

**MOBILE SUBJECTS:
THE LONG AND SHORT OF MIGRATION IN COLONIAL BIHAR**

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What follows is the first section of a longer paper made up of three parts. The opening bit focuses on internal migration between Bihar (primarily the north Bihar districts of Champaran, Darbhanga, Muzaffarpur, and Saran and the south Bihar districts of Gaya, Patna, and Shahabad) and the rest of India, with most people initially moving towards *purab* or the “East.” Although not detailed here as yet, this discussion will trace the places migrants originated from, down to the thana- and village-levels, and the destinations they journeyed to across Bengal and increasingly to other regions of India.

The second part of the paper looks at overseas migration from Bihar, mostly involving people moving to locales across the Indian and Pacific Oceans and the Caribbean. Empirically and theoretically, it emphasizes the linkages between internal and international migration in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The final section examines the lived experiences of Bihari migrants by exploring the different subjectivities they assumed, particularly in their lives beyond India, but also closer to home in the “East.” It utilizes migrant self-narratives and other utterances extracted from folk songs, plays, and oral testimonies to piece together “keywords” they employed to recount and understand their experiences. My interest in their lexicon seeks to comprehend the acts of ‘translation’ that men and women engaged in away from home in *bidesh*. A fragment of this work recently appeared as: “First Person Singular? North Indian Migrant Narratives from the Era of Indenture,” *History and Theory* 64, 3 (2025):405-12)

“It is a trite observation, the truth of which every one will acknowledge who is familiar with Bengal, that the natives . . . are above all things a domestic, stay-at-home people.”¹ Enshrined in the 1881 Census, this characterization of the people of a region that included today’s West Bengal, Bangladesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Orissa—and elsewhere in the Indian subcontinent—as immobile was widely circulated and upheld by

¹ Bengal, *Report on the Census of Bengal, 1881, vol. 1*, by J. A Bourdillon (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1883), p. 151.

colonial administrators in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.² Evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, this stereotype persisted, at times propagated in the very same government reports that also testified to a much more complex picture of mobility. The 1881 census is a case in point: a completely different set of images followed on the heels of its “trite observation,” as the rest of the paragraph reproduced below indicates:

At certain seasons of the year there is considerable internal movement: gangs of labourers throng well-known labour markets, and there is always a small percentage of the male population, especially from Behar and Western Bengal, which is absent from home in service of a more or less permanent character; but for every man who comes from Shahabad or Sarun to take service as an orderly or groom in Calcutta, or who trudges from Lohardugga to cut rice in Dinagepore or the jute in Mymensingh, hundreds never go beyond the limits of their own district, but live and die in their own village.³

The author of the 1881 census, J.A. Bourdillon, knew better than to propagate a stock image of “stay-at-home people,” if not then certainly later. In the late 1880s and then again during the census year of 1891, he served as the magistrate of the north Bihar district of Saran, a tour of duty during which he made a name for himself for his detailed accounts of “emigration.” In fact, the district administration report he filed in 1891 alluded to a record number of people heading “eastward,” more than a hundred thousand among whom were, as he perceptively noted, unusually large numbers of women.⁴

² E.g., see

³ Annual General Administration Report, Patna Division for 1890-91,” Bengal General Proceedings, Oct-dec. 1891, Oct.

⁴ Ibid?

This stream of migrants, according to an extensive report on Saran penned by Bourdillon in 1890, was primarily “quasi-permanent” or “temporary” in nature. Based on data he extracted from the 1881 census, migrant testimonies conveyed by local government officials and residents, postal department statistics on money orders paid out in the district, and railway records, he categorized the former—and smaller—cohort as comprising people who left the district “for a year or two at a time, or even longer” and the latter as those moving for “only a few months.”⁵

Quasi-permanent migrants, in his estimation, were mostly “better class Hindus” and Muslims. Whereas Muslims primarily converged on Calcutta to take up positions in “domestic service as khidmatgars [servants, bearers], syces [grooms], and drivers of hackney carriages,” Hindus became “cartmen and durwans [door keepers]” in Calcutta and Darjeeling, with “a considerable number of lower caste men, such as Chamars, Dusadhs, and Gareris” assuming positions “as syces.” These migrants typically stayed “away for a year or two—sometimes more—making remittances and paying occasional visits to their homes”; some added their families to the mix “once well established in a good situation or business.”⁶

The overwhelming majority of people on the road from Saran and other Bihar districts, however, were “temporary” or seasonal migrants who flocked to the “East” or *purab*. When asked to fill in the geographical coordinates of this general directional marker, they identified the following destinations: “Purneah and Bhagulpore in the Bhagulpore Division, Bogra, Rungpore and Darjeeling in the Rajshahye Division; or

⁵ Bourdillon report.

⁶ Bourdillon report.

further east still, beyond Calcutta and Howrah—the districts of Dacca and Mymensingh.”⁷

Saran migrants visited the “East” during the months of December to May after they had finished planting the *rabi* or spring crops in the autumn. That is, they were “winter emigrants”—predominantly males of “all classes”—who timed their itinerancy to the slack season of the agricultural year when they could get by with having their women and children tend to the work at home until the important *bhadoi* and rice crops necessitated their return in June.

In the “East,” they were involved in “digging and cleaning tanks,” “repairing roads,” “making railway embankments and harvesting the winter rice crop.” Some became palanquin bearers even though they were not Kahars, a caste that traditionally carried out this work. Women who accompanied their men either worked alongside them or ground corn for *banias* (traders). To continue in the words of the Saran Magistrate:

the great majority of those who go to Calcutta and Howrah work as common coolies in the streets, or as mill hands in the mills round the metropolis. The earthwork of the Assam-Bihar Railway through Purneah, and the Northern Bengal Railway in Rungpore, Bogra and Dinagepore, has been largely constructed by Sarun men, and the preparation of the Mymensingh-Dacca Branch of the Eastern Bengal Railway attracted a considerable number who now repeat their annual visit to cut the jute in Mymensingh and load it in Dacca and Naraingunge.⁸

⁷ Ibid. Bogra, Rungpore, Dacca, and Mymensingh are now in Bangladesh.

⁸ Ibid.

Census figures confirm a Saran presence in all these localities. Of the 124,211 inhabitants enumerated elsewhere in 1881, most were in the Bihar districts of Champaran (44,835 people), Muzaffarpur (10,995), Patna (6,813), Darbhanga (3,593), Bhagalpur (3,335), Purnia (2,824), Shahabad (2,204), and Monghyr (1,979). Beyond Bihar, they were identified in Calcutta and Suburbs (9,081), Rangpur (7,269), Mymensingh (5,124), 24-Parganas (2,798), Howrah (2,112), Dinajpur (2,068), Malda (1,712), and Tipperah (1,534), a spatial distribution evidenced by Bourdillon's postal department statistics from 1889.⁹

Much the same geographical distribution was on display in 1891, the next time the census was taken. A total of 277,629 people from Saran, 180,001 men and 97,268 women, were scattered across other Bihar districts or in neighboring North-Western Provinces, especially the contiguous district of Gorakhpur. About 80,000 of them were termed "temporary cold weather emigrants" living and working in all the places they had been located in earlier in 1881, but also, notably, in a few new venues: Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, and the present-day Bangladesh districts of Bogra and Dacca.¹⁰

Although the two censuses identified almost identical patterns of migration in Bengal generally and Saran specifically, their findings evoked different administrative responses. In contrast to his predecessor, C. J. O'Donnell, the 1891 Superintendent of Census, coincidentally, also a former Saran official, found the evidence conclusive about the highly mobile character of the people of his former district. In his words, its "population evinces such a readiness to emigrate either permanently or in search of

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ C. J. O'Donnell, *Census of India, 1891, Vol. 3, The Lower Provinces of Bengal and their Feudatories, The Report* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1893), pp. 106-7.

temporary employment.”¹¹ Not surprisingly, he took issue therefore with the earlier portrayal of the region as comprising “domestic stay-at-home people.” While acknowledging that there was “little emigration, in the European sense, across the seas,” he expressed “doubt if [there was] any nation of the old world . . . in a more constant state of movement or more ready to change its home.” Proof was embodied in the 821,998 people from Bengal enumerated outside the province in 1891, about half in Assam, and the nearly 300,000 Saran inhabitants outside the district, not to mention almost another 200,000 each from the Bihar districts of Gaya and Muzaffarpur.¹²

Nor were these figures comprehensive. As O’Donnell rightly observed, censuses and other government reports enumerated “only a portion of the migration which is ceaselessly at work. Our district frontiers are mere arbitrary lines, and when we find people streaming from one district to another touching it,” he perspicaciously added, “we are merely recording the average movement of the locality across any arbitrary boundary in that neighborhood.”¹³ That was certainly the case in nineteenth-century Bengal, a vast territory inhabited by almost 40 million people in 1891.

Different as well was the outlook of the 1891 census in that it did not equate mobility with long-distance and international migration. While its author observed that most migrants remained within the boundaries of Bengal, he also recognized that people were increasingly moving to more places farther afield, a pattern already apparent in 1881. Even Bourdillon acknowledged this changing pattern of mobility, his changing views, no doubt, shaped by his stint as Saran Magistrate, when he was involved in a study

¹¹ Ibid., p. 106.

¹² Ibid, p. 2.

¹³ Ibid.

of migrant remittances and subsequently in the writing up of its census report in 1891. As he learnt from his examination of money orders paid out in 1889, Saran's migrants wandered all over Bengal and beyond. In rank order, by value of remittances, these locales included: Assam, North-Western Provinces and Oudh, Bombay, Punjab, Central Provinces, Madras, Rajputana, Central India, Mysore, Sind and Baluchistan, and Coorg.¹⁴

In addition, the money orders, as much as Rs. 46,951, also came from Burma. These funds were remitted by Saran migrants who had joined its military police or taken up positions as “domestic servants, such as dhobis (washermen), sweepers, and bearers.” Many journeyed there—as is typical of chain migration and the workings of information networks¹⁵—on the heels of “some relation or fellow villager who has preceded them to this El Dorado.”¹⁶ No wonder Bourdillon's 1891 Saran census referred to it as “one of the greatest emigrating districts in Bengal.”¹⁷

The development of railways connecting Bihar to Calcutta and other destinations in the “East” added to the flows of migrants. According to an early twentieth-century report, an “ever-growing number of the landless laborers in Bihar and Orissa” were relying on train travel to leave “their homes in the cold weather, when there is but little work in the fields” and return “in time for the agricultural operations which begin with the breaking of the monsoon. Altogether one and a quarter million inhabitants of this Province [the newly created province of Bihar and Orissa] were present in Bengal at the

¹⁴ Bourdillon report.

¹⁵ Simone Wegge, “Chain Migration and Information Networks: Evidence from Nineteenth-Century Hesse-Cassel,” *Journal of Economic History* 58, 4(1998):957-86.

¹⁶ Bourdillon report.

¹⁷ “District Census Report,” Saran, in *District Census Report, 1891, Patna Division* (1898), p. 65.

time of the census.”¹⁸ As many as a quarter of a million people from Tirhut and Patna divisions were enumerated in and around Calcutta. (p. 5)

The size of money orders and their destinations add further details to the growing traffic of migrants from Bihar. In the famine year 1896-1897 Muzaffarpur alone received over 1.5 million rupees in money orders that more than doubled to 3.4 million in 1910. Saran, in keeping with its reputation as one of the great “emigrating districts,” recorded an even higher total that year, tallying nearly 5.15 million rupees, with as much as a third, roughly 1.7 million rupees sent during the first quarter of the year when most people moved to take up temporary employment.¹⁹

Colonial officials held sharply contrasting views of mobility because many were preoccupied with long-term and long-distance migration. Thus, the frequent laments about the homebound nature of the people. Bourdillon’s initial observations about migration, including in his remarkable study of Saran migrant remittances, issued from that context, as did the responses to his findings. As his superior officer stated in echoing Bourdillon’s concern about the circumscribed geography of migrant remittances and their implications for permanent migration, Saran’s mobility pattern was cause for concern because it did not portend a surge in long-distance migration, if anything, the opposite. For as “long as the women will not emigrate, and the men send all their earnings back to their homes . . . there is no hope of reducing the pressure of the people on the land.

¹⁸ L.S.S. O Malley, “Memorandum on the Material Condition of the People of Bengal and Bihar and Orissa in the Years 1902-03 to 1911-12,” p. 4

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 5.

Under the circumstances, emigration seems likely to bring about [an] increase in population.”²⁰

Bourdillon struck much the same note when he testified in 1898 before the Indian Famine Commission about a “readiness to emigrate” existing “in only a few [Bihar] districts . . . and that only for a short time in most cases.”²¹ That is, even in districts with high levels of mobility, the tendency was to undertake short-term or “quasi-permanent” and not long-term international migration.

Colonial officials fixated on “emigration” of the long-distance kind because they increasingly pinned their hopes on it as a way out of the woes of Bengal, perceived largely in terms of overpopulation rather than the growing poverty of the region. They acknowledged that the region faced food crises of enormous proportions without sizable reductions in numbers because population growth had overwhelmed food supply and was increasing the number of landless and poor. Such concerns heightened in the wake of the famines of 1865-1866 and especially 1873-1874, leading colonial authorities to seek more detailed information about their subjects, specifically about their dietary and laboring practices, class and caste composition, and demographic trends and agricultural productivity.

One outcome of such inquiries was the growing awareness among Bihar officials that many men in their districts habitually moved “East” in search of seasonal employment—a practice that prompted both optimism and pessimism about the

²⁰ W. Kemble, Offg. Commr., Patna, to Secty., GOB, no. 609G, Sept 30, 1890, Bengal General Proceedings, vol. 3627, 1890.

²¹ “Written Statement of evidence by J.A. Bourdillon, Commissioner, Patna Division, 15 Mar 1898,” in *Appendix to the Report of the Indian Famine Commission, 1898, being Minutes of Evidence, etc., Vol. 1, Bengal* (London: HMSO, 1899), p. 182.

possibilities of “emigration.” For instance, the 1872-1873 annual administration report of Patna Division, which comprised the districts of Patna, Gaya, Shahabad, Tirhut, Saran, and Champaran, made much of the area’s “thick” population and “badly off . . . lower classes” as well of the “internal movements” of laborers to the Soane canal works in Shahabad and the “periodic emigration” of Saran residents eastward. However, it also pointed out that relatively little of the migration from the area was permanent.²²

Negative publicity about the devastating human toll of famines in the late nineteenth century added to the urgency of finding solutions to food insecurity. In 1874 the *Friend of India* reported on the presence of “starving Beharees” in Hughli, men who were described as part of the traffic of people from Bihar and the “upper provinces” who frequented the old Banaras Road and the Grand Trunk Road in search of employment. “They chiefly consist of persons going to, or returning from, Calcutta, where up-country men are extensively employed on business, or as syces, grass-cutters, durwans &c, or as daily laborers.”²³

Both representations of Bihar—of starvation and periodic mobility—became familiar to local administrators in the late nineteenth century, their juxtaposition in the official imagination invariably raising the tantalizing (and vexing) possibility of endless numbers of people escaping hunger and premature death in India by their evacuation to distant, foreign locales. Why “starving Beharees” persisted in their seeming “objection to

²² “Annual General Report on the Patna Division,” Bengal General Pros, Sept-Dec 1873, Nov, nos. 101-113.

²³ F. H. Pellew, Offg. Magistrate, Hughli, to Commissioner of Burdwan, no. 126, June 6, 1874, Bengal Scarcity and Relief Proceedings, vol. 219, sept. 1874.

leave the country” to move “to lands in need of population,”²⁴ as people had historically done in Britain, always puzzled and confounded the colonial government.

The rest of this opening section of the paper explores the relationship between seasonal and internal migration on the one hand and the more permanent and long-distance migration on the other hand. It argues that the two were closely interrelated, a tie that colonial officials failed to comprehend and a connection that the scholarly literature on transnational migration has generally not addressed much empirically or theoretically.²⁵

Indeed, for many men and women in Bihar, familiarity with internal, especially short-term, migration rendered long-distance movement less daunting. No wonder they were among the first to board ships for distant shores in the nineteenth century, their involvement in this labor recruitment, often termed indentured labor, and often characterized as coerced or semi-coerced migration, resulting in the remarkable population mixes of countries across the Indian and Pacific Ocean, the Caribbean, and, to a lesser extent, Southeast Asia.

Nor is it surprising that, in recent decades, many from the region, including from Saran and other Bihar districts have joined the throngs of people, previously mostly from

²⁴ E. MacNaghten, General Secty., Behar Planters Association, in *Indian Famine Commission 1898*, p. 80.

²⁵ For two recent studies emphasizing the linkages between internal and transnational migration, see Annemarie Steidl, Engelbert Stockhammer, and Hermann Zeithofer, "Relations among Internal, Continental, and Transatlantic Migration in Late Imperial Austria," *Social Science History* 31, 1 (2007): 61-92; Crispin Bates and Marina Carter, "Enslaved Lives, Enslaving Labels: A New Approach to the Colonial Indian Labor Diaspora," in *New Routes for Diaspora Studies*, eds. Steven C. C. McKay, Aims McGuinness, Sukanya Banerjee (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).

the southern states of Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu, moving to "Dubai" or "Arab," to use their designation for a variety of locales across the Persian Gulf and Saudi Arabia, respectively.²⁶

Nevertheless, compared to the substantial numbers of people who moved "East" in the colonial period, only a tiny fraction headed overseas, a contrast that invariably prompted colonial administrators to lament their failure in effecting both "a permanent removal of any part of the Bihar population to other parts of India" and abroad. As one official noted, "though a large proportion of the emigrants to the West Indies are drawn from this part of Bengal, the actual number emigrating each year is intrinsically small. Foreign emigration, indeed, affords at present a very much smaller field of relief than the ordinary labor markets in other provinces."²⁷

And "intrinsically small" that number remained throughout the colonial period even though Bihar migrants—and those from the nearby areas of eastern North-Western Provinces (later known as the United Provinces and then Uttar Pradesh)—constituted a significant proportion of the flows of people from India to certain world areas. A closer examination of the migration paths that people from Bihar chose—seasonal, longer-term internal or overseas—and who moved and why will highlight the interrelationship among these different migration patterns as well as the reasons why most opted for in-country over international migration. In fact, for most people internal mobility was in lieu of the latter, an alternative that meant that few sought long-distance mobility. In weighing these

²⁶ Business. Saran district has been divided into three districts: Chapra (almost 4 million population, 2011 Census), Siwan (3.3 million) and Gopalganj (2.5 million).

²⁷ "Material Condition of the People of India," Bengal Revenue Proceedings, vol. 4539.

different paths that migrants followed, this study will also emphasize that "subaltern agency" was critical in determining all forms of spatial mobility, including in the movement of indentured labor, which was not "simply . . . a European-sponsored importation of a non-white workforce."²⁸

Then as now, the flow of people from the region to other overseas areas reimagined a world of labor in which *purab* or east was not the only direction in which people moved, but also to a string of islands known locally as Mirich or Mauritius or Chinidad or Trinidad. People also moved to Jamaica, the northern portion of South America, principally Demerara or British Guyana and the Dutch colony of Surinam (also known as Dutch Guyana); Fiji, and Burma or Myanmar.

First let us consider internal migration and how and why it became the movement of choice for increasingly larger numbers of people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This paper will draw on district-level data to highlight the determinants of mobility at the sites of origination, whether that entailed internal or international migration.

²⁸ Bates and Carter, "Enslaved Lives," p. 75.

