Understanding India's Labour Market: Interstate Migrant Workers' Livelihood Experiences and Outcomes

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Abstract

Cosmopolitan India witnesses skilled migration forming the bulk of white-collar employment, but a larger share of internal migration hails from the economically laggard regions of India, forming the interstate labouring class of unskilled and semi-skilled migrants. Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh accounting for half the inter-state migrants have the highest incidence of poverty and human development gaps. They make a living toiling in agricultural fields, running assembly lines in factories, serving at restaurants, pulling rickshaws, driving cabs, and as domestic workers. They often serve in bondage, looked down upon as lesser human beings, facing multiple vulnerabilities in the form of meagre wages, adverse employment conditions, inadequate onsite living conditions, and almost absent social protection. Their exploitation and life in bondage and servitude often remain undocumented in National Surveys and Commissions. There is no definite quantification of such migrants living in precarity; bonded labour is often hidden or manifests in different forms but identification of the different forms of precarity/ vulnerability becomes extremely difficult, especially when workers are themselves not aware of being so. This paper seeks to highlight the challenges in identifying the nature and extent of precarity of interstate migrant labour in bondage. It tries to address the gap in identifying bonded labour through criteria that can be replicated in future

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towards achieving SDG-8.8 target to protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, women migrants, and those in precarious employment.

Keywords: **Interstate Migrants, Bonded Labour, Labour Precarity**

1. Introduction

The vast spectrum of internal migration in India rests on complex socio-economic factors including inter-regional imbalances, poverty and limited employment opportunities in villages. Migrant workers often journey long distances in a quest for better living conditions, to often find themselves in exploitative practices of labour employment, insecure labour conditions, and systemic exclusion at the destination. The precarious nature of employment and limited social protection exacerbates their vulnerabilities; representing new forms of economic bondage and exploitation. Interstate migrants often get trapped into cycles of economic vulnerability and bondage, especially those from vulnerable and socio-economically distressed communities (Olsen and Morgan, 2015; Finn, 2008; Srivastava, 2005). Such significant contributors to the economy remain invisible in mainstream discourse and policy frameworks with their struggles mostly unheard and unseen.

The long-overdue Census after the 2011 and lack of a large-scale migration survey since 2007-08 has created a huge data gap preventing the full understanding of the lives of interstate migrants in India, their economic vulnerabilities and conditions of bondage under which many get trapped. Without new data, it becomes hard to design targeted interventions that ensure their inclusion in the frameworks of development. Policies targeting their challenges are therefore fragmented, and the lack of comprehensive documentation and understanding of their conditions creates cycles of ne-

glect and marginalization.

In the absence of recent and comprehensive migration data, this paper draws on alternative datasets to examine the economic vulnerabilities of migrants in India. It primarily uses the National Sample Survey Office's (NSSO) Multiple Indicator Survey (MIS)-78th Round to analyse migration patterns and socio-economic characteristics of internal migrants. Although the MIS was originally scheduled to be conducted during January–December 2020, fieldwork was extended until August 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure complete survey coverage. The survey covered 14,266 first-stage units (8,469 rural and 5,797 urban) and 276,409 sample households (164,529 rural and 111,880 urban), making it one of the largest nationally representative surveys available on migration and related socio-economic characteristics. To complement the migration-specific evidence from the MIS, the paper also draws upon Periodic Labour Force Surveys (PLFS), using the survey rounds closest to the MIS reference period. During July 2022–June 2023, the PLFS covered 12,714 first-stage units (6,982 villages and 5,732 urban blocks), 101,655 households (55,844 rural and 45,811 urban), and 419,512 individuals (243,971 rural and 175,541 urban). Although the PLFS is not a migration-specific survey, it provides nationally representative evidence on wages, working hours, labour force participation, and employment conditions. Together, these complementary surveys provide a more comprehensive understanding of interstate migrants by combining migration-specific information with the broader labour market conditions that shape migrants' economic vulnerability and susceptibility to labour bondage.

This paper studies the socio-economic circumstances of migrants in India while focusing on problems of economic insecurity and bondage. These issues need to be addressed not just to ensure social justice but also to ensure inclusive economic growth and human development. This research contributes critically by exploring the intersection of migration, economic precarity, and systemic neglect in an effort to better the lives of interstate migrants

and push for policy reforms that safeguard their rights and dignity.

2. Incidence of Migration in India

This section looks at incidence and composition of migration in India, across intrastate, interstate, and international boundaries. Intrastate mobility within the same state, which is a major share of total migration, reflects rural to urban movements seeking better livelihood opportunities. Interstate movement involves mobility across state borders. Understanding the composition of migration requires a gendered perspective, as reasons for migration often vary between men and women. Majority of males migrate for employment and economic reasons, while social factors, mainly marriage and family obligations, often drive women's migration. In the absence of a migration-specific survey, this analysis is based on certain questions undertaken through the Multiple Indicator Survey 2019-21 by NSSO. Through this dataset, this study makes inroads into socio-economic vulnerabilities that migrants face along with structural issues, enhancing informed comprehension of India's precarious migration.

Table 1: Percentage of Persons Whose Current Place of Residence is Different from the Last Usual Place of Residence for Each State/UT

State/UT	Rural	Urban	All
Kerala	39	38	38
Telangana	32	45	37
Punjab	33	41	36
Maharashtra	32	40	36
Andhra Pradesh	33	39	35
Tamil Nadu	30	38	34
West Bengal	32	38	34
Odisha	32	38	33
Jharkhand	29	39	32

Chhattisgarh	29	37	31
Rajasthan	27	27	27
Uttar Pradesh	26	31	27
Gujarat	22	31	26
Haryana	22	32	26
Madhya Pradesh	23	29	25
Karnataka	20	26	22
Bihar	19	25	19
All-India	**27**	**35**	**29**

Source: National Sample Survey Organization's- Multiple Indicator Survey (2020-21)

Table 1 provides an overview of migration patterns in India, and looks at proportion of individuals whose current place of residence differs from their last usual place of residence across rural and urban areas. At the All-India level, 29% of individuals reported a change in their place of residence, with a higher proportion in urban areas (35%) than in rural areas (27%). While these figures alone should not be interpreted as conclusive evidence that urban centres act as magnets for migration, they are nevertheless noteworthy because the MIS was conducted during the pandemic, when India experienced an unprecedented episode of reverse migration following nationwide lockdown; this reverse migration reflected a humanitarian crisis that exposed the vulnerability of circular and interstate migrant workers rather than signalling a structural reversal of India's migration trajectory (Srivastava, 2020, 2021). Consequently, despite this extraordinary disruption, a substantial gap in mobility between urban and rural areas persists. Further to wider literature on India's structural transformation, urbanisation, and labour migration, this persistent differential suggests that urban centres continue to attract migrants towards industrial and service-sector employment, educational institutions, and public services, while persistent regional inequalities and rural distress continue to sustain rural-to-urban and inter-state migration (Kundu, 2011; Kundu and Kumar, 2022; Srivastava, 2020, 2021). The relatively higher mobility to urban areas should thus be interpreted not

as an isolated statistical difference, but as evidence consistent with broader structural processes continuing to shape India's urbanisation and economic growth.

Kerala records the highest level of mobility in rural areas, with 39% of rural population reporting a change in their place of residence. Kerala is followed by Andhra Pradesh and Punjab, where 33% of the rural population reported a change in residence, and Telangana, Maharashtra, Odisha and West Bengal at 32% each. In urban areas, Telangana records the highest level of mobility (45%), followed by Punjab (41%), Maharashtra (40%), Andhra Pradesh and Jharkhand (39%), and Kerala, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Odisha (38%). At the overall level, Kerala records the highest mobility among all states, with 38% of its population reporting a change in residence, followed by Telangana (37%), Punjab and Maharashtra (36%), and Andhra Pradesh (35%).

The relatively high levels of mobility observed in Kerala, Telangana, Punjab, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh reflect their importance in India's migration landscape. Kerala's high overall mobility is shaped by both internal and international migration, while Telangana, Punjab and Maharashtra continue to attract migrants through expanding industrial and service-sector employment opportunities. In contrast, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and other northern states record comparatively lower levels of mobility, reflecting relatively fewer economic opportunities to attract migrants. Overall, the data indicate that mobility remains higher in urban than in rural areas across most states.

Overall, the data underscore continued dominance of urban migration, driven by economic aspirations, education, and employment opportunities in cities, coupled with rural stagnation, socio-economic constraints, and limited opportunities in villages. Contrary to conventional views that higher migration reflects expanding economic opportunities and structural transformation, broader labour migration literature presents a more nuanced picture. Migration in India increasingly represents both a livelihood strategy and a

response to structural labour market failures, shaped by uneven regional development, agrarian distress, labour market segmentation, and the limited availability of decent work in rural areas (Deshingkar, 2011, 2019; Kundu, 2009). Higher labour mobility may coexist with precarity, informality and vulnerability at the destination, as migrant workers are disproportionately concentrated in insecure, low-paid, and poorly protected segments of the labour market (Breman, 2013, 2023; Srivastava, 2020, 2021). This challenges the conventional assumption that migration expands economic freedom or improves labour market outcomes and suggests that mobility may represent a strategy for survival rather than upward economic mobility. Addressing these disparities therefore requires not only improving rural livelihoods and creating decentralised growth opportunities, but also strengthening labour market institutions, extending social protection, regulating labour intermediaries, and ensuring that migration becomes a pathway to decent work rather than a source of labour vulnerability and bondage.

Table 2: Percentage distribution of persons by location of their last usual place of residence for each State/UT Sector: All

State/UT	Another State	Another Country	Same State	All
Punjab	21	1.4	78	100
Jharkhand	20	0.1	80	100
Haryana	20	0.3	80	100
Gujarat	15	0.2	85	100
Maharashtra	15	0.4	85	100
Telangana	11	0.2	89	100
Rajasthan	11	0.2	89	100
West Bengal	11	1.4	88	100
Kerala	11	9.9	80	100
Karnataka	10	0.1	90	100
Chhattisgarh	10	0.0	90	100

Odisha	10	0.1	90	100
Uttar Pradesh	9	0.3	91	100
Andhra Pradesh	9	0.6	91	100
Madhya Pradesh	9	0.0	91	100
Bihar	8	0.4	91	100
Tamil Nadu	4	1.1	95	100
All-India	**12**	**0.9**	**87**	**100**

Source: National Sample Survey Organization's- Multiple Indicator Survey (2020-21)

Table 2 presents the distribution of migrants according to the location of their last usual place of residence, distinguishing between interstate, international and intra-state migration. At the All-India level, interstate migration (12%) overwhelmingly exceeds international migration (0.9%), indicating that labour mobility in India continues to be driven primarily by internal migration. The table also reveals important state-level variations. Punjab (21%), Jharkhand (20%), Haryana (20%), Gujarat (15%) and Maharashtra (15%) record interstate migration levels above the All-India average, reflecting relatively high labour mobility across state boundaries. Tamil Nadu (4%), Bihar (8%), Uttar Pradesh (9%), Andhra Pradesh (9%) and Madhya Pradesh (9%) remain below the All-India average. West Bengal presents a relatively modest level of interstate migration (11%) but a comparatively higher share of international migration (1.4%), while Kerala emerges as a significant outlier, with 9.9% of its population reporting their last usual residence in another country, the highest proportion among all major states. Together, Punjab, West Bengal and Kerala illustrate distinct migration trajectories. Punjab combines high interstate mobility with a long tradition of overseas migration, West Bengal reflects historically established cross-border and international migration networks, whereas Kerala represents India's most mature remittance-driven migration economy. This distinctive pattern reflects Kerala's established history of overseas migration, particularly to

Gulf countries, where international migration and remittances have become integral to the state's economy and household livelihoods (Rajan & Zachariah, 2019). By comparison, interstate migration across much of India is primarily associated with labour mobility within the domestic economy in search of employment and livelihood opportunities. Consequently, migration should not be viewed as a homogeneous phenomenon. Although Table 2 does not permit an assessment of the socio-economic outcomes of international or interstate migrants, extensive evidence from the Kerala Migration Surveys (KMS) demonstrates that international migration has historically generated substantial remittance inflows, which have contributed significantly to household consumption, housing, education, savings and asset accumulation, while also playing an important role in Kerala's broader socio-economic development (Rajan, 2026; Kannan and Hari, 2020). However, recent studies of return migration following the COVID-19 pandemic caution that many overseas return migrants also experienced unemployment, income loss and reintegration challenges, indicating that the developmental benefits of international migration cannot be assumed to persist automatically upon return (Rajan and Arokkiaraj, 2020).

While the developmental contribution of international remittances has been extensively documented, particularly in context of Kerala's Gulf migration, the role of internal remittances has received comparatively limited attention despite the dominance of internal migration in India and its potential to reduce poverty (Castaldo et al, 2012). Unlike international remittances which are systematically captured, internal remittances are difficult to estimate, as a significant proportion continues to be transferred through informal channels, inadequately captured in official datasets. Tumbe (2011), using data from the 49th and 64th rounds of NSSO, estimated India's domestic remittance market at approximately US$10 billion in 2007–08, with nearly 60% comprising interstate transfers and 80% directed to rural households. Building on such aggregate estimates, studies using Indian Human Development Surveys (IHDS) show that internal remittances contribute significantly to household welfare by supporting consumption, education and livelihoods,

while also reshaping family relations and the lives of those left behind. For instance, Desai and Banerji (2008) discuss how male migration alters women's responsibilities, labour force participation and decision-making within households, while Lei and Desai (2021) show that the benefits of migration depend critically on the adequacy of remittance flows, with low remittances associated with poorer health outcomes among left-behind wives. These studies suggest that the developmental impacts of internal migration extend beyond income transfers alone and encompass broader social and household transformations. However, these developmental gains must be interpreted with caution. Unlike international remittances, which are more frequently associated with long-term savings, housing investment and asset accumulation, internal remittances are largely generated by workers employed in informal, low-paid and insecure occupations, limiting both the amount and stability of income transferred to households. This distinction is particularly important for understanding labour vulnerability in India. Internal remittances represent a significant but relatively neglected dimension of India's migration economy, and also reflect the precarious labour market conditions under which millions of interstate migrant workers earn and support their families. Concentration of internal migrants in informal and poorly protected labour markets (Srivastava, 2020; Deshingkar, 2019) constrains their earning capacity and stability of remittance flows, leaving many households dependent on incomes generated under conditions of persistent labour insecurity and vulnerability. These conditions reinforce the structural risks of indebtedness, economic insecurity and labour bondage that continue to characterise a large segment of India's interstate migrant workforce.

The dependence of millions of households on internal remittances should not obscure the conditions under which these incomes are earned. State policies have largely remained inadequate in recognising and addressing the vulnerabilities of interstate migrant workers, leaving many trapped in cycles of precarious employment, indebtedness and, in some cases, labour bondage. From the perspective of origin states, significant share of underprivileged migrants originates from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan and

Madhya Pradesh, together accounting for nearly half of India's interstate migrants as per the Census of India 2011. In their quest for survival and livelihood security, these migrants often find themselves in a world of unremitting insecurity. From construction sites and factories to domestic work and street vending, they form the backbone of India's informal economy, yet remain largely invisible, voiceless and expendable. This vulnerability is also documented in the broader literature. Internal migrants are disproportionately concentrated in low-paid, insecure and poorly regulated employment, often encountering adverse working conditions, inadequate onsite living arrangements, weak labour protection and limited access to social security (Nair et al, 2020; Nair et al, 2021). Rajan and Rajagopalan (2023) observe that interstate migrant workers commonly experience meagre wages, adverse employment conditions, inadequate living conditions, language barriers, weak bargaining power and social exclusion, despite the existence of legislative safeguards intended to protect them. Vulnerability of internal migrants extends beyond low incomes to encompass multiple overlapping forms of labour market, social and institutional exclusion. These structural disadvantages increase workers' dependence on labour contractors and employers, heighten their exposure to exploitation and coercion, and reinforce conditions that can culminate in labour bondage. Consequently, many interstate migrant workers continue to labour under hazardous conditions, receive meagre wages, and remain persistently exposed to exploitation, coercion and bonded labour.

Table 3 highlights the primary reasons for migration among rural and urban populations in India, revealing significant gendered and socio-economic patterns. Among males, employment emerges as the dominant driver, accounting for 49% of total migration, with a higher prevalence in urban areas (56%) compared to rural areas (39%). This gap manifests the concentration of economic opportunities in urban centers and serves as a major pull factor to the rural migrants for better livelihoods.

Table 3: Main Reason for Leaving Last Usual Place of Residence

Main Reason	Rural	Urban	All
Male			
Employment Related Reasons	39	56	49
Other Reasons	28	13	19
Migration of Parent/Earning Member of the Family	12	21	17
Studies	9	7	8
Marriage	11	2	6
Social/Political Problems	1	1	1
All	100	100	100
Female			
Marriage	93	72	87
Migration of Parent/Earning Member of the Family	3	20	8
Other Reasons	2	4	3
Employment Related Reasons	0	2	1
Studies	1	2	1
Social/Political Problems	0	0	0
All	100	100	100

For women, marriage remains the overriding reason for migration, accounting for 87% of all cases in the MIS 2020-21 (93% in rural areas and 72% in urban areas). Women's migration has become increasingly diverse with rising educational attainment, expanding opportunities for higher education, urbanisation and changing labour market aspirations. However, official migration statistics understate women's economic mobility because women often report marriage or accompanying family members as the *principal* reason for migration even when employment constitutes an important underlying motivation, due to the nature of the survey question (Deshingkar

& Akter, 2009). Mazumdar, Agnihotri and Neetha (2013) argue that conventional migration concepts and classifications are gender-insensitive, obscuring the scale and diversity of female labour migration. This suggests that marriage and employment should not always be interpreted as mutually exclusive motivations for women's migration. Nevertheless, MIS data demonstrate that these emerging trends had not fundamentally altered the overall migration profile of women during the survey period. Women's employment-related migration accounted for only 1% of all female migration and marriage remained the principal driver of female migration, suggesting that gendered social norms, labour market segmentation and structural barriers continued to constrain women's independent labour mobility. At the same time, regional, occupational and socio-cultural variations indicate that women's migration experiences are becoming increasingly heterogeneous and should not be interpreted through a single lens.

Table 4: Percentage Distribution of Persons at the Present Place of Residence by Main Reason for Leaving Their Last Usual Place of Residence (All-India), 2020–21

Main Reason for Leaving Last Usual Place of Residence	**Labour Force Status At Present Place of Residence**			
	Employed	Unemployed	Out Of Labour Force	Total
Sector: Rural				
In Search of Employment	78	9	13	100
In Search of Better Employment	90	4	6	100
Business	88	1	11	100
To Take up Employment/ Better Employment	88	4	9	100
Transfer of Service/ Contract	68	1	31	100

Proximity to Place of Work	87	1	11	100
Sector Urban				
In Search of Employment	84	5	12	100
In Search of Better Employment	91	1	8	100
Business	87	1	12	100
To Take up Employment/ Better Employment	89	1	10	100
Transfer of Service/ Contract	76	0	23	100
Proximity to Place of Work	87	1	12	100
Sector: All				
In Search of Employment	82	6	12	100
In Search of Better Employment	91	2	7	100
Business	87	1	12	100
To Take up Employment / Better Employment	89	2	10	100
Transfer of Service/ Contract	74	1	26	100
Proximity to Place of Work	87	1	12	100

Source: National Sample Survey Organization's- Multiple Indicator Survey (2020-21)

Table 4 shows the employment outcomes of interstate migrants in relation to their reasons for migration, thereby throwing light on vulnerabilities and precarious livelihoods. The largest proportion of labour mobility trend is dominated by economic necessity-driven migration: whether in search of employment, better opportunities, or business prospects.

In rural areas, 78% of migrants who moved in search of employment got jobs, while 9% were unemployed, and 13% were out of labour force. Of those who were migrating in search of better employment, 90% got jobs and only 4% were unemployed. However, for those who migrated because of service transfers or contracts, 31% went out of labour force, indicating the disruptive effects of forced or unplanned relocations, which often leave

workers without adequate job security or integration into new labour markets.

In cities, migrants are better off; 84% of those seeking work are employed, and only 5% are unemployed. Those who migrated for better job opportunities reported the highest employment rate at 91%, indicating the concentration of opportunities in urban centers. Nonetheless, structural issues remain pertinent to contract workers who still compose 23% of total workforce, illustrating precarious employment contracts and the dearth of social security provisions for workers within the informal urban economy

Table 4 demonstrates that migration for employment-related reasons does not invariably translate into continued participation in the labour market at the destination. While the majority of migrants were employed after migration, the table also reveals that a noticeable proportion remained outside the labour force. This exclusion is not just an economic issue but is also a manifestation of deeper systemic issues- missing social protection, absent worker rights, and capital-favouring policies (Srivastava, 2021; Datta and Rajan, 2024). The results validate the story that migrant labourers are caught in a vicious cycle of poverty and exploitation, with low bargaining power and without access to crucial welfare services. Many migrants, especially from the disadvantaged regions and communities, end up in low-paying, hazardous, and unstable jobs that offer little hope for a better future. The high percentage of out-of-labor-force migrants points to structural failures in integrating migrants into the formal economy and providing them with dignified livelihoods. Being out of the labour force is conceptually different from being unemployed; unlike the unemployed who are actively seeking and available for work, persons outside the labour force are not participating in the labour market during the reference period. This heterogeneous group includes students pursuing further education, homemakers engaged in unpaid domestic and care responsibilities, retirees, older persons who have withdrawn from economic activity, and persons unable to work because of illness or disability. The category also includes individuals who

may temporarily withdraw from employment because of family responsibilities, further education or health-related reasons before re-entering the labour market at a later stage. The findings therefore suggest that labour migration and labour force participation are related but distinct processes. Participation in the labour market is shaped not only by employment opportunities but also by household responsibilities, educational decisions, health conditions, institutional arrangements and different stages of the life course.

This distinction assumes greater significance in context of India's ongoing demographic transition. As improvements in life expectancy, healthcare and healthy ageing gradually extend productive working lives, the composition of the out-of-labour-force population is itself likely to evolve. This challenge is likely to be particularly pronounced because India's demographic transition is spatially uneven. Southern states including Kerala and Tamil Nadu are already entering an advanced stage of population ageing and are expected to experience tightening labour supply, whereas younger northern states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh are likely to remain the principal source regions of interstate migrant labour for several decades. Consequently, future labour market policy may increasingly need to move beyond the conventional objective of employment creation towards expanding labour force participation itself. As longevity increases, conventional upper limits of working age that currently underpin labour market statistics and employment policies may require reconsideration. Future policy debates may thus focus not only on extending statutory retirement ages where appropriate, but also on creating opportunities for voluntary and flexible labour force participation among healthy older persons through phased retirement, part-time employment, lifelong learning, periodic reskilling and age-friendly workplaces. Such measures would enable many older persons who are currently classified as being outside the labour force to remain economically active for longer, thereby partly mitigating labour shortages in ageing regions while reducing pressure on shrinking working-age populations. In turn, this would alter not only the size and composition of the out-of-labour-force population but also the nature of labour mobility between younger

labour-surplus regions and ageing labour-deficit regions. The labour force status observed in the MIS 2020–21 should therefore be interpreted as reflecting the prevailing demographic and institutional context rather than a fixed pattern, highlighting that labour force participation, like migration itself, is shaped by evolving demographic realities, labour market institutions and public policy.

3. Economic Vulnerability and Labour Bondage

Migrants' susceptibility to bonded labour and vulnerability is due mainly to minimum wage not paid, prolonged working hours and lack of paid rest days. These are a violation of Article 23 of Indian Constitution which banned all kinds of forced labour. As specified by Section 4 of the Minimum Wages Act 1948, the payment of at least state prescribed minimum wage must be ensured irrespective of being piece-rated or time-rated work, with provision for paid weekly rest and overtime wages for work extending beyond eight hours in a day.

However, interstate migrants are disproportionately concentrated in low-paid, informal and insecure employment, where labour relationships are frequently mediated through contractors and subcontracting chains rather than direct employer–employee arrangements. This fragmented employment structure weakens workers' bargaining power, obscures employer accountability and makes the enforcement of labour standards considerably more difficult. Consequently, migrants are often subjected to excessive working hours, denial of weekly rest, delayed or withheld wages, and other forms of labour exploitation, deepening their economic precarity and increasing their vulnerability to labour bondage. Their financial insecurity is further aggravated because essential components of workers' well-being, including housing, healthcare, transportation and social security, are rarely incorporated into the effective wage package, requiring migrants to bear these costs out of already limited earnings. Although India has enacted a range of labour protections (some of these are discussed below), including legis-

lation governing wages, occupational safety, social security and the rights of interstate migrant workers, the predominance of informal employment, dependence on labour intermediaries, fragmented regulatory oversight, interstate administrative complexities, limited awareness of legal entitlements among migrants, and weak implementation and enforcement substantially constrain the effective realisation of these statutory safeguards. As a result, the gap between legal protection and workplace reality continues to expose many interstate migrant workers to persistent economic insecurity and exploitation.

Components of minimum wages have been defined in section 4 of the Act

3.1. Minimum Wage

The Minimum Wages Act, 1948 provides that statutory minimum wages do not include additional benefits such as accommodation, light, water supply, medical facilities, travel assistance, or contributions towards the Employees' Provident Fund, Pension Fund and gratuity. Payment of wages below the statutory minimum nevertheless constitutes "forced labour" under the Indian constitutional framework. This principle was firmly established by the Supreme Court in *People's Union for Democratic Rights & Others v. Union of India & Others* [(1982) 3 SCC 235], where the Court held that labour performed for remuneration below the prescribed minimum wage amounts to "forced labour" within the meaning of Article 23 because economic compulsion arising from poverty, hunger and destitution can be as coercive as physical force.

The constitutional doctrine was subsequently strengthened in *Sanjit Roy v. State of Rajasthan* [(1983) 1 SCC 525], where the Supreme Court ruled that even workers employed under government famine relief programmes could not be paid below the statutory minimum wage, reaffirming that the State itself cannot dilute constitutional guarantees on grounds of economic necessity. The Court further expanded the scope of Article 23 in *Bandhua Mukti Morcha v. Union of India* [(1984) 3 SCC 161] by recognising that the

prohibition of forced labour imposes a positive obligation upon the State to identify, release and rehabilitate bonded labourers, thereby shifting constitutional jurisprudence beyond mere prohibition towards active protection and enforcement.

More recently, the Supreme Court, in *In Re: Problems and Miseries of Migrant Labourers* [Suo Motu Writ Petition (Civil) No. 6 of 2020], revisited these constitutional concerns in the context of the COVID-19 migrant crisis, directing governments to strengthen the registration of interstate migrant workers, ensure portability of welfare entitlements, expand food security measures and improve access to social protection. This marked an important evolution in judicial thinking—from protecting workers against exploitative wages and bonded labour to recognising the broader institutional vulnerabilities associated with interstate migration. Collectively, these decisions demonstrate that India's constitutional jurisprudence has progressively evolved from defining forced labour to recognising the State's continuing responsibility to secure dignity, livelihood and social protection for vulnerable workers. Yet, despite this robust constitutional framework, the persistence of labour exploitation among interstate migrant workers underscores that the principal challenge today lies not in the absence of legal safeguards, but in their effective implementation and enforcement within India's predominantly informal labour market.

3.2. Overtime wage for work done over eight hours

The Minimum Wages Act 1948 also mentions that an employee (whether wages be fixed on hourly, daily, other prescribed period basis) who works over standard hours a day shall be eligible for pay for the number of hours worked over standard working hours. Similarly, the Factories Act 1948, also provides for overtime wage for working over 9 hours in a day (48 hours a week), with extra hours earning double the regular wage rate. The violation of this would fall under forced labour as well.

3.3. Paid weekly with rest of one day in every seven days:

Minimum Wages Act 1948 also stipulates that for any employment with minimum wage fixed, the appropriate government shall set normal working hours inclusive of rest intervals and set weekly rest days with remuneration.

Migrant workers, especially those in low-paying and informal sectors, are most vulnerable to exploitative practices violating one or more of these conditions due to their socio-economic disadvantages, lack of legal awareness, and absence of bargaining power. Such conditions further push them into cycles of debt, dependency, and exploitation, making it a matter of utmost urgency to enforce labour laws strongly for the protection of their rights and fair working conditions.

3.4. Failure of Inter-State Migrant Workman (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979:

The Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979 prohibited employment of interstate migrant workers in an establishment without a valid registration certificate from the principal employer. It is now absorbed under Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions (OSH) Code 2020, attempting to provide more extensive protections. OSH Code provides for decent working conditions, minimum wages, grievance redressal mechanisms, protection from abuse and exploitation, skill enhancement, and social security for all workers, including interstate migrants.

Under OSH, all governments must ensure maintaining an electronic database or registry of interstate migrant workers through self-declaration and Aadhar-linked identification for self-employed across states. Despite such legal provisions, the implementation is weak, and majority of migrant workers go unreported and invisible in official records. Lacking credible data, the objective assessment of problems faced by migrants becomes difficult-whether wage theft, working conditions, or the denial of access to social welfare schemes. Without proper documentation and data, identifying vulnerabilities, strengthening enforcement, increasing general awareness,

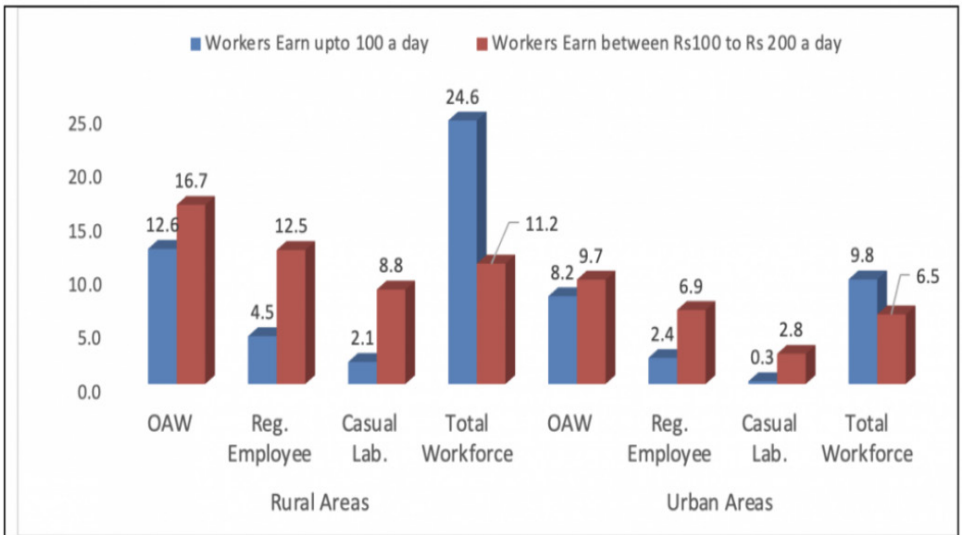
and streamlining the registration processes are important steps forward in bridging this gap and providing meaningful support to migrant workers.

4. Wage Stagnation and Vulnerable Workforce in India

As there is no contemporary data on earnings of migrant workers, it is challenging to ascertain the level to which wages fall below statutory minimum. Their potential economic vulnerability and being in bondage can be evaluated by reviewing trends in real wages and number of working poor. A lower threshold than scheduled wages, considering minimum wages vary by state and occupation, becomes a criterion for ascertaining bonded labour.

As compared to the National Sample Survey Office's (NSSO) Employment–Unemployment Surveys (EUS) conducted during 2004–05 to 2011–12, which were subsequently succeeded by the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) from 2017–18 onwards, wages have shown stagnation over the past decade. Evidence from the PLFS 2022–23 further suggests that concerns relating to wage growth and employment quality continue to persist across India's labour market (Mehrotra & Kumar, 2024).

Figure 1: Daily Earning/wage (Nominal) of the workers in India, 2022-23



Source: Explained in detail by first author along with Prof. Santosh Mehrotra in the Wire (2024), "Consumption Indicator Survey Doesn't Paint a Bright Picture of India's Economy." Consumption Indicator Survey Doesn't Paint a Bright Picture of India's Economy - The Wire

Figure 1 shows that a considerable share of workforce earn precarious wages (stuck between Rs 100 to 200 per day), including for 17% of rural own-account workers and 12% of regular salaried workers (Mehrotra and Kumar, 2024). Such trends have likely led to a rise in working poor. Migrant workers are more likely to be adversely affected, and interstate migrants most of all. There is a probability that many of these migrants end up in low-wage, long-hour traps without being able to make ends meet while being employed.

Although these estimates relate to the labour force as a whole rather than migrant workers specifically, the consequences of wage stagnation are like-

ly to be considerably more severe for interstate migrant workers, who are disproportionately concentrated in low-paid, informal and insecure occupations. Interstate migrants often incur additional costs associated with migration, including housing, transportation, food and remittances to households in their places of origin, reducing their effective disposable income. Their economic vulnerability is therefore compounded by inadequate social security coverage, rising inflation, increasing living costs and weak bargaining power, making them particularly susceptible to income insecurity despite remaining employed.

The post-2014 period has also witnessed significant labour policy reforms, most notably the consolidation of 29 central labour laws into the four Labour Codes, with the stated objectives of simplifying labour regulation, expanding social security coverage and improving labour market efficiency. In particular, the Code on Social Security, 2020 seeks to extend the ambit of social protection to unorganised, gig and platform workers, while the Code on Wages, 2019 aims to universalise minimum wage protection. However, as Mehrotra and Sarkar (2021) argue, the effectiveness of these reforms will depend fundamentally on their implementation, institutional capacity and enforcement rather than legislative consolidation alone. Though the Labour Codes represent an important shift in India's labour policy framework, their implications for interstate migrant workers remain contingent upon effective registration, portability of entitlements, enforcement of labour standards and the inclusion of workers employed in the predominantly informal economy. Consequently, despite an evolving legislative framework, many of the structural vulnerabilities confronting interstate migrant workers including wage insecurity, inadequate social protection and weak bargaining power, continue to persist.

5. Overworked Labour Force in Bondage without Rest

Besides stagnating real wages, Indian labourers work long hours with no respite, working every day of the week. Their work hours often go beyond the scheduled 48 hours a week, which implies they are overworked and deprived of sufficient rest, driving them into conditions like bondage. While the data is representative of the entire labor force, it is clear that migrant workers, especially interstate migrants, are even more exploited. Their poor economic condition makes them more susceptible to severe working conditions and violations of labour rights.

Table 5: Percentage distribution of workers in Current Weekly Status (CWS) by number of days worked in a week for each State/UT for Jan-Mar 2024

	Male Workers			Female Workers		
	1 - 5 Day	6 Day	All 7 Days	1 - 5 Day	6 Day	All 7 Days
Gujarat	4	1	96	8	2	89
Rajasthan	6	1	94	5	3	93
Bihar	5	4	91	38	2	60
Haryana	7	2	91	5	0	95
Telangana	9	2	88	19	3	79
Madhya Pradesh	11	1	88	34	1	65
Punjab	9	3	88	6	0	94
Maharashtra	10	3	87	18	4	78
Chhattisgarh	11	2	86	23	3	74
Uttar Pradesh	13	2	86	23	3	74
Odisha	16	2	82	33	2	66
Andhra Pradesh	13	5	81	19	7	74

West Bengal	13	7	81	14	1	85
Karnataka	13	10	77	22	5	73
Jharkhand	19	5	77	40	4	56
Tamil Nadu	23	2	76	27	3	70
Kerala	21	5	74	14	4	82
All India	**11**	**3**	**86**	**20**	**3**	**77**

Source: National Sample Survey Organization's- Multiple Indicator Survey (2020-21)

Table 5 shows considerable regional and gender differences in employment patterns across Indian states and union territories. Overall, 86% of male workers claimed to have worked during all 7 days of the week, compared to 77% of female workers. States like Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Haryana have the maximum percentage of males working for a full week. States like Tamil Nadu and Kerala have relatively less work engagement. Among female workers, Haryana and Punjab presented high full-week work participation. Jharkhand and Bihar had the largest share of women working only 1-5 days a week, reflecting economic vulnerability as well as irregular employment opportunities. Gender disparities wherein women worked fewer days than men in most states, show a possible lack of access to consistent work opportunities.

Table 6: Percentage distribution of workers in CWS by number of hours actually worked in a week for each State/ UT

	Male			**Female**		
	48<HRS≤60	**>60 HRS**	**>48 HRS**	**48<HRS≤60**	**>60 HRS**	**>48 HRS**
Rajasthan	39	23	61	25	6	31
Gujarat	35	23	58	19	3	23
Punjab	41	16	56	13	5	18
Bihar	41	11	52	7	2	8
Maharashtra	36	11	47	17	2	19
Chhattisgarh	39	6	45	22	2	24

Uttar Pradesh	35	9	44	4	1	5
Madhya Pradesh	33	8	41	12	1	12
Andhra Pradesh	27	13	40	23	2	25
Haryana	24	15	39	15	3	17
Telangana	28	11	39	12	2	13
West Bengal	27	12	39	8	2	11
Odisha	24	10	34	9	2	10
Karnataka	23	8	31	12	2	13
Kerala	21	8	30	10	3	13
Jharkhand	22	7	29	1	0	1
Tamil Nadu	22	6	28	11	4	14
All India	**32**	**12**	**43**	**12**	**2**	**14**

Source: National Sample Survey Organization's- Multiple Indicator Survey (2020-21)

Table 6 reveals a worrying trend of excessive working hours that surpass the legally mandated limits under the Minimum Wages Act. A large percentage of male workers, especially in Rajasthan (61%), Gujarat (58%), and Punjab (56%), work more than 48 hours a week, with a considerable number working more than 60 hours. Among female workers too, Chhattisgarh (24%), Andhra Pradesh (25%), and Rajasthan (31%) have a significant number of workers working more than the standard hours. A significant portion of workers are exposed to excessive working hours proving lackluster enforcement of labour standards.

Although PLFS does not indicate whether these additional hours were compensated through overtime payments, the findings indicate prevalence of long working hours in many states. In the context of interstate migrant workers, this distinction assumes particular significance. Since a large proportion of migrants are employed in informal and poorly regulated labour markets, access to overtime compensation, paid leave, paid sick leave and

other employment-related benefits remains uncertain or altogether absent. Thus, working beyond statutory hours cannot automatically be interpreted as translating into higher earnings or improved welfare. Similarly, workers reporting fewer hours can not necessarily be viewed as voluntarily absent from work. In absence of formal employment contracts and comprehensive social security, illness, workplace injuries or family emergencies may result in unpaid leave and immediate income loss. For many migrant workers, the inability to work even temporarily may lead to wage loss, indebtedness and heightened economic insecurity. Long working hours and the absence of adequate income protection during periods of illness or family exigencies thus represent two interconnected dimensions of labour vulnerability. This underscores the precarious conditions under which a large section of India's interstate migrant workforce continues to earn its livelihood, highlighting why labour exploitation and, in extreme situations, labour bondage persist despite the existence of statutory labour protections.

Figure 2: Average no. of hours actually worked per week by Regular wage and Salary workers in CWS for each State/ UT Jan-Mar 2024

Source: National Sample Survey Organization's Periodic Labour Force Survey (2022-23)

The reality of overwork is already deeply entrenched in India's labour force, as data from the Current Weekly Status (CWS) survey for January-March 2024 reveal (Figure 2). Average working hours for men are 51 hours per week, and for Gujarat and Rajasthan, it is 55 hours. However, in the case of women, the average working hours are around 43 hours a week. For some states like Telangana and Karnataka, the figure exceeds this. This far exceeds the globally agreed-upon 48-hour working week, and in most of these additional hours, benefits are not provided in the form of legal entitlements for weekly rest days.

Recent statements by industry leaders[1] have reignited a contentious debate about work culture in India. Such suggestions range from advocating for young Indians to work 70-hour weeks to boost the country's economic growth, to expressing regret that employees can't be made to work on Sundays, advocating for 90-hour workweeks. These comments, dressed as a call to greater national productivity and competitiveness, are worrisome. This brazenly ignores the harsh realities facing the Indian workforce. Such statements may seek to legitimize long working hours without discussing fair compensation, job security, and well-being.

Such debates surrounding proposals for 70-hour or even 90-hour work weeks by senior corporate leaders have largely centred on highly skilled formal-sector employees, where longer working hours are often presented as a pathway to higher productivity, national competitiveness and economic growth. However, these debates stand in sharp contrast to another emerging global discourse. While some business leaders continue to advocate extended working weeks, several countries have begun experimenting with four-day workweeks[2], seeking to improve productivity, innovation, workers' well-being and work-life balance without increasing working hours. At the same time, concerns over excessive working hours have also led to growing recognition of workers' "right to disconnect", with several countries introducing legal protections against work-related communications outside official working hours Zekić (2026). Even China's "996" work culture, working from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week, was subsequently declared illegal[3], recognising that excessively long working hours violate labour rights and undermine workers' health and well-being.

For internal migrant workers in India, the debate assumes an altogether different character. Unlike highly skilled professionals, whose discussions often revolve around productivity, innovation and career advancement, in-

1 infosys: L&T chairman Subrahmanyan's 90-hour work week comment reignites work-life balance debate - The Economic Times
2 What Countries have Four-Day Work Weeks?
3 What is China's 'illegal' 9-9-6 work rule that Infosys founder Narayana Murthy wants Indians to follow? - The Week

ternal migrant workers employed in construction, manufacturing, and other labour-intensive informal service sectors are not free to bargain or negotiate the length or conditions of their work. Long working hours are not a matter of individual choice; but are shaped by low wages, insecure employment, labour contracting systems, weak bargaining power and absence of social protection. The question is not whether migrant workers should work longer or shorter hours, but whether the hours they already work for are fairly remunerated with overtime compensation, occupational safety, employment security, paid leave and dignity at work. When prolonged working hours coexist with inadequate wages, insecure employment and weak labour rights, they become symptomatic of structural labour precarity and, in extreme situations, conditions conducive to labour exploitation and labour bondage.

Enforcement of Minimum Wages Act and OSH Code, which place certain parameters of working hours, overtime wages and benefits, especially for migrant workers who often lack bargaining power and awareness of their rights, increases their precarity. With limited access to social security measures, such as healthcare and pensions, they are forced to work beyond legal limits just to make ends meet. The existing data shows that a significant portion of workers already exceed legal working hours.

Interstate migrant workers, who leave their home states in search of better opportunities, find themselves trapped in a vicious cycle of long working hours, low wages, and poor living conditions. The cost of living is rising, inequality is deepening, and yet they continue to earn a pittance that barely covers their basic needs. Weak enforcement of working hours, compensation and rest periods, also have impacts on mental and physical fatigue among employees, making them little more than bonded labour.

6. Economic Vulnerability of the Migrants

This study, using the NSSO Multiple Indicator Survey (2019-21) also brings into focus income vulnerability of migrants as it analyses the change in income on account of migration. This survey provides insightful data on

income vulnerability of migrant workers by analyzing how their earnings alter due to migration. Workers perceive migration as a means of accessing better livelihood conditions, but migration may not always go with financial stability.

Table 7: Percentage distribution of persons by change in income due to migration for each State in Rural Areas. (2020-21)

Rural	De-creased	In-creased	Remain Same	To-tal
Uttar Pradesh	58	33	9	100
West Bengal	56	33	11	100
Bihar	56	30	14	100
Odisha	47	40	13	100
Kerala	44	23	32	100
Chhattisgarh	36	45	19	100
Rajasthan	32	51	17	100
Madhya Pradesh	25	54	21	100
Jharkhand	25	67	8	100
Punjab	24	56	20	100
Tamil Nadu	19	57	24	100
Karnataka	18	45	38	100
Andhra Pradesh	14	55	31	100
Maharashtra	14	49	37	100
Haryana	11	71	17	100
Telangana	11	71	18	100
Gujarat	8	55	36	100
All-India	**30**	**47**	**24**	**100**

Source: National Sample Survey- Multiple Indicator Survey (2020-21)

Table 7 reveals significant variations across states, reflecting the diverse economic opportunities and challenges faced by migrants in rural destina-

labour-intensive informal service sectors are not free to bargain or negotiate the length or conditions of their work. Long working hours are not a matter of individual choice; but are shaped by low wages, insecure employment, labour contracting systems, weak bargaining power and absence of social protection. The question is not whether migrant workers should work longer or shorter hours, but whether the hours they already work for are fairly remunerated with overtime compensation, occupational safety, employment security, paid leave and dignity at work. When prolonged working hours coexist with inadequate wages, insecure employment and weak labour rights, they become symptomatic of structural labour precarity and, in extreme situations, conditions conducive to labour exploitation and labour bondage.

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Kerala	44	23	32	100
Chhattisgarh	36	45	19	100
Rajasthan	32	51	17	100
Madhya Pradesh	25	54	21	100
Jharkhand	25	67	8	100
Punjab	24	56	20	100
Tamil Nadu	19	57	24	100
Karnataka	18	45	38	100
Andhra Pradesh	14	55	31	100
Maharashtra	14	49	37	100
Haryana	11	71	17	100
Telangana	11	71	18	100
Gujarat	8	55	36	100
All-India	**30**	**47**	**24**	**100**

Source: National Sample Survey- Multiple Indicator Survey (2020-21)

Table 7 reveals significant variations across states, reflecting the diverse economic opportunities and challenges faced by migrants in rural destinations. At the all-India level, 47% of migrants to rural areas reported an in

tions. At the all-India level, 47% of migrants to rural areas reported an increase in income, while 30% experienced a decline, and 24% saw no change. These figures suggest that while rural migration can provide opportunities for economic betterment, a large proportion of migrant's experience stagnation or even deteriorating financial conditions, questioning the quality of employment and livelihood opportunities available in rural destinations. Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, and Bihar exhibit the highest percentages of income decline (58%, 56%, and 56% respectively), indicating the limited economic prospects available for return migrants or those relocating within these rural areas. These states are characterized by agrarian distress, underemployment, and low industrial penetration, which likely contribute to the inability of migrants to secure better-paying opportunities. The persistence of income stagnation in these states reflects structural issues such as lack of skill development, seasonal employment patterns, and dependence on informal labour markets. In contrast, Jharkhand, Punjab, Haryana, and Telangana present more positive outcomes, with a significant proportion of migrants experiencing an increase in income (67%, 56%, 71%, and 71%, respectively). The relatively higher income gains in these states suggest better economic opportunities in sectors such as agriculture, agro-based industries, and rural enterprises that might be absorbing migrant labour. For instance, Haryana and Punjab's agricultural prosperity and Telangana's focus on rural industrialization may offer better wage prospects and employment stability for those relocating to rural areas. However, despite the positive trends, a notable share of migrants in these states still report income stagnation, indicating that rural labour markets may not be dynamic enough to uplift all workers equally. In Kerala and Karnataka, a considerable portion of migrants (32% and 38%, respectively) reported no change in income post-migration. Kerala, despite being economically advanced, has a high dependence on remittances, and opportunities in its rural areas may be limited to low-paying service jobs. Similarly, Karnataka's rural employment opportunities might not be sufficient to provide substantial income improvements for incoming migrants, reflecting the challenges of absorbing labour

into productive rural economies. Gujarat stands out with the lowest percentage of migrants experiencing income decline (8%), while 55% reported an increase and 36% saw no change. The state's robust rural economy, driven by agro-industries, cooperatives, and decentralized industrial growth, might explain the relatively better financial outcomes for migrants. However, the large share of those whose incomes have not changed indicates that not all sectors are equally rewarding and that opportunities may depend on factors such as skill levels and social networks.

Overall, the data points to mixed economic effects of migration to rural areas, pointing to both opportunities and persistent vulnerabilities. While certain states demonstrate the potential for improved livelihoods, many migrants remain trapped in low-income cycles, facing challenges such as inadequate social security, seasonal employment, and dependence on informal labor arrangements. Strengthening rural economic infrastructure, expanding skill development programs, and improving access to credit and social protection schemes are critical to ensuring that migration leads to sustainable income improvements for those relocating to rural areas.

Table 8 shows the distributional percentage of urban migrants across the strata and income change in various Indian states. The all-India data showed that 68% reported an increase in their total income, 12% reported a decrease in their total income, and 20% reported no change. Urban movement as compared to rural movement, reflects economic improvement due to the greater degree of industrialization and access to formal jobs, and greater economic diversity in the urban context.

Table 8: Percentage distribution of migrants in the urban areas by change in income Status

	De-creased	**In-creased**	**Remain Same**	**To-tal**
Kerala	43	26	31	100

West Bengal	18	56	26	100
Bihar	14	65	21	100
Uttar Pradesh	13	65	22	100
Jharkhand	12	72	17	100
Punjab	11	70	19	100
Chhattisgarh	11	71	18	100
Odisha	11	73	17	100
Rajasthan	10	73	17	100
Tamil Nadu	10	74	16	100
Madhya Pradesh	9	65	26	100
Andhra Pradesh	8	69	22	100
Karnataka	7	76	16	100
Maharashtra	7	72	21	100
Gujarat	5	84	12	100
Telangana	3	90	6	100
Haryana	2	84	14	100
All-India	**12**	**68**	**20**	**100**

Source: National Sample Survey- Multiple Indicator Survey (2020-21)

However, significant cross-state variability suggests unequal economic gains in some states. Kerala stands out as an anomaly, with 43% of migrants reporting a decline in income, the highest among all states, while only 26% experienced an increase. This may be explained by the state's labor market saturation, a higher cost of living and dependence on low paying service jobs. Contrarily, the resolution is the most positive in the states of Telangana and Haryana where 90% and 84% of migrants have respectively reported an increase in income and only a very small proportion reported an income decrease. The bigger potential income for these states can also be related to the strong urban economic activity, industry expansion, and labour participation into the formal economy, mainly in the areas of IT, manufacturing and services. These states also have a lower rate of income stagnation, meaning that the migrants have greater potential for upward mobility. Kar-

nataka, Tamil Nadu and Gujarat also have significant increases in income (76%, 74% and 84% respectively) owing to their rapidly industrializing urban economies and the availability of sources of jobs through various industrial and service sectors. The relatively small percentage of income lost in these states (ranging from 5% to 10%) suggests that their urban centre is both a more stable and growth-oriented environment in which to live for migrant workers. For states with moderate wage growth such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh (approximately 65% each), while the majority report an overall increase in income, the earnings of migrants across this number of states continue to stagnate or decline minimally, perhaps as a result of the common existence of informal work and lack of match between skill base and the city labour market. Punjab, Odisha, and Rajasthan similarly demonstrate positive trends of 70-73% reporting increased income. Although urban migrants have an attractive economic opportunity in comparison with rural migrants, both types of migrants are subject to a system of vulnerabilities including precarious work, informal work, and absence of social security.

Table 9 starkly illustrates the precarity and systemic exploitation faced by migrant labourers across the country. Despite migration often being perceived as a pathway to economic improvement, the reality for many migrants remains grim, with 22% experiencing a decline in income at the national level. This decline is most severe in states such as Bihar (49%), Kerala (44%), and Uttar Pradesh (41%), where nearly half of the migrants find themselves worse off than before, highlighting their vulnerability to exploitative labour conditions, wage suppression, and lack of bargaining power. These are high incidence levels of income decline that indicate a sort of cycle that traps the migrants into low-paid, insecure work with little to no social protection and makes them vulnerable to further economic distress and dependence on exploitative employers.

Table 9: Percentage distribution of change in income Status of migrants in India

	Decreased	Increased	Remain Same	Total
Bihar	49	36	15	100
Kerala	44	25	32	100
Uttar Pradesh	41	45	14	100
Odisha	38	48	14	100
West Bengal	37	45	18	100
Chhattisgarh	28	53	19	100
Rajasthan	25	58	17	100
Jharkhand	21	69	11	100
Madhya Pradesh	19	58	23	100
Punjab	16	65	19	100
Tamil Nadu	14	66	20	100
Karnataka	13	60	27	100
Andhra Pradesh	13	59	29	100
Maharashtra	11	60	29	100
Telangana	7	82	12	100
Gujarat	6	76	19	100
Haryana	4	81	15	100
All-India	**22**	**56**	**22**	**100**

Source: National Sample Survey- Multiple Indicator Survey (2020-21)

Income stagnation, which affects 22% of migrants nationally, further compounds their precarity. States such as Kerala (32%), Andhra Pradesh (29%), and Maharashtra (29%) report alarmingly high proportions of migrants whose economic conditions remain unchanged despite their relocation. This stagnation reflects structural barriers, including limited upward mobility, lack of skill recognition, and exploitative labour arrangements that offer no scope for improvement. In these states, many people usually end up in

informal arrangements, where they are held together by debt, harsh conditions, and systemic neglect, making it nearly impossible to break the cycle of poverty and insecurity.

Despite 56% migrants reporting an increase in income, this pattern conceals significant problems of precarious employment and exploitation. Telangana shows the highest income growth at 82%, followed by Haryana (81%) and Gujarat (76%). These states have the most significant dependence on migrant labour in industries such as construction, textiles, and manufacturing. The increase in earnings, however, is accompanied by exploitative work conditions, such as long hours, and job insecurity. The marginal financial gains seen in these states do not necessarily translate into improved living conditions or social mobility, as migrant workers frequently remain confined to low-wage, high-risk jobs with little prospect of long-term stability.

7. Concluding Remarks

In a declining, stagnant, or marginally increasing real income scenario, migrants remain caught in a persistent cycle of dependency and vulnerability that perpetuates economic hardship. This challenge is exacerbated by inflation and rising prices of essential household consumption goods and services, eroding the purchasing power of wages. For low-income interstate migrant households, whose expenditure would largely cover non-discretionary items such as food, housing, transport, fuel and healthcare, even modest increases in the cost of living can substantially reduce real incomes, leaving little opportunity for savings or asset accumulation. Interaction of stagnant wages and rising living costs erodes workers' economic security, reinforcing indebtedness, dependence on labour contractors and employers, and heightened susceptibility to labour exploitation and, in extreme situations, labour bondage. This situation urgently calls for policy interventions that tackle the structural causes of labour exploitation through fair and living wages, comprehensive social security measures, portability of welfare entitlements, and the effective realisation of migrant workers' rights through

robust legal and institutional safeguards against exploitative working conditions.

Adding to the challenge of real wages stagnating is an overworked labour force that works six days a week, and more often than not, even beyond the scheduled hours. Such conditions point to a broader regime of labour precarity in which low wages, prolonged working hours, inadequate social protection and weak bargaining power reinforce one another. Interstate migrant workers remain the worst affected because such structural disadvantages constrain their ability to negotiate wages, working conditions and employment security, thereby increasing their vulnerability to labour exploitation and labour bondage.

The absence of comprehensive and regularly updated labour statistics, together with delays in release or discontinuation of important labour datasets, poses a significant challenge to understanding the conditions of interstate migrant workers and designing evidence-based policy interventions. Statistical invisibility is bound to translate into policy invisibility. When information on migrant workers' employment, wages, working conditions and social protection remains fragmented or unavailable, their vulnerabilities are less likely to receive sustained policy attention. Although concerns regarding the availability and timely release of official data have periodically been raised in academic and policy circles, they have rarely generated sustained debate commensurate with their implications for labour governance and workers' rights. Evidence from the MIS nevertheless shows that many migrants fail to secure employment after migration or even experience a decline in income, underscoring the precarious nature of migration as a livelihood strategy. These realities reinforce the argument that labour exploitation and labour bondage are rooted not only in labour market conditions but also in institutional shortcomings that limit the visibility of migrant workers within official statistical and policy frameworks.

A necessary precondition for effective policy intervention is the genera-

tion of robust, timely and publicly accessible evidence on the conditions of interstate migrant workers. Strengthening labour governance requires not only the regular conduct and timely dissemination of nationally representative labour and migration surveys, but also the integration of administrative records, periodic enterprise-level studies, destination- and origin-based migrant surveys, and longitudinal research capable of tracking changes in migrants' employment, wages, working hours, working conditions, social protection and living conditions over time. Equally important is the systematic use of existing administrative platforms, including the e-Shram database, the One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC) system, labour department records and other social protection databases, to complement conventional survey data while ensuring transparency, accessibility and data quality. Pending the development of a more comprehensive evidence ecosystem, these existing administrative databases, together with targeted field surveys, independent academic research and regular social audits, can provide valuable evidence for identifying emerging vulnerabilities, monitoring policy implementation and informing timely interventions. Without reliable data and sustained research, interstate migrant workers will continue to remain statistically invisible, resulting in policies that are fragmented, reactive and insufficient to address the structural inequalities they confront.

Internal migrant workers remain among the most economically vulnerable, exploited and institutionally neglected segments of India's labour force. They are indispensable to the country's economic growth, sustaining construction, manufacturing, transport, logistics, domestic work and numerous other labour-intensive sectors, yet continue to experience stagnant real wages, prolonged working hours, insecure employment, inadequate social protection, weak bargaining power and limited access to labour rights. Labour laws and social protection mechanisms continue to suffer from uneven implementation and weak enforcement, leaving many workers vulnerable to conditions that may border on labour bondage, where overtime compensation, weekly rest, paid leave and dignified working conditions often remain beyond their reach. While this study focuses on interstate migrant workers,

many of these vulnerabilities are shared by the wider migrant workforce and India's predominantly informal labour market, underscoring the need for broader structural reforms in labour governance.

Addressing these challenges requires more than incremental policy reforms. It demands a comprehensive labour governance framework built upon fair and living wages, universal and portable social security, effective enforcement of labour standards, safe working and living conditions, accessible grievance redressal mechanisms, and meaningful recognition of migrant workers as central contributors to India's economic and social development. Protecting migrant workers and strengthening decent work in the informal economy is therefore not merely a matter of labour market regulation; it is a constitutional imperative and a prerequisite for social justice, inclusive development and equitable economic transformation. The vision of *Viksit Bharat* cannot be realised by building world-class infrastructure while leaving the workers who build it trapped in insecurity, exploitation and labour bondage. A truly developed India will be measured not only by the pace of its economic growth but also by the dignity, security and rights it guarantees to those whose labour sustains that growth.

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