



Migration, Labour Mobility and Regional Development in Eastern India: A Historical Study

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***Abstract:** Migration and labour mobility have played a significant role in shaping the historical and regional development of Eastern India. The present study examines the historical evolution of migration patterns and their relationship with industrial growth, urbanisation, and socio-economic transformation in regions such as Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, and Jharkhand. The study draws on historical literature, secondary sources, and earlier scholarly works on labour migration and regional development. The findings reveal that large-scale labour mobility in Eastern India gained momentum during the colonial period due to agrarian distress, land revenue policies, and the expansion of plantations, mines, and industries. Migration patterns included rural–urban migration, seasonal migration, and forced or semi-forced labour movement. Industrial centres such as Kolkata, Dhanbad, and Jamshedpur emerged as major destinations for migrant labour. The study further shows that migration contributed significantly to industrialisation and urban growth, while also leading to overcrowding, labour exploitation, and regional inequality. The analysis highlights that migration has functioned both as a survival strategy and as a driver of economic transformation. However, the benefits of development remained unevenly distributed, with labour-receiving regions advancing economically while many source regions continued to face poverty and underdevelopment. The study also points out that policy responses and labour welfare measures often remained inadequate due to weak implementation and institutional limitations. Overall, the paper emphasises that migration in Eastern India is deeply connected with historical economic change, regional imbalance, and social transformation.*

***Keywords:** Migration; Labour Mobility; Eastern India; Regional Development; Urbanisation; Industrialisation; Colonial Economy; Labour Migration*

1. Introduction

Migration and labour mobility have long been central to the historical transformation of societies, particularly in regions undergoing economic and structural change. In the Indian context, migration is not merely a demographic process but a reflection of deeper socio-economic and political dynamics. It has played a crucial role in shaping settlement patterns, labour markets and regional development over time. Eastern India, comprising Bengal, Bihar,

Odisha and Jharkhand, has historically served as both a source and a destination of migrant labour, making it an important area of study.

The roots of large-scale labour mobility in Eastern India can be traced back to the colonial period, when British economic policies restructured traditional agrarian systems and introduced new forms of industrial and plantation economies. The introduction of the Permanent Settlement in Bengal and similar land revenue systems led to increased land pressure, peasant indebtedness and agrarian distress, which in turn pushed rural populations towards migration (Chandra, 1982). At the same time, the expansion of tea plantations in Assam, coal mines in Jharkhand and jute industries in Bengal created a growing demand for labour. This resulted in the movement of workers across regions, often under coercive or semi-coercive conditions (Breman, 1996).

Labour mobility during the colonial period was characterised by diverse forms, including seasonal and long-distance migration, as well as indentured labour. The migration of tribal and lower-caste populations from Chotanagpur and adjoining regions to tea plantations and mining areas has been widely documented (Guha, 1982). These movements were not always voluntary; many workers were recruited through intermediaries and subjected to exploitative working conditions. Such processes contributed to the integration of regional economies but also reinforced social hierarchies and economic inequalities.

In the post-independence period, migration patterns in Eastern India underwent significant changes. While colonial forms of forced migration declined, economic disparities, lack of employment opportunities and uneven development continued to drive migration. Rural–urban migration increased, particularly towards industrial and metropolitan centres such as Kolkata, Dhanbad and Jamshedpur. Seasonal and circular migration also remained common, especially among economically vulnerable groups (Kundu, 2011).

Existing studies on migration in India have examined its economic, social and demographic dimensions. Scholars such as Breman (1996) have analysed labour migration in relation to capitalism and informalisation, while others have focused on regional inequality and development (Kundu, 2011). However, there is limited historical synthesis that connects migration patterns with long-term regional development processes in Eastern India. Most studies either focus on specific regions or time periods, without providing an integrated perspective.

This creates a clear research gap. There is a need to examine migration and labour mobility not only as isolated phenomena but as processes deeply embedded in historical development trajectories. Understanding how migration has shaped regional economies, urbanisation and social structures over time can provide valuable insights into present-day development challenges.

Against this background, the present study aims to analyse migration and labour mobility in Eastern India from a historical perspective and to examine their role in regional development. The study seeks to explore the patterns of migration, their underlying dynamics and their long-term impacts on economic growth, urbanisation and social transformation in the region.

2. Historical Background

Migration and labour mobility in Eastern India have evolved through distinct historical phases shaped by economic and political changes. In the pre-colonial period, mobility was largely local and seasonal, linked to trade, agriculture and artisanal activities. Most rural populations remained tied to land through customary systems, limiting large-scale migration (Habib, 1963).

The colonial period marked a major turning point. British policies such as the Permanent Settlement (1793) altered agrarian structures, leading to land concentration, indebtedness and rural distress. These changes pushed many peasants and tribal communities towards migration (Chandra, 1982). At the same time, the expansion of tea plantations in Assam, jute industries in Bengal and coal mining in the Chotanagpur region created a growing demand for labour. Recruitment was often mediated through intermediaries and, in many cases, involved coercive conditions (Guha, 1982).

The development of railways further facilitated long-distance migration by connecting rural hinterlands with industrial centres. Eastern India thus became a major supplier of labour to plantations, mines and emerging urban-industrial regions (Kerr, 2007). In the post-independence period, migration patterns shifted towards rural–urban and seasonal migration, driven by industrialisation and regional inequality, but the underlying economic pressures continued (Kundu, 2011).

Overall, the historical trajectory shows a transition from limited local mobility to large-scale labour migration shaped by structural economic changes.

3. Patterns of Labour Mobility in Eastern India

Labour mobility in Eastern India has taken diverse forms over time, reflecting changes in economic structures and regional development. One of the most prominent patterns is rural–urban migration, particularly during the colonial and post-colonial periods. Industrial centres such as Kolkata, Dhanbad and Jamshedpur attracted large numbers of workers from rural Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha. This movement was driven by labour demand in jute mills, coal mines and the steel industry (Kundu, 2011).

Another important pattern is seasonal and circular migration, which remains a defining feature of the region. Many labourers migrate temporarily during the agricultural off-season to work in construction, brick kilns and informal urban sectors. This type of mobility reflects the lack of stable employment opportunities in rural areas and allows households to diversify income sources (Breman, 1996).

The region has also experienced forced and semi-forced migration, especially during the colonial period. Tribal and lower-caste populations from the Chotanagpur Plateau were recruited for tea plantations in Assam and other labour-intensive sectors. These movements were often organised through intermediaries and involved harsh working conditions, indicating limited freedom of choice (Guha, 1982).

In addition, inter-regional migration has been a consistent feature, with workers moving not only within Eastern India but also to other parts of the country. Migration from Bihar and

Jharkhand to industrial and metropolitan regions has continued since independence, reflecting persistent regional disparities.

Overall, labour mobility in Eastern India is characterised by a combination of permanent, seasonal and forced movements. These patterns highlight the close relationship between migration and economic opportunities, as well as the structural inequalities that shape labour flows in the region.

4. Migration and Regional Development

4.1 Industrial Development

Migration has played a crucial role in the industrial growth of Eastern India. The availability of a large pool of migrant labour supported the expansion of coal mining in Jharkhand, jute industries in Bengal and steel production in centres such as Jamshedpur. These industries depended heavily on the migration of workers from rural hinterlands, which enabled rapid industrialisation during both the colonial and post-colonial periods (Chakrabarty, 1989).

4.2 Urbanisation

Labour migration has significantly contributed to the growth of urban centres. Cities like Kolkata, Dhanbad and Asansol developed as major labour-receiving regions. The continuous inflow of migrants led to the expansion of labour colonies and informal settlements. While this process supported economic development, it also resulted in challenges such as overcrowding, inadequate housing and pressure on urban infrastructure (Kundu, 2011).

4.3 Agricultural Impact

Migration has had a mixed impact on rural agriculture. In some areas, out-migration has caused seasonal labour shortages, affecting agricultural productivity. At the same time, remittances sent by migrant workers have provided financial support to rural households, improving consumption levels and reducing vulnerability. This dual impact highlights the complex relationship between migration and rural development (Breman, 1996).

4.4 Socio-Cultural Transformation

Migration has led to significant changes in social structures and cultural practices. Interaction between different communities in urban and industrial areas has influenced caste relations, social mobility and cultural exchange. Exposure to new work environments and lifestyles has gradually transformed traditional norms, particularly among migrant communities (Guha, 1982).

4.5 Regional Inequality

Despite its positive contributions, migration has also reinforced regional disparities. Industrial and urban areas have benefited from labour inflows and economic growth, while many source regions continue to experience poverty and underdevelopment. This uneven development pattern highlights the structural inequalities that drive migration and shape regional outcomes.

5. Policy and Administrative Response

5.1 Colonial Labour Policies

During the colonial period, labour mobility in Eastern India was largely regulated through policies designed to serve the interests of the colonial economy. Recruitment systems for plantations and mines were often controlled through intermediaries and legal frameworks such as the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act (1859) restricted labour mobility by penalising workers who attempted to leave employment contracts. These measures ensured a steady supply of labour but also led to exploitation and limited worker rights (Tinker, 1974).

5.2 Regulation of Industrial Labour

With the growth of industries, the colonial administration gradually introduced labour regulations to address working conditions. Laws such as the Factories Act (1881, later amended) aimed to regulate working hours, wages and safety conditions. However, these regulations were limited in scope and often poorly enforced, particularly in mining and plantation sectors where migrant labour was concentrated (Chakrabarty, 1989).

5.3 Post-Independence Migration Policies

After independence, the nature of labour mobility changed and policy focus shifted towards welfare and development. The Indian government introduced labour laws and social security measures to protect workers' rights, including the Minimum Wages Act (1948) and the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act (1979). These policies aimed to regulate working conditions and provide basic protections for migrant labour.

In addition, development programmes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) were introduced to reduce distress migration by providing employment opportunities in rural areas. However, migration has continued due to persistent regional inequalities and inadequate employment opportunities in source regions (Kundu, 2011).

5.4 Institutional and Governance Challenges

Despite the existence of policy frameworks, implementation remains a major challenge. Weak enforcement of labour laws, inadequate documentation of migrant workers and limited access to welfare schemes reduce the effectiveness of these policies. Migrant workers often remain outside formal systems, making it difficult to ensure their rights and benefits.

Coordination between different states and administrative bodies is also limited, which affects the management of inter-state migration. In many cases, policies fail to address the specific needs of migrant populations, particularly those in the informal sector.

5.5 Contemporary Policy Gaps

In recent years, migration has gained attention in policy discussions, especially in the context of urbanisation and labour markets. However, there is still a lack of a comprehensive migration policy in India that integrates economic, social and regional aspects. Policies often focus on either labour welfare or rural development, without addressing the broader structural causes of migration.

Overall, the policy and administrative response to migration in Eastern India has evolved over time, but significant gaps remain. Addressing these challenges requires stronger governance mechanisms, better implementation of existing laws and a more integrated approach to migration and development.

6. Discussion

The historical analysis of migration and labour mobility in Eastern India reveals that migration has been both a driver of development and a reflection of structural inequalities. The patterns observed across different periods indicate that migration is closely linked with changes in economic systems, particularly the transition from agrarian to industrial economies. During the colonial period, labour mobility was largely shaped by external economic demands, while in the post-independence period, it has been driven more by internal disparities and uneven development.

A key issue that emerges from the analysis is the dual nature of migration. On the one hand, migration has contributed to industrial growth, urbanisation and the integration of regional economies. It has provided employment opportunities and enabled income diversification for rural households. On the other hand, migration has often involved exploitation, poor working conditions and social marginalisation, particularly for vulnerable groups such as tribal and lower-caste communities (Breman, 1996).

The relationship between migration and regional development is therefore complex. While labour-receiving regions have benefited from economic growth, source regions continue to face poverty and underdevelopment. This uneven distribution of benefits highlights the persistence of regional inequality in Eastern India. Migration, in this context, becomes both a survival strategy for individuals and an indicator of an imbalance in development (Kundu, 2011).

Another important aspect is the role of governance and policy. Although various labour laws and welfare measures have been introduced over time, their effectiveness has been limited by weak implementation and institutional constraints. Migrant workers, particularly those in informal sectors, often remain outside the reach of formal protection mechanisms. This gap between policy and practice underscores the need for more inclusive and effective governance frameworks.

The discussion also points to the need for a more integrated approach to understanding migration. Rather than viewing migration solely as an economic phenomenon, it should be analysed in relation to social structures, cultural change and historical processes. Such an approach can provide a deeper understanding of how migration shapes and is shaped by regional development.

Overall, the study highlights that migration in Eastern India is not merely a demographic process but a key factor influencing economic growth, social transformation and regional inequality. Addressing the challenges associated with migration requires a balanced approach that recognises both its developmental potential and its social costs.

7. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that migration and labour mobility have been central to the historical development of Eastern India. From the colonial period to the present, migration has shaped patterns of industrial growth, urbanisation and socio-economic transformation. The movement of labour from rural hinterlands to industrial and urban centres supported economic expansion, particularly in sectors such as mining, plantations and manufacturing. At the same time, migration has reflected underlying structural issues such as agrarian distress, lack of employment opportunities and regional inequality.

The findings highlight that migration has both positive and negative implications for regional development. While it has provided livelihood opportunities and contributed to economic growth, it has also been associated with exploitation, poor working conditions and social marginalisation. The benefits of migration have been unevenly distributed, with labour-receiving regions experiencing growth while source regions continue to face underdevelopment. This uneven pattern reinforces the idea that migration is both a driver and an outcome of regional disparity.

The study also emphasises the importance of governance and policy in shaping migration outcomes. Although various labour laws and development programmes have been introduced over time, their impact has been limited by weak implementation and institutional constraints. The absence of a comprehensive and integrated migration policy further complicates the situation, particularly for informal and vulnerable workers.

However, the study has certain limitations. It is primarily based on secondary sources and historical literature, which may not fully capture recent trends or micro-level variations in migration patterns. The analysis focuses on broad regional processes and provides little empirical evidence at the district or community level. In addition, the study does not incorporate quantitative analysis, which could offer more precise insights into the relationship between migration and development. Future research may address these limitations by integrating field-based studies, statistical analysis and region-specific case studies to provide a more comprehensive understanding of migration dynamics in Eastern India.

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