



Research Article

Migration and Its Aftermath: A Study of Socio-Economic Challenges Faced by Internal Migrants in India

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19483823>

Abstract

Background: Internal migration has emerged as a central feature of India's socio-economic landscape, involving the movement of millions of workers from rural and semi-urban areas to urban centres in pursuit of livelihood. Despite their critical role in sustaining the informal economy, these migrants continue to face severe socio-economic deprivation after migration.

Objectives: This paper examines the socio-economic challenges encountered by internal migrants in India's informal sector after migration, with particular attention to livelihood precarity, housing conditions, access to basic services, and social exclusion.

Methodology: The study's main focus is a critical analysis of secondary data from the Economic Survey of India, Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), National Sample Survey (NSS) reports, Census of India, and peer-reviewed academic literature. The analysis is grounded in a Marxist political economy framework.

Findings: The paper finds that migration, contrary to being a pathway to upward mobility, frequently reproduces and deepens structural inequalities. Migrants face exploitative wages, inadequate housing, exclusion from welfare entitlements, and social discrimination.

Conclusion: Rights-based policy interventions and a structural reimagining of India's social protection architecture are urgently needed to address the systemic vulnerabilities of informal migrant workers.

Manuscript Information

- ISSN No: 2583-7397
- Received: 11-02-2026
- Accepted: 25-03-2026
- Published: 09-04-2026
- IJCRM:5(2); 2026: 472-476
- ©2026, All Rights Reserved
- Plagiarism Checked: Yes
- Peer Review Process: Yes

How to Cite this Article

Monish M, Saif S. Migration and Its Aftermath: A Study of Socio-Economic Challenges Faced by Internal Migrants in India. Int J Contemp Res Multidiscip. 2026;5(2):472-476.

Access this Article Online



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KEYWORDS: Internal migration, socio-economic challenges, informal sector, labour precarity, critical political economy

1. INTRODUCTION

India is home to one of the world's largest internal migrant populations. According to the Economic Survey of India (2017), approximately 9 million people migrate annually between states, while intra-state migration figures are considerably higher. The Census of India (2011) estimated the total number of internal migrants at around 450 million, a figure that has grown substantially in the years since. These migrants constitute the invisible backbone of urban construction, manufacturing, domestic work, sanitation, and a wide range of informal service industries.

Despite their economic significance, internal migrants in India occupy a position of acute structural vulnerability. They leave behind familiar social networks and support systems, only to find themselves in urban spaces marked by precarious employment, exploitative labour arrangements, inadequate housing, and systemic exclusion from social welfare entitlements. Due to the abrupt collapse of livelihoods and the lack of social safety nets in their destination cities, millions of migrant workers were forced into distressed reverse migration during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, which vividly revealed these vulnerabilities.

The socioeconomic circumstances of internal migrants in India following migration are critically examined in this essay, with a particular emphasis on workers in the unorganised sector. Using a Marxist political economy lens, the study situates migrant vulnerability within broader structures of class, uneven regional development, and capital accumulation. The paper draws on secondary data to map the scale of migration, analyse the nature of challenges faced, and propose a rights-based policy framework for reform.

1.1 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study is guided by the following research objectives:

1. To examine the socio-economic conditions of internal migrants in India's informal sector after migration.
2. To analyse the structural determinants of livelihood precarity, housing deprivation, and social exclusion experienced by migrant workers.
3. To assess the adequacy of existing legislative and policy frameworks in addressing the welfare needs of internal migrants.
4. To propose evidence-based policy recommendations for improving the socio-economic status and rights of informal migrant workers in India.

2. Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts a Marxist political economy framework to analyse the socio-economic conditions of internal migrants. Central to this perspective is Karl Marx's concept of the industrial reserve army of labour — the pool of unemployed or underemployed workers whose existence disciplines the employed workforce and suppresses wages (Marx, 1867/1990). Internal migrants in India function precisely as this reserve army: they are drawn into urban economies during periods of

expansion and expelled during economic downturns, as seen most starkly during the COVID-19 crisis.

The framework of uneven and combined development, theorised by Trotsky and later elaborated by scholars of dependency theory, explains how regional disparities between India's developed urban centres and underdeveloped agrarian hinterlands compel outmigration. Rural unemployment, agrarian distress, and the structural neglect of backward regions function as push factors, while the demand for cheap and disposable labour in urban informal economies serves as a pull factor (Bremman, 2010).

Harvey's (2004) concept of accumulation by dispossession is also instructive. The dispossession of agrarian communities through land acquisition, the withdrawal of state support from small-scale agriculture, and the erosion of rural livelihoods create a surplus population that has little choice but to migrate. In urban centres, this surplus population is absorbed into informal labour arrangements that enable capital accumulation at the cost of worker welfare. This framework helps explain why migration frequently reproduces, rather than resolves, conditions of poverty and deprivation.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The academic literature on internal migration in India has grown considerably over recent decades. Jan Bremman's foundational ethnographic work on footloose labour in Gujarat documented how migrant workers in informal industries such as brick kilns, construction, and agriculture are subjected to extreme forms of exploitation, including wage theft, bonded labour, and physical coercion (Bremman, 1996). His work established that informality is not an aberration but a structural feature of capitalist development in the Global South.

Deshingkar and Akter (2009), in a comprehensive review for the Human Development Research Paper series, found that while migration can improve household incomes in the short term, it does not necessarily translate into long-term upward mobility. Migrants remain trapped in low-wage, low-skill informal occupations with little prospect of social or economic advancement. The study highlighted the absence of institutional support as a critical barrier to migrant welfare.

Tumbe (2018), in his historical analysis of migration in India, traced the deep roots of circular and seasonal migration, arguing that migration has been a survival strategy for India's poor for centuries. However, the contemporary neo-liberal policy environment has intensified vulnerability by weakening labour protections and expanding the scope of informality. Similarly, Bhagat (2010) demonstrated using Census data that the volume and diversity of internal migration in India are substantially undercounted, making effective policy intervention difficult.

The report of the Working Group on Migration (Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, 2017) provided a comprehensive policy-oriented assessment of migrant conditions, noting critical gaps in access to housing, healthcare, education, and social security. The Economic Survey of India (2017) further corroborated these findings, estimating that approximately 4.5 crore inter-state circular migrants work in

India, the majority of whom are employed in the informal economy with no legal protections. The COVID-19 pandemic subsequently intensified academic attention on migration, with Sharma and Bhagat (2021) documenting the mass reverse migration of 2020 as a humanitarian crisis rooted in decades of policy neglect.

4. Patterns and Trends of Internal Migration in India

Internal migration in India is characterised by its scale, diversity, and structural embeddedness in the informal economy. The Census of India (2011) recorded approximately 450 million internal migrants, constituting around 37% of the total population. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS 2020-21) indicates that the majority of migrant workers are employed in construction (the single largest employer of migrants), manufacturing, domestic work, transport, and petty trade — all sectors defined by informality, low wages, and absence of social protection.

Major migration corridors include movements from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Odisha to destination states such as Maharashtra, Delhi, Gujarat, Haryana, and Kerala. These flows reflect the deep regional inequalities that characterise India's development trajectory, with economically backward states serving as labour reservoirs for relatively more industrialised regions. Circular and seasonal migration — characterised by repeated, temporary, and often distress-driven movement — is the dominant form, particularly among agricultural labourers, construction workers, and brick kiln workers (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009).

According to PLFS data, over 90% of India's workforce is employed in the informal sector, and migrants constitute a disproportionately large share of this informal labour force. Migrant workers are concentrated in the most precarious and hazardous segments of the informal economy, receiving wages below legal minimums and working under conditions of extreme physical and psychological stress (Tumbe, 2018).

5. Socio-Economic Challenges After Migration

5.1 Livelihood Precarity and Wage Exploitation

One of the most pervasive challenges faced by internal migrants is the precarity of their livelihoods. Migrant workers in the informal sector are typically engaged through intermediary contractors or labour brokers — known as sardars or thekedar — who extract a commission from wages while providing no legal employment contract. This arrangement renders workers invisible to labour law enforcement mechanisms and exposes them to arbitrary wage deduction, delayed payment, and outright wage theft (Breman, 1996).

The PLFS (2020-21) reveals that the average daily wage of casual migrant workers in construction is approximately Rs. 400-500, which remains below the nationally recommended minimum wage in several states. Moreover, the absence of written contracts means that migrant workers have no legal recourse when wages are withheld. The Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979 — the primary legislation governing

migrant labour — has been largely ineffective in practice due to poor implementation and low awareness among both workers and employers (Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, 2017).

5.2 Housing and Living Conditions

The housing conditions of internal migrants in Indian cities represent one of the most visible manifestations of their socio-economic deprivation. The vast majority of migrant workers reside in informal settlements, slums, or makeshift shelters at or near their worksites. A study by the National Human Rights Commission (2015) found that migrants in construction sites typically live in temporary tarpaulin shelters without access to clean drinking water, sanitation, or electricity.

Urban housing markets systematically exclude migrant workers through prohibitively high rents, requirements for local identity documents, and social discrimination based on caste, religion, and regional identity. The consequence is extreme overcrowding, with multiple families sharing single-room tenements. These conditions are not incidental but are structurally produced by the labour market's demand for cheap and disposable workers who can be housed as cheaply as they are paid (Harvey, 2004).

5.3 Access to Healthcare and Education

Migrant workers and their families face significant barriers in accessing healthcare and education in destination cities. Public health services are generally tied to local residence and documentation, which migrants frequently lack. The portability of health entitlements under schemes such as Ayushman Bharat has been limited in practice, with migrants often unaware of their eligibility or facing bureaucratic obstacles to enrolment (Sharma & Bhagat, 2021).

The children of migrant families suffer disproportionate educational disadvantage. Frequent movement between origin and destination disrupts school attendance, while the absence of birth certificates or local address proof prevents enrolment in destination schools. The Right to Education Act, 2009, has not been effectively implemented to account for the mobility of migrant children, resulting in high dropout rates and perpetuation of intergenerational poverty (Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, 2017).

5.4 Social Exclusion and Discrimination

Beyond economic deprivation, internal migrants face systematic social exclusion in destination cities. Discrimination based on language, caste, and regional identity is pervasive, shaping migrants' access to housing, employment, and public services. Migrants from North and Central India employed in construction in Southern cities often report linguistic discrimination and social hostility, while Adivasi and Dalit migrants face the compounding disadvantage of caste-based exclusion layered upon class-based exploitation (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009).

Migrants are also politically marginalised. As non-residents of their destination cities, they are unable to vote in local elections

and consequently receive little attention from urban political representatives. Their interests are similarly underrepresented at the state level in their origin regions, where they are physically absent during election periods. This double political invisibility ensures that migrant welfare remains a low priority in both origin and destination states (Tumbe, 2018).

5.5 Absence of Social Security and Welfare Entitlements

The portability of social welfare entitlements represents the most critical structural gap in India's treatment of internal migrants. Public Distribution System (PDS) rations, housing benefits under PMAY, and employment guarantees under MGNREGA are all tied to the native district or state of the worker. When migrants move to urban centres, they lose access to these entitlements without gaining equivalent protections in their destination (Bhagat, 2010).

The One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC) scheme, introduced in 2019 and accelerated following the COVID-19 crisis, represents a positive step toward portability. However, implementation remains uneven across states, and digital literacy barriers prevent many migrants from accessing the system. Similarly, the e-Shram portal — a national database of unorganised workers — has the potential to create a universal platform for migrant welfare delivery, but its effective integration with service delivery systems remains a work in progress.

6. COVID-19 and the Exposed Vulnerabilities of Migrant Workers

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent nationwide lockdown announced in March 2020 constituted an unprecedented humanitarian crisis for India's internal migrant workers. The sudden suspension of economic activity resulted in immediate job losses for millions of informal workers, while the closure of transportation networks stranded migrants in destination cities without income, food, or shelter. The subsequent spectacle of hundreds of thousands of migrants walking hundreds of kilometres back to their home states — some dying en route from exhaustion, accidents, and hunger — captured the scale of the policy failure and the depth of migrant vulnerability (Sharma & Bhagat, 2021).

The pandemic crisis demonstrated conclusively that India's social protection architecture had been constructed on the assumption of sedentary, locally embedded populations. Migrants fell through every crack: they were not covered by PDS because they lacked local ration cards; they were not covered by MGNREGA because they were not in their registered villages; and they were not covered by urban welfare schemes because they lacked local domicile documents. The crisis thus served as a dramatic diagnosis of the structural exclusion that had been quietly operating for decades.

7. Policy Analysis and Recommendations

Addressing the socio-economic challenges of internal migrants requires a fundamental rethinking of India's welfare architecture, moving from place-based entitlements to person-

based, portable rights. The following policy directions are proposed based on this review:

Universal Portability of Welfare Entitlements: The One Nation One Ration Card scheme must be fully implemented and extended to include healthcare, housing, and education entitlements. Welfare rights must follow the worker, not the address.

Strengthening Labour Law Enforcement: The Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act, 1979, or its successor provisions under the Code on Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions, 2020, must be vigorously enforced. Labour inspectorates must be adequately staffed and empowered to conduct worksite inspections in the construction and manufacturing sectors.

Universal Registration Through e-Shram: The e-Shram portal must be integrated with all major social welfare delivery systems. Registration campaigns must be conducted in source districts, and digital literacy support must be provided to enable migrant workers to enrol and access their entitlements.

Affordable Urban Housing: State governments must create designated migrant worker housing facilities at worksites and in urban peripheries, modelled on the Kerala government's Apna Ghar scheme. Building codes must mandate employer responsibility for worker accommodation in large infrastructure projects.

Political Representation: Mechanisms must be developed to ensure that migrant workers can exercise their voting rights without returning to their home districts. Proxy voting, postal ballot, or constituency transfer provisions should be explored to address the political disenfranchisement of internal migrants.

8. CONCLUSION

Internal migration in India is not a temporary or marginal phenomenon but a structural feature of the country's capitalist development — one that generates enormous economic value while simultaneously producing and reproducing conditions of poverty, precarity, and exclusion for millions of workers. This paper has demonstrated, through a critical review of secondary data and within a Marxist political economy framework, that the socio-economic challenges faced by informal migrant workers after migration — including wage exploitation, housing deprivation, exclusion from welfare entitlements, and social discrimination — are not accidental but are systematically produced by the structural conditions of uneven development and informal capital accumulation.

The COVID-19 pandemic stripped away the veil of normalcy and exposed these conditions with stark clarity. The response — or more accurately, the absence of an adequate response — underscored the depth of institutional failure in protecting migrant workers. Going forward, addressing internal migration must move from a charitable or humanitarian discourse to a rights-based framework that recognises migrants as full citizens

entitled to dignified labour, secure housing, accessible healthcare, quality education for their children, and meaningful political representation. This requires not merely incremental policy adjustments but a structural transformation in how the Indian state conceptualises welfare, citizenship, and the rights of labour in motion.

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