



An Analysis Of Migration Pattern Of Seasonal Migrants- A Case Study Analysis From Purnea District, Bihar

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Introduction

The migration patterns of developed and developing nations differ sharply. In developed countries, migration is largely driven by pull factors such as better opportunities and improved living conditions at the destination. In contrast, in developing countries, push factors, including poverty, unemployment, lack of development, and natural disasters—force people to leave their native places in search of survival. Thus, for a majority of the poor, migration continues to function primarily as a coping and survival strategy (Das and Saha, 2013).

Migration has been viewed as an intrinsic aspect of human life since the very beginning of civilization. Within social sciences, population studies place significant focus on migration, not merely as the physical movement of individuals from one place to another, but also in terms of its broader impact on the lives and experiences of those individuals (Hossain, 2001).

Purnia district, located in the eastern part of Bihar, shares its boundaries with Katihar, Bhagalpur, Madhepura, Araria, Kishanganj, and a small stretch of West Bengal. Local traditions offer differing views on the origin of its name: some trace it to the ancient temple of Mata Purn Devi in the district, while others believe it derives from the Hindi phrase “*Purna-Aranya*”, meaning “Complete Jungle.” Despite its cultural heritage, Purnia ranks among the poorest districts of Bihar, with a literacy rate of just 51.08 percent—significantly lower than the state average of 61.8 percent, according to the 2011 Census. The census further highlights a stark rural-urban divide, with 89.49 percent of the population living in rural areas and only 10.51 percent in urban settlements. These figures underscore the district’s persistent poverty and low standards of living.

Research has shown that Purnia is heavily affected by seasonal migration, with over half of its households reporting at least one migrant member due to acute unemployment and widespread poverty (Deshingkar et al., 2006). The continuous cycle of people moving back and forth each year points to the severity of economic hardship in the region. Yet, comprehensive studies capturing the complete reality of migration in Purnia remain limited. Against this backdrop, the present study aims to examine the nature, causes, and consequences of migration for both migrants and their families.

Objectives

1. To find out the destination of seasonal migrants from Srinagar block of Purnea district.
2. To know the kind of assistance getting during the migration journey.
3. To know the purpose of migration.

Research Questions

1. What are the factors that determine the destination of migrants?
2. Is assistance really help them?
3. At what extent the purpose meet the criteria?

Data sources

This study employs a case study approach, with data collected through a household survey of 202 households representing two religious groups: Hindus (Other Backward Castes and Scheduled Castes) and Muslims (General Castes and Other Backward Castes). For the purpose of analysis, a migrant household is defined as one in which at least one member has lived away from the usual place of residence for employment purposes for 60 days or more within the past year.

Analysis

Place of destination

In the selection of migration destinations, seasonal migrants demonstrate relatively less dependence on intermediaries or external actors, particularly when compared to long-term or permanent migrants. Instead, their choices are guided by a combination of structural and social factors. Drawing on the *push-pull framework*, the pull factors include labor demand at specific destinations, while the push factors emerge from limited livelihood opportunities at the place of origin.

Equally important are the social networks and linkages migrants maintain with workers, contractors, and kin in their localities. These connections act as a form of social capital, reducing risks and uncertainties

associated with migration by providing information, access to employers, and in some cases, assistance with travel and accommodation.

An illustrative example is the Mushar community, which regularly migrates to the agricultural fields of Punjab and Haryana. Their movement is strongly shaped by the demand for their specialized skills in paddy cultivation, making them a preferred labor force in these regions. This case highlights how labor market segmentation and the recognition of community-based occupational skills intersect with social networks to influence seasonal migration patterns.

Table-1 Destination site of seasonal migrants (In percentage)

Caste	Delhi Only	Delhi, Punjab, And U.P	Within Bihar	West Bengal	Punjab, Haryana, And U.P (Rural Areas)	Total
Sheikh	80	20	0	0	0	100
Anshari	0	87.5	0	0	12.5	100
Mushar (Manjhi)	0	22	26	0	52	100
Mahaldar	0	9.52	0	90.48	0	100
Godhi	0	12.5	0	0	87.5	100
Dusadh	0	0	0	0	100	100
Chamar	0	25	0	0	75	100
Total	15.84	19.31	6.44	18.81	39.6	100
Source- Primary Survey 2022-23						

The table presents the caste-wise distribution of migrant households according to their destinations, highlighting clear patterns of caste-based migration circuits. Among the Sheikh households, migration is entirely concentrated in Delhi, showing a strong and exclusive urban linkage with the city. The Anshari caste demonstrates a more diverse pattern, with the majority (87.5%) migrating to Delhi, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh, and the remaining 12.5% to the rural areas of Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh. The Mushar (Manjhi) community reflects a widely dispersed pattern, as more than half (52%) migrate to rural Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh for agricultural labor, 26% remain within Bihar in short-distance seasonal migration, while 22% move towards Delhi, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh. By contrast, the Mahaldar caste shows an overwhelming preference for West Bengal, with 90.48% migrating there and only a small fraction to Delhi, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh, indicating a regional migration corridor shaped by proximity and cultural familiarity. The Godhi community, similar to the Mushars, is strongly linked to rural agrarian

destinations, with 87.5% moving to Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh, while 12.5% migrate to Delhi, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh. The Dusadh households display the highest concentration, with all migrants (100%) directed exclusively towards Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh, reflecting a strong occupational dependence on agricultural labor. Likewise, the Chamar caste is heavily concentrated in rural agrarian destinations, with 75% migrating to Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh, while 25% are engaged in urban or semi-urban migration circuits including Delhi.

At the aggregate level, the overall distribution shows that the largest share of migrants (39.6%) move to rural Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh, emphasizing the continued importance of agricultural labor migration. This is followed by 19.31% migrating to Delhi, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh combined, 18.81% to West Bengal, and 15.84% exclusively to Delhi, while only 6.44% remain within Bihar. These trends suggest that while Delhi continues to attract a considerable share of urban migrants, the dominant pattern is migration to rural agrarian regions, particularly among marginalized caste groups. The data, therefore, underscores the persistence of caste-based segmentation in migration, with upper and intermediate castes like Sheikh showing urban-oriented migration, while Scheduled Castes and marginalized groups such as Mushar, Dusadh, Chamar, and Godhi are concentrated in rural agricultural circuits.

Sources of assistance in the destination

The source of assistance is a critical factor in shaping migration outcomes. Migrants rarely move in isolation; rather, they rely on different forms of support to facilitate their journey and settlement at the destination. Assistance may come from family members, relatives, friends, co-villagers, or labor contractors, each playing a significant role in easing the migration process. Such networks provide valuable information about job opportunities, routes of travel, costs involved, and living arrangements at the destination. In many cases, they also offer financial help or advance payments, which enable migrants to cover travel and subsistence expenses. Beyond the logistical and financial aspects, sources of assistance also act as a protective mechanism, helping migrants avoid exploitation, discrimination, and harassment—both physical and mental—by employers, landlords, or contractors. For marginalized caste groups, in particular, this support becomes even more vital, as it reduces vulnerability in unfamiliar environments. In this way, the presence or absence of reliable assistance networks significantly influences not only the choice of destination but also the safety, security, and overall success of migration experiences.

Table-2 Purpose of migration (In percent to the total HHs)

Source Of Assistance	Total Number	Percentage To The Total
Labour contractor	79	39.11
Labour union	1	0.5
Other workers	88	43.56
Friend/ relatives	34	16.83
Total	202	100

Source- Primary Survey 2022-23

The table highlights the different sources of assistance available to migrant households in facilitating their migration journey and employment opportunities. Out of the total 202 households surveyed, the majority (43.56%) reported receiving support from other workers. This indicates the strong role of peer-to-peer networks within the labor market, where co-workers or fellow migrants already employed at the destination provide information, guidance, and initial support for new entrants. Such informal worker-to-worker linkages function as a vital form of social capital, enabling smoother integration into the labor market.

The second most significant source of assistance was labour contractors, cited by 39.11% of households. Contractors play a particularly prominent role in organizing and channeling the migration flow, especially for those engaged in agricultural and construction work. They often act as intermediaries between employers and laborers, arranging travel, negotiating wages, and ensuring group recruitment. However, reliance on contractors may also expose migrants to exploitative practices due to unequal power relations, wage cuts, or bonded labor-like conditions.

A smaller yet notable proportion of migrants (16.83%) depended on friends and relatives for assistance. This reflects the role of kinship-based networks, which are typically more trustworthy and protective compared to contractors. Such support not only helps migrants reach their destinations but also offers emotional and social security, reducing risks of harassment and exploitation.

The least significant source of assistance reported was labour unions, accounting for only 0.5% of the total. This suggests that the role of formal institutions and collective bargaining organizations in supporting migrant labor remains extremely limited in the study area. Migrants continue to rely heavily on informal networks rather than institutional mechanisms, which reveals a gap in organized labor protection for this group.

At the aggregate level, the findings indicate that informal networks dominate the migration process, with over 99% of households depending on either contractors, co-workers, or personal relations. The minimal involvement of unions underlines the absence of institutional safeguards for migrants, leaving them largely dependent on community or contractor-led arrangements.

Purpose of migration

The purpose of seasonal migration in the study area emerges very clearly from the findings. Migration is primarily driven by the scarcity of employment opportunities in the local villages as well as within the broader district and state. The agricultural sector, which constitutes the main source of livelihood in rural Bihar, is characterized by low productivity, fragmented landholdings, and seasonal demand for labor, which together fail to provide sustainable income throughout the year. Non-farm employment opportunities are also scarce, with limited scope for industrial or service-based work in the local economy. As a result, households are compelled to seek short-term, seasonal migration as a livelihood diversification strategy to bridge income gaps, cope with poverty, and ensure survival. Seasonal migration thus acts as a critical coping mechanism, enabling households to supplement their earnings during the agricultural lean season and to meet essential consumption needs such as food, health, education, and debt repayment. In this context, the reliance on migration is less a matter of choice than of necessity, reflecting the structural constraints of the rural labor market in the region.

Table-3 Purpose of migration (In percent to the total HHs)

Purpose	percentage of the total
in search of employment/better employment	97.52
social and political problems	2.48
Total	100
Source- Primary Survey 2022-23	

The table clearly demonstrates that the overwhelming purpose of migration in the study area is economic in nature. Out of the total households surveyed, 97.52% reported migrating in search of employment or better employment opportunities. This finding highlights the severe scarcity of viable livelihood options in the local economy and confirms that migration is primarily a survival strategy rather than a matter of choice. The dependence on migration underscores the inability of local agricultural and non-agricultural sectors to generate sufficient and sustainable income, compelling households to seek work outside their villages, districts, or even the state. Seasonal migration thus becomes an essential means to secure wages, diversify income, and meet household consumption needs.

In contrast, only 2.48% of households identified social and political problems as the reason for migration. While this percentage is very small, it indicates that a limited number of families are compelled to migrate due to issues such as caste-based discrimination, social conflict, or local political pressures that create a hostile environment in their place of origin. For these households, migration is not merely an economic

necessity but also a form of social escape and survival strategy, offering them a safer and more secure living environment elsewhere.

At the aggregate level, the table reveals that economic compulsion dominates the migration process, with social and political drivers playing only a marginal role. This finding supports the interpretation that migration in the study area is overwhelmingly “push-driven”, shaped by the absence of adequate employment opportunities at home rather than by attractive conditions at the destination.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings clearly show that migration in the study area is not an individual or voluntary choice but a necessity shaped by structural economic constraints and mediated through informal support systems. The overwhelming majority of households migrate in search of employment, reflecting the push-driven nature of migration caused by the scarcity of livelihood opportunities in local villages, districts, and the state as a whole. At the same time, the process of migration is heavily dependent on informal networks of assistance, particularly fellow workers, contractors, and kinship ties, which not only facilitate mobility but also provide protection against exploitation and insecurity. The negligible role of formal institutions such as labor unions highlights a significant gap in organized support and protection for migrant workers. Thus, seasonal migration emerges as both a coping strategy for survival and a socially mediated process, where economic compulsions intersect with community-based networks to shape the overall migration experience.

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