

# Stepping Stone, Shock Absorber, and Alternative: The Role of Internal Migration in Shaping International Migration in India

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## 1. Background:

International migration has become a popular means of improving living standards and household economic status, with millions of people from developing countries migrating abroad (Zachariah et al., 2001). Migration decisions—whether individuals migrate directly across borders without prior experience or move from rural areas to cities and eventually abroad in a step-by-step process—are shaped by several structural barriers, such as high costs and limited networks. Internal migration helps individuals build social networks and capital, which in turn facilitate international migration. For many, internal migration serves as a strategic alternative to overcome these barriers and accumulate the necessary resources for international migration (Mary et al., 2015).

Historically, internal and international migration have been interconnected, with internal migration playing a significant role in shaping future international migration pathways. However, studies on internal and international migration have often treated them as separate processes, ignoring their close relationship (King et al., 2010; King, Skeldon, & Vullnetari, 2008; Bernard, A., & Vidal, S. 2023). This present study aims to uncover the hidden relationship between internal and international migration, following King and Skeldon's 2008 migration pathway model.

**1.1 Research Questions:** This paper addresses three main research questions:

- i. What are the migration patterns and pathways followed by migrants?
- ii. How does internal migration shape the dynamics of international migration?
- iii. Can internal-to-international migration pathways serve as a better alternative for promoting safe, orderly, and regular migration?

## 2. Data and Methodology:

This paper uses data from a PhD field survey conducted between September 2023 to April 2024, collecting information from 216 return migrants across 16 villages in Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar using multistage sampling and house listing. The study focuses on return migrants who return in 15 years before survey. Out of the total 216 samples, 58 individuals with a history of international migration were selected for detailed analysis. The study findings are presented using descriptive and bivariate analysis, along with the chi-square test. Additionally, case studies are included to further support and strengthen the results.

## 3. Results and discussion:

### 3.1 Background Character and migration status

The study population is predominantly Hindu (85.6%), with a significant portion belonging to other backward classes (46.8%) and landless families (40.3%). The results indicate that the majority of migration in the study area is internal (73.1%), followed by internal to international migration (13.0%), international to internal migration (7.4%), and only international migration (6.5%). Maharashtra, Delhi, Gujarat, and Punjab are the major destinations for internal migrants, while Saudi Arabia, Dubai, and the United Arab Emirates are the main destinations for international migration.

### 3.2 Driver, network and financing of migration

Driven by high ambitions and wanted to earn money in shorter period amid economic crises, a significant number of people directly migrate internationally without prior migration experience, skills, or knowledge, often through brokers or agents. The results also show that direct international migrants spend more than INR 20,000 compared to those with internal migration experience. Most of the money goes to intermediaries and agents, and travel expenses are often supported by loans. Due to their lack of experience, direct international migrants face numerous works and living-related challenges at their destinations. In contrast, some migrants follow a stepwise migration process, moving from their villages to metropolitan cities before migrating abroad. They use internal migration as a stepping stone (Hagen-Zanker, J., & Azzarri, C. 2010) to accumulate economic capital, networks, skills, experience, and adaptability, which helps them succeed at international destinations.

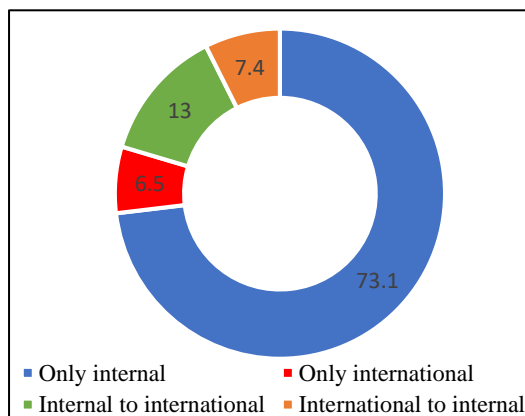


Figure 1: Migration Pathway

Migration Pathway	Migration Experience			
	Successful	Average	Unsuccessful	Total (n)
OM	59.5	31.6	8.9	158
IM	21.4	21.4	57.1	14
OM-IM	75	21.4	3.6	28
IM-OM	0	56.3	43.7	16
Total	54.6	31.5	13.9	216

OM- Only internal; IM- Only International  
OM-IM- Internal to international migration  
IM-OM- International to internal migration

Table 1: Migration pathway by migration

### 3.3 Internal migration as a ‘stepping stone’ for international migration:

Internal migration's critical role in shaping successful international migration pathways. Internal migration enables individuals to gain valuable skills and experience and build essential social networks, which help them navigate the complexities of international migration. It often serves as a stepping stone, especially in regions with limited economic opportunities where individuals seek better livelihoods. This progressive pathway typically begins with internal migration, such as moving from rural to urban areas, where migrants can acquire the skills, financial resources, and networks necessary for international migration. By undergoing this preparatory phase, individuals are better equipped to handle the challenges they may face abroad. This gradual process enhances their adaptability and increases the likelihood of success in international migration.

**Case study 1:** In 2007, Mohit Kumar (name changed) migrated to Mumbai for the first time at the age of 18, quitting his education due to his family's poor financial condition. In Mumbai, he learned welding and stayed there for two years. Following that, he worked as a welder in Hyderabad for 8 months, Kolkata for 12 months, and Madhya Pradesh for 2 months. During this time, he was motivated by a friend to consider international migration, and he began preparing using his savings. Mohit contacted an agent, who helped him secure an employment visa for Saudi Arabia. He flew to Saudi Arabia with a group of young men who were recruited through the agency. In Saudi Arabia, Mohit worked nearly 12 hours a day and did not face any language barriers as he lived and worked with other Indian laborers. His employer provided accommodation and an LPG gas connection, so his primary expenses were for food. His previous migration experiences had taught him to adapt to new situations, and he used informal sign language to communicate when shopping for essentials.

### **3.4 Internal migration as a 'shock absorber' from international migration:**

Internal migration acts as a "shock absorber" for failed international migrants by offering them economic opportunities to recover after unsuccessful migration experiences. Many return home due to poor working conditions, low wages, or exploitation abroad, often burdened with debt. Internal migration to cities or industrial regions provides them jobs in sectors like construction or manufacturing, helping them stabilize financially. It also allows them to apply skills learned abroad, offering a manageable way to rebuild their livelihoods and support their families.

**Case study 2:** Krishna (name changed), a 35-year-old man, worked as a daily laborer in his village, earning INR 200 per day. Motivated by a broker and with high expectations, he decided to migrate abroad. To finance his migration, he took a loan of INR 100,000 from a bank and a moneylender and obtained a two-year visa to Kuwait. His contract, written in Arabic, promised a job as a construction helper with a salary of INR 20,000 per month. However, upon arriving in Kuwait, Krishna realized he had been deceived. He worked over 12 hours a day but earned only INR 10,000 per month, half of what had been promised. His living conditions were poor, and he had to travel an hour each day to reach his workplace. He felt cheated, as not only was the pay much lower, but the working hours were far longer than the 8 hours he had been told. Moreover, due to unhygienic living conditions and rough work environments, Krishna's health deteriorated, further affecting his ability to work. Although his visa was for two years, he had to leave after just one year due to his declining health. The company returned his passport only after deducting some money, and Krishna had to bear the cost of his return journey, coming home 14 months before the end of his contract. Years after his return from Kuwait, Krishna migrated to Mumbai with his relative and has been working in a textile mill since 2016, earning INR 8,000 per month. Most of his earnings are used to repay the debts he incurred from his failed migration attempt.

### **3.5 Internal Migration as a Complement to International Migration**

Internal migration can complement international migration by creating synergies between the two forms of mobility. This interplay enhances the migration experience for individuals and communities, optimizing economic, social, and cultural benefits.

**Case Study 3:** Md Ayub (name changed) migrated to Bangalore as a laborer at the age of 25 to support his household expenses. During his time in Bangalore, he learned plumbing and worked there for ten years. Seeing the financial success of his relatives who had migrated abroad and improved their household economic conditions, Md Ayub decided to follow in their footsteps and migrate to Dubai. With the help of an agent and the guidance of his experienced relatives, he spent INR 60,000 on the migration process. He was well aware of the contract he signed before migrating. In 2011, Md Ayub moved to Dubai with his relatives and started working as a plumber, earning approximately INR 30,000 per month. He did not face significant issues during his international journey. After working for six years in Dubai, he returned to his village in 2016. He then migrated to Mumbai and invested in his relative's salon business while working there for eight years. Md Ayub had initially planned to bring his family to Mumbai. However, due to the uncertainty and challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, he decided to set up a migration brokerage/agent business in his village instead.

### **3.6 Internal migration as alternative to international migration**

Internal migration can often serve as an alternative to international migration, particularly in contexts where structural barriers such as high costs, documentation challenges, poor networks, and lack of familial support hinder the opportunity to migrate abroad. Migration is seen as a way to diversify household income, and migrants from nuclear families often prefer to engage in both agriculture and internal migration. Income from agriculture provides food security, while remittances earned through

migration within the country are used for developmental purposes, such as housing, investment in agriculture, education, and healthcare.

**Case Study 4:** Ravi Kumar (name changed), a 32-year-old man from rural Bihar, India, began migrating to Delhi after a family bifurcation. During this time, he learned about the high incomes earned in Gulf countries and started dreaming of migrating there to improve his family's financial situation. He had heard stories of people from his village sending remittances from abroad, building houses, and securing a better future for their families. However, the reality of international migration posed significant challenges for Ravi. When he contacted a local agent, Ravi realized the financial cost of migration was overwhelming, with the agent charging around INR 100,000 (approximately \$1,200). Additionally, he was concerned that his family might face difficulties in his absence, and their agricultural activities would be disrupted. Considering these challenges, Ravi decided to migrate to Mumbai instead, where he found work as a painter in the construction sector. Initially, Ravi earned a low wage, but as he gained skills and experience, his monthly income increased to around INR 12,000-15,000. During the monsoon season, he returned home for 3-4 months to help with cultivation. While the family relied on agriculture for food and daily necessities, the remittances Ravi sent from Mumbai were used for housing and other developmental work, significantly improving their living conditions.

#### 4. Conclusion:

This study reveals the significant role that internal migration plays in shaping international migration pathways in India. Internal migration serves as a stepping stone for migrants by providing opportunities to gain valuable skills, build essential social networks, and accumulate the financial resources needed for international migration. It prepares individuals to handle the challenges they may face abroad, ultimately enhancing their success in international destinations. Additionally, internal migration functions as a shock absorber for migrants who return prematurely from international migration due to adverse working conditions, exploitation, or unmet expectations. By offering these returnees economic opportunities in domestic cities, internal migration helps them recover and rebuild their livelihoods. Furthermore, for those facing structural barriers such as high migration costs, lack of networks, or documentation challenges, internal migration offers a viable alternative to diversify household income and improve living conditions within the country. The findings highlight the interconnectedness between internal and international migration, suggesting that internal migration is not merely a separate process but a crucial preparatory phase option for many international migrants. Governments should focus on promoting internal migration by enhancing skill development and vocational training programs, which equip migrants for both internal and international opportunities.

#### 5. Reference:

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