities. To reduce distress-driven migration, Bihar must invest in rural industrialization, skill development, infrastructure, and formal labour protection systems. Geographical constraints like floods and droughts demand region-specific development models. A balanced approach will allow Bihar to transform migration from a survival strategy into a choice.

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