



Seasonal Migration in South Bihar in the Aftermath of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Patterns, Impact, and Policy Response

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Abstract

South Bihar — the Magadh and southern Bhojpur belt comprising districts such as Gaya, Aurangabad, Nawada, Jehanabad, Arwal, Rohtas, Kaimur and Nalanda — has for decades been one of India's most significant source regions for seasonal and circular labour migration. The COVID-19 pandemic and the nationwide lockdown of March 2020 triggered an unprecedented reverse-migration event, with an estimated three million migrant workers returning to Bihar within weeks. This paper examines the pre-pandemic migration baseline, the scale and nature of reverse migration, its socio-economic consequences for source households, and the extent to which migrants have since re-migrated or found local alternatives. Drawing on household surveys conducted by the Institute for Human Development, rapid assessments by ActionAid, district-level studies from Kaimur, and the Bihar Economic Survey, the paper finds that over ninety per cent of migrant households suffered an adverse livelihood shock, that local employment guarantee schemes absorbed only a small fraction of returnees, and that most workers eventually re-migrated once destination-area economies reopened — underscoring the continued structural dependence of South Bihar's rural economy on out-migration. The paper concludes with data-based recommendations and an assessment of the Government of Bihar's policy response, including skill-mapping drives, the Bihar Skill Development Mission, and expanded MGNREGA provisioning.

Keywords: South Bihar, seasonal migration, reverse migration, COVID-19, MGNREGA, Bihar Skill Development Mission, Magadh region, rural livelihoods.

1. Introduction

Bihar is India's largest source state for inter-state out-migration in absolute terms, and South Bihar — the drought-prone, agriculturally stressed districts lying south of the Ganga — has historically supplied a disproportionate share of the state's circular and seasonal migrant workforce. Poor irrigation coverage, fragmented landholdings,

limited non-farm employment, and recurring agrarian distress have pushed generations of workers from districts such as Gaya, Aurangabad, Nawada, Kaimur, Rohtas, Jehanabad and Arwal toward the construction sites, brick kilns, textile units and industrial hubs of Delhi-NCR, Punjab, Haryana, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Karnataka.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted this well-established migration system in a manner without recent precedent. The nationwide lockdown announced on 24 March 2020 left millions of migrant workers stranded without income, transport, or social protection in destination cities, prompting a mass reverse-migration wave back to native villages. Bihar received the single largest number of returning migrants of any Indian state — an estimated three million workers within a few months of the lockdown. South Bihar's rural economy, already stretched, had to absorb this workforce with little productive local employment to offer.

This paper synthesises the available survey-based evidence on the scale, drivers and consequences of this migration disruption for South Bihar, and evaluates the adequacy of the Government of Bihar's subsequent policy response.

2. Objectives of the Study

- To document the pre-pandemic pattern and scale of seasonal out-migration from South Bihar.
- To assess the magnitude and socio-economic impact of reverse migration triggered by the COVID-19 lockdown.
- To examine the extent to which returnee households accessed government safety nets such as MGNREGA and the Public Distribution System.
- To analyse post-pandemic re-migration trends and their implications for rural livelihoods in South Bihar.
- To review Government of Bihar policy interventions and propose evidence-based recommendations.

3. Methodology

This paper adopts a secondary-data research design, synthesising evidence from peer-reviewed studies, government reports and rapid assessments rather than conducting a fresh primary survey. Principal sources include the Institute for Human Development / Ideas for India household survey covering over 1,600 households in twelve villages across seven Bihar districts; the Economic and Political Weekly study on the COVID-19 pandemic and migrant workers from rural Bihar; an ActionAid rapid assessment of 177 returnee migrants across fifteen Bihar districts; a district-level Krishi Vigyan Kendra study of reverse migrants in Kaimur district; the Bihar Economic Survey 2024–25; and Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data. Figures reported in this paper reflect the specific survey samples cited and should be read as indicative of the broader South Bihar pattern rather than as a state-wide census.

4. South Bihar's Migration Profile: The Pre-Pandemic Baseline

Migration has long functioned as a core livelihood strategy for South Bihar's rural households rather than a marginal or distress-only phenomenon. Survey evidence from the Institute for Human Development found that more than half of rural Bihar households had at least one migrant worker prior to the pandemic, with well-documented migration corridors linking specific source districts to specific destinations — for instance Rohtas to Gujarat, Kaimur and Aurangabad to Punjab and Haryana, and Gaya and Nawada to Delhi-NCR and Maharashtra. Construction, brick-kiln work, textile manufacturing and agricultural labour were the dominant sectors of employment at destination.

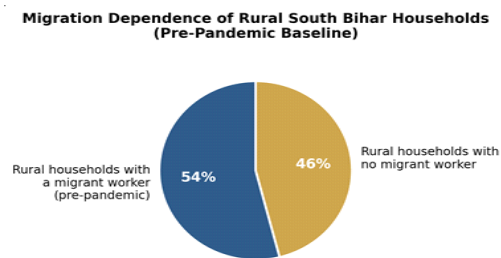


Figure 1: Share of rural South Bihar households with at least one migrant worker, pre-pandemic baseline.

Source: Institute for Human Development / Ideas for India household survey (1,600+ households, 7 Bihar districts, 2020).

This dependence made South Bihar's rural economy structurally exposed to any large-scale disruption of the migration system a vulnerability that materialised fully with the onset of the pandemic.

5. Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Reverse Migration and Its Consequences

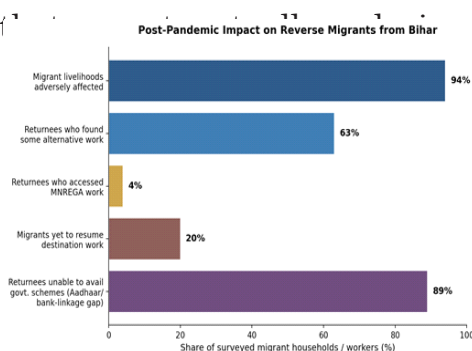
The nationwide lockdown of March 2020 halted construction activity, industrial production and daily-wage work across India's major migrant-receiving states almost overnight. With incomes lost and no means of return transport initially available, Bihar's migrant workers faced acute distress before the state and central governments arranged Shramik Special trains and buses to bring them home. Bihar alone received an estimated three million returning migrants — the highest of any state — placing severe strain on the absorptive capacity of rural South Bihar.

Household-level evidence indicates that the shock was near-universal among migrant families: ninety-four per cent of rural households with a migrant worker reported that the worker's livelihood was adversely affected. The typical returning worker lost more than forty days of work even before reaching the village, and once home, spent a further four to five months there with limited local income-earning opportunity, since South Bihar's rural non-farm economy could not absorb the sudden labour surplus.

Government safety nets proved only partially effective in cushioning this shock. Fewer than two-thirds of returnees found any alternative part-time work around their village, and that work typically amounted to only three to four days a week. MGNREGA the principal rural employment guarantee available locally reached a strikingly small share of returnees: only about four per cent of returning migrants secured MGNREGA work in the immediate aftermath, despite the scheme's legal entitlement of up to 100 days of guaranteed employment. Separately, a district-level study in Kaimur recorded 8,495 reverse migrants across 879 villages in eleven blocks, estimating an associated loss of remittance income of roughly 138.6 crore annually (11.55 crore a month) to the district economy.

Access to welfare entitlements was also constrained by documentation and administrative gaps. A rapid assessment by ActionAid covering 177 returnee migrants across fifteen Bihar districts found that respondents were unable to access government schemes principally because their Aadhaar numbers were not linked to their bank accounts (cited in 89% of cases), because entitlements could not be claimed outside the migrant's home district (83%), and because of a general lack of awareness of available

schemes (36%) — reasons for more than one barrier.



as most respondents cited

Figure 2: Post-pandemic impact indicators for reverse migrants from Bihar. Sources: IHD/Ideas for India household survey (2020); ActionAid rapid assessment of 177 returnees, 15 Bihar districts (2020).

By the time follow-up surveys were conducted, the majority of returnees who intended to re-migrate had already gone back to their destination areas — but roughly one-fifth of those who returned to destinations were still to resume work, and a comparable share of the original returnee pool had not yet re-migrated at all, remaining dependent on constrained local livelihoods. This pattern indicates that reverse migration during the pandemic was overwhelmingly temporary rather than a durable shift toward local employment, reaffirming out-migration as the default livelihood strategy for South Bihar households once destination-area economies reopened.

6. Post-Pandemic Structural Indicators

More recent state-level data help contextualise why re-migration resumed so strongly. The Bihar Economic Survey 2024–25 records a Labour Force Participation Rate of 43.4 per cent for 2022–23, well below the national average of around 56 per cent, alongside an unemployment rate of 3.4 per cent and urban youth unemployment (age 15–29) of 10.8 per cent. Agriculture continues to dominate rural employment, while construction and trade are growing but still limited sources of local jobs. These indicators

from South Bihar a narrow migration — remained largely unchanged.

Indicator	Value	Source / Period
Migrants returned to Bihar during 2020 lockdown	~3 million	State govt. estimates, 2020
Rural households with a pre-pandemic migrant worker	54%	IHD / Ideas for India survey, 2020
Migrant households reporting adverse livelihood impact	94%	IHD / Ideas for India survey, 2020
Returnees accessing MGNREGA work post-return	~4%	IHD / Ideas for India survey, 2020
Kaimur district reverse migrants	8,495 workers	KVK Kaimur study, 879 villages, 11 blocks
Bihar LFPR, 2022–23	43.4%	Bihar Economic Survey 2024–25
Bihar unemployment rate, 2022–23	3.4%	Bihar Economic Survey 2024–25

7. Government of Bihar's Policy Response

The Government of Bihar undertook a series of measures during and after the pandemic to register, support and re-employ returning migrant workers, several of which have since evolved into longer-term programmes:

7.1 Skill Mapping and the Migrant Job Portal

The state's Industries Department, working with district administrations, carried out a large-scale skill-mapping exercise of returning migrants and built the resulting database into a mobile application intended to match workers with job vacancies through district industry centres and generate automated job alerts based on recorded skills.

7.2 Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyaan

Bihar was the launch state for the Government of India's Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyaan, a 50,000-crore public-works programme announced in June 2020 to run in mission mode for 125 days across 116 districts in six migrant-origin states, combining rural infrastructure works with wage employment for returned migrants.

7.3 Bihar Skill Development Mission (BSDM)

Beyond emergency relief, the state's labour department, through BSDM, launched training programmes aimed specifically at Bihar-origin migrants working in states such as Karnataka, Kerala, Delhi-NCR, West Bengal, Gujarat and Maharashtra, intended to raise their skill recognition and bargaining power in construction, garments, retail and security sector jobs. Complementary state schemes include the Kushal Yuva Programme for youth soft-skills and IT training, and JEEVIKA-linked Rural Self-Employment Training Institutes (RSETIs) supporting entrepreneurship among returnee households.

7.4 PMKVY Special Component for Migrant Shramiks

Under the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana's special programme for the six Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyaan states, reverse migrants in Bihar were identified and mapped to job roles in coordination with district administrations, combining Short Term Training and Recognition of Prior Learning components.

7.5 Expanded MGNREGA Provisioning

Districts including Kaimur reported efforts to expand MGNREGA job-card issuance and worksite availability for returnees, though survey evidence suggests actual uptake among returned migrants remained low relative to the scale of the reverse-migration event, pointing to persistent implementation gaps at the block level.

8. Recommendations

8.1 Strengthen Local Employment Guarantee Delivery

- Expand MGNREGA worksite availability and job-card issuance specifically targeted at returnee and seasonal-migrant households in South Bihar's high out-migration blocks.
- Introduce fast-track MGNREGA registration for returning migrants during future crisis events, learning from the low uptake observed in 2020.

8.2 Improve Portability of Welfare Entitlements

- Accelerate Aadhaar-bank seeding and One Nation One Ration Card coverage so migrant households are not excluded from PDS and cash-transfer schemes while working outside their home district.
- Establish inter-state migrant welfare desks at major destination hubs (Delhi-NCR, Punjab, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka) linked to Bihar's labour department for grievance redressal and entitlement portability.

8.3 Deepen Skill Mapping and Job Matching

- Institutionalise the migrant skill-mapping database as a continuously updated registry rather than a one-time pandemic exercise, integrated with the Bihar Skill Development Mission and district industry centres.
- Expand destination-state skill-upgradation programmes under BSDM to more sectors beyond construction, garments, retail and security.

8.4 Build Local Non-Farm Employment Capacity

- Invest in food-processing, brick and construction-material clusters, and MSME

parks in South Bihar districts (Gaya, Aurangabad, Nawada, Kaimur, Rohtas) to raise the local labour-force participation rate closer to the national average.

- Strengthen RSETI- and JEEVIKA-linked entrepreneurship financing for returnee households seeking to remain in the home district.

8.5 Build a Migration Early-Warning and Data System

- Establish a real-time state migration database — building on the 2020 registration of roughly 651,000 returning migrants — to enable rapid, targeted responses during future economic or public-health shocks.
- Commission periodic (biennial) household migration surveys specific to South Bihar districts to track re-migration, remittance flows and local absorption capacity over time.

9. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed both the scale of South Bihar's dependence on seasonal out-migration and the limited capacity of local institutions to absorb returning workers when that system was disrupted. Survey evidence shows that the vast majority of migrant households suffered significant livelihood loss, that existing safety nets such as MGNREGA reached only a small share of returnees, and that most workers ultimately re-migrated once destination economies reopened rather than transitioning to sustained local employment. The Government of Bihar's response — spanning skill mapping, the Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyaan, BSDM training programmes and PMKVY's special migrant component represented a meaningful first step, but the persistence of a comparatively low labour force participation rate and continued heavy out-migration indicate that structural investment in local non-farm employment, portable welfare entitlements, and a permanent migration data system remain the priority for reducing South Bihar's vulnerability to future shocks.

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