

Migrant in my own country: The long march of migrant workers in India during the COVID-19 pandemic 2020—Failure of postcolonial governments to decolonize Bihar and rebuild Indian civilization after 1947

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ABSTRACT

The world is passing through the unprecedented crisis of COVID 19 pandemic. A large section of the global population has been living under mandatory mass quarantine, the lockdown, as a strategy towards slowing down the expansion of the pandemic. This lockdown is being eased out across world in a phase wise manner. India being one of the most populous countries is hardest hit by the pandemic and soon the number of positive cases is likely to touch one million mark. One of the most significant phenomena observed during the Indian lockdown, has emerged as the long march of migrant workers from cities to their native places. Bihar, one of the Indian provinces is the major provider of migrant labourers for Indian agriculture and the industry sectors. As depicted on social media and television, the plight of migrants was disturbing and exposed modern Indian democracy's vulnerabilities. Many of them had to walk on foot for thousands of kilometers, with their hungry families, from the industrial cities to their native places. Nothing has changed for the migrant workers through the past three centuries, including the first century of postcolonial India. Why are they called migrant workers? Are they not citizens of India? How come being Bihari—a native of Bihar province, one of the primary sources of migrant workers in India, become a stigma? So how did the historical symbol of the most significant accomplishments of Indian history, literature, science, and culture come to be identified with poor migrant workers' image? Bihar's underdevelopment is often blamed on corrupt local politicians and caste politics. However, the history of migrant workers from Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh states of India is worth a closer attention for possible solutions. The phenomenon has a historical linkage with the fall of once upon a time the great Indian civilization; centuries of occupation, colonization, slavery, and indentured servitude. India has made steady progress in economic terms since 1947, India's independence from the British empire. The economy's size and rise in gross domestic product (GDP) are meaningless if ordinary citizens continue to be disfranchised, not protected, and liberated from the colonial processes. For India's sovereign economic development, there is no option but to invest in long-term and rebuild the civilization and build a system of the indigenous Indian knowledge economy based on the core principles and values of the Indian civilization.

Keywords: Migrant workers, Slavery, Indentured workers, Indian Independence, Indian Civilization, History of India, History of Bihar, Magadha Empire, Buddha, Ashoka, Chanakya, Indian economy, Development of India, Culture of India, Tourism industry, Visit Bihar, India Arrival Day, India diaspora, Future of India, Rebuilding Bihar, Bihari people, Patliputra, Magadha empire, Gupta Empire, Colonization of India, the British empire, Independence of India, Bhikhari Thakur, Mahatma Gandhi, Satyagrah. Champaran movement, Mr. Rajkeshwar Purryag, History of Mauritius, BIMARU States, Ancient India, Future of India, Indian economy, COVID-19, Corona, Pandemic in India, Public Health, Archeological Survey of India, GDP of India, Economy size of India, Niti Ayog, Government of India, Indian Agriculture Sector, Development of Bihar

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Migrant in My Own Country

The world is passing through the unprecedented crisis of COVID 19 pandemic. A large section of the global population has been living under mandatory mass quarantine, the lockdown, as a strategy towards slowing down the expansion of the pandemic. This lockdown is being eased out across world in a phase wise manner. India being one of the most populous countries is hardest hit by the pandemic and soon the number of positive cases is likely to touch one million mark. One of the most significant phenomena observed during the Indian lockdown, has emerged as the long march of migrant workers from cities to their native places. Why it happened is a matter of detailed socioeconomic and political studies. In this paper, the author has briefly reviewed the historical reasons for internal migration from Bihar and other similar Indian states. Bihar, one of the Indian provinces is the major provider of migrant labourers for Indian agriculture and the industry sectors. Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic lockdown saw the long march of migrant workers in India. As depicted on social media and television, their plight was disturbing and exposed modern Indian democracy's vulnerabilities. Many of them had to walk on foot for thousands of kilometers, with their hungry families, from the industrial cities to their native places. Nothing has changed for the migrant workers, through the past three centuries, including the first century of postcolonial India.^[1]

Who are these migrant people? Why are they called migrant workers? How come being Bihari, a native of Bihar, one of the primary provincial sources of migrant workers in India, become a stigma? So how did the historical symbol of the most significant accomplishments of Indian history, literature, science, and culture come to be identified with the poor migrant worker's image? The underdevelopment of Bihar and a large number of Biharis seeking employment outside the state is often blamed on corrupt local politicians and caste politics in recent times. However, the history of migration of workers from Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh (UP) states of India is worth a closer attention for possible solutions. This phenomenon has a historical linkage with the fall of, once upon a time great Indian civilization; centuries of occupation, colonization, slavery, and indentured servitude.

The Fall of Bihar - Slavery and Indentured Servitude

Mr. Rajkeshwar Purryag, the fifth President of Mauritius, was born in 1947, the year the British empire transferred power to the native Indian government in New Delhi. In 2013, he visited Wajitpur village of Punpun block in Patna, Bihar, from where his forefathers were brought to Mauritius as indentured laborers by the European colonial authorities and their agents 180 years ago. An emotional Mr. Purryag touched Bihar's soil and wept; he addressed the locals and met two of his relatives who continue to live below the poverty line in modern India. Patna (ancient name Patliputra) was once upon a time the capital

of the mighty Magadha Empire. Bihar is considered the cradle of Indian civilization. The national emblem of the Republic of India is an adaptation of the Lion Capital of Ashoka the Great, one of the illustrious emperors of the Mauryan Magadha empire.^[2] Internationally, Bihar is also known as the land of Buddha and Mahavira.

Many of the present generation Indian wouldn't know about the word 'Indentured Servitude'. The people who endured the process of migration as part of colonial arrangements are largely cut off from their native lands and the memories the locals in Bihar and other states in India have also faded away. In 1834, slavery was abolished by the British parliament; the same year, on 2nd November, the first ship of indentured laborers arrived on Mauritius's shores. Indian Arrival Day is a holiday celebrated on various days in the nations of the Caribbean. Presently, the people of Indian origin account for eighty percent of Mauritius's total population, out of which more than fifty percent are from Bihar. Even today, the Biharis continue to be a stable source of cheap labor to India's industrial cities and agriculture hubs. The present-day migrant worker's phenomenon in India is a continuation of the historical events and colonial processes such as the industrial revolution in Europe, the American civil war, slavery trade by Europeans, and the labor supply-demand in the international markets. Industrialization of colonial India, artificial famines in Bengal, development of factories, and British business monopolies in the Indian cities like Calcutta, Bombay, Surat, and the military's raising during World Wars are the other factors. The system of indentured servants and contractual slavery prevailed through the 19th century and was formally abolished just about World War I.^[3]

Degeneration of the Indian Civilization: Colonization, Famine and Migration

While the fall of Indian civilization to centuries of international colonization is monumental, let us briefly look at the process slavery and the status of indentured servants during British colonial period in India. The new indentured servitude (volunteer contract), was only a little different from slavery and technically permitted under that legal system of that time. Mediators and commission agents penetrated deep into the heartland of rural India, where poverty was rampant. They recruited indentured laborers, transported them to India's ports, and shipped off to the faraway colonized land. This system flourished and continued until World War I when a new requirement for military recruitment arose. More than one million soldiers were recruited in India during WWI. Later some two million Indians fought on behalf of the British during WWII. Through the 18th and 19th centuries, under colonial rule, catastrophes such as the Bengal famines and many more like them created a socioeconomic environment where ordinary people agreed to become indentured laborers just for food and survival. Bihar was earlier part of the large Bengal province. Workers were also recruited and lured to colonial India's industrial hubs of Kolkata (Calcutta), Surat, and Mumbai (Bombay).

Bidesia: Migration in the Folklore of Bihar & the Mahatma Gandhi's Champaran Satyagrah

Shri Bhikhari Thakur, born in Saran (Chhapra) district of Bihar, is known as one of the greatest writers and performers in Bhojpur, a local dialect. In the classic work, “Bidesiya,” a play he has reflected upon women empowerment, migration, and poverty. The play is about the eternal wait of the wife “Pyari Sundari” of migrant worker “Bidesiya” who doesn’t return from Calcutta (Kolkata), one of the initial industrial hubs of the British colony and the capital city of Bengal.^[4] The literal meaning of Bidesia is ‘one who lives in foreign land’. The play was composed and staged in 1912 and was published in 1917; the year Mahatma Gandhi launched the first Satyagraha movement in Motihari—Champaran, Bihar, as part of the freedom movement of India. When Mahatma Gandhi reached Bihar, his agitation was against the bonded slaves at cash crops (Indigo) farms owned by the British cultivators.^[5] An year later in 1918, the Spanish Flu pandemic hit India. It was locally named as Bombay Fever and believed to have killed upto 15 million people, the most among all countries. During 2020 COVID pandemic, Bombay (now Mumbai - the industrial capital of India) and Maharashtra state are again contributing the largest number of cases in India.

Post-1947—Patterns of Migration during the Postcolonial Era

In 1947, governance was transferred to the natives through the “Indian Independence Act 1947,” an amendment of the “Government of India Act 1935” of the British Parliament.^[6] The migration of workers from rural Bihar and Eastern UP continued in the postcolonial era. The British colonial industrial hubs gradually evolved into large metropolitan cities. It is common for men and women from Bihar to seek employment in Dilli (Delhi) and Punjab even today. According to the Indian Railways sources, there are conspicuous migration corridors within the country: Bihar to National Capital Region (Delhi), Bihar to Haryana and Punjab, Uttar Pradesh to Maharashtra, Odisha to Gujarat, Odisha to Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan to Gujarat.” Darbhanga (Bihar)—Delhi (New Delhi) Sampark Kranti Express is India’s most crowded trains, carrying more than half a million passengers annually. Trains linking Bihar to Punjab remain popular as they have traditionally catered to the movement of agriculture labor. Seventy-five percent of migrant workers in Kerala come from West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, and Odisha.^[7]

Bihar and the Civilization of India

Interestingly Bihar is considered as the cradle of Indian civilization. Land of Rama, Sita, and Valmiki Rishi from Ramanaya walked through this land. Krishna, Bhim, Karna, and Jarasandha of the Mahabharata era lived their lives here. This is the land of Chandragupta, Ashoka, Buddha, and Mahavira. Bihar is the site of ancient universities of Nalanda and Vikramshila; and celebrated scholars such as Aryabhata, Chanakya, Jivaka,

Vatsyayana (Kamasutra), Panini, and Dhanvantari. The capital of the great Indian empires of Shishunaga, Nanda, Maurya, Gupta, and early Pala dynasties. Guru Gobind Singh Ji was born here. Guru Nanak walked through this land. The history of Bihar represents everything that any civilization, country, and nation can be proud of.^[8] How come the symbol of the most significant accomplishments of Indian history, literature, science, and culture come to be identified with the poor migrant worker’s image? Human migration is a natural phenomenon, but there have been numerous events of involuntary migrations, and many times also engineered.

Why do the People of Bihar not Demand Development from their Local Politicians?

While reminded of the Indian population’s hardships due to food shortage during the Bengal famine, Winston Churchill famously messaged Lord Wavell, the British Viceroy to India. “Why hasn’t Gandhi died yet?” An estimated 2 million people died in the Bengal famine of 1943. Earlier, the famine in 1770 had taken the lives of one-third of the Indian population.^[9] During the colonial period, the perennial cycles of famines precipitated massive population migration to cities for food and employment. Such a situation is a human tragedy, but a migrant population is also an outcome of geopolitical and civilizational conflicts. In recent decades we have seen war in Syria, leading to the migration of population to far away countries. While a few countries did not allow them to enter their territories, others welcomed them with open arms and benevolence with limited citizen rights.

Why do the People of Bihar do not demand development from their their own local politicians? Why doesn't Bihar develop on its own, after all now we are past 1947 by 73 years. The answer is not easy. Every Indian knows 'Chanakya' and 'Ashoka'. These two are considered the greats, not only of Bihar but for whole India. Both them continue to be heroes of the present day Indians. Strangely not a single statue commemorating the memory of any of them is available in Bihar. Chanakya, the author of the ancient treatise Arthashastra (Economics) famously said "The happiness of the people is the happiness of the king; Their good alone is his, his personal good is not his true good; the only true good being that of his people: Therefore let the King be active in working for the prosperity and welfare of his people'. Ashoka the Great, was an Indian emperor of the Maurya Dynasty, who ruled almost all of the Indian subcontinent from c. 268 to 232 BCE. Whatever is know about ancient India is known through the monuments, edicts and inscriptions erected by Ashoka. His symbol has been adopted as state emblem of the Republic of India. But strangely again there is not a single statue of Ashoka the Great himself to be seen anywhere in India, nor it was thought appropriate to built one since 1947. The civilization of Bihar and the people of Bihar were destroyed to dust during the colonial period. Had it been in their own hands, they would have done it long back. Unfortunately, after 1947, no efforts were made to rebuild Bihar, India’s collective responsibility. On 15th August 1947, Mahatma Gandhi did not participate in any celebration of Independence

of India. The Satyagraha against colonialism that he initiated in Champaran, Bihar, was not complete. Biharis, the victims of historical colonial exploitations, and slavery are still working hard in Punjab/Haryana's farms; Surat, Mumbai, and Delhi; Industries of Bangalore, Pune, and Hyderabad. What appears to exist today in India is a continuation of the informal indentured worker system. Their status seems to remain at the same levels as they were during the colonial period; and without economic, societal, economic, and cultural support. Not rebuilding Bihar and Indian civilization is a colossal mistake of the successive postcolonial governments.

Reconstruction of Bihar

The word Bihar is derived from "Vihara," meaning Buddhist monastery. It is not possible to walk without stepping on an ancient archeological site in Bihar. Unfortunately, the majority of this archeological heritage remains uncovered. The leading archeological site of ancient Pataliputra (Patna), Kumhrar, is the least visited site of the Archeological Survey of India (ASI). Mauryan's hundred pillar hall is immersed in a filthy pond created by perpetual waterlogging, drenched in mud, and is surrounded by wild grasses, as reported by national newspapers from 2000 to 2017.^[10,11] Can you imagine this happening in Rome, Giza (Egypt), and Greece? The small streets and villages Buddha walked through on foot; places like Kushinagar, Vaishali, Patna, Nalanda, Bodhgaya, Sarnath, and Varanasi; every inch can be identified, marked, decorated, celebrated. The revival of ancient Nalanda University came very late in 2010. It was established on the basis a Joint Press Statement from the 4th East Asia Summit held in Thailand in October 2009; something that should have been a spontaneous and immediate act of any governments in 1947.^[12] Which civilization does not celebrate their greats? Is it a default situation, or is it a continuation of colonial design for maintaining the flow of migrant workers from Bihar to India's cities?

Monument of Independence: Decolonization of India

George V the British Emperor, held Delhi Durbar (court) in 1911 in New Delhi, and declared himself the Emperor of India. New Delhi, the colonial capital of British India, continues to be the seat of power today. The 75th anniversary of India's independence is only two years away. It would be an excellent opportunity to raise a "Freedom Monument" or "Independence Monument," and convert a few prominent colonial buildings into "Museums of India's Colonization." Due to unknown reasons, a monument commemorating India's Freedom or Independence was not built after 1947 in New Delhi or anywhere else in India. Probably India has been very poor all these years. But nothing is more costlier than slavery and precious than freedom. Nevertheless, Indian has been growing economically at a remarkable pace during recent decades. At least one monument should also be raised to recognize the contribution of the migrant workers to the economy of India. It will guide to direction that we Indians needs to take in future.^[13,14] An Independence Monument of New Delhi,

India could be as simple as a massive solid granite sculpture of the National Emblem, which an adaptation of the Lion Capital of Ashoka from 250 BCE at Sarnath, with the national motto inscribed below *Satyameva Jayate* (सत्यमेव जयते; "Truth alone triumphs"). There is no recent monument celebrating India's civilization. How long will India continue to celebrate the colonial building's lightings and the British Empire's servant quarters on her chest? How long can Indian people be kept on the "be grateful" model of survival/development, reminding them that "our ancestors didn't even have food." The monuments are of symbolic value, but they represent collective resolve and key values of any living civilization. And more importantly, it is the mindset of "Where the mind is without fear & the head is held high," as articulated by Rabindra Nath Tagore (1861-1941) in Gitanjali.

Economic Relief Package for Bihar

Should Bihar receive an economic relief package? Does Bihar require a special status among other Indian states? No! Bihar doesn't need a financial relief package of the modern economic order. Bihar is a very, very special state of India, the heartland of Indian civilization and nationalism. It just needs to be acknowledged. Bihar needs a deep healing touch for India to survive and shine in the future. Bihar doesn't need a poverty alleviation program funded by the World Bank, but an honest intent of a hundred-year reconstruction plan of the civilization. Even if the current development projects that function in the short electoral cycles are utilized to rebuild Bihar and Indian civilization for three consecutive years, much of the Migrant problem would be solved.

Bihar and Migrant Laborers—Way Forward

It is not about welfare projects for migrant workers but also the honor, dignity, and treatment as equal citizens. Given the history, Bihar has the potential to become a cultural tourism hub in India, and no other industry or relief package is required. Political gesturing, development promises, piecemeal packages of any amount will continue to keep Bihar under siege and prevent the benefit of India's economic growth, being enjoyed by the majority of the ordinary citizen. Without revitalizing India's civilization and sovereign knowledge economy; financial debt (slavery) will continue to rise, as individuals and the collective. India is predicted to be a large, emerging market sovereigns with the highest debt burden by 2021.^[15]

India's historical influence and contribution to the world resulted from the scholarship generated at ancient universities such as Nalanda, Taxila, and Vikramshila. How would ordinary citizens' lives become happy and fulfilling if India continues to be a franchise economy in the post colonial era. The economy's size and rise in GDP are meaningless if citizens continue to be disfranchised, not protected, or liberated from the colonial processes. For India's sovereign economic development, there is no option but to invest long-term into rebuilding the civilization and designing a system of the indigenous knowledge

economy based on the core principles and values of the Indian civilization.

COVID 19 pandemic 2020 is not only an opportunity for Indians to collectively resolve the current crisis but also to reflect upon the progress India has made after the worldwide Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918. The path taken by the migrant workers has given the nation the future direction. It is time to liberate the migrant workers and also the citizen of India from the historical injustices of colonialism and gift them back their civilization.

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Conflicts of interest

The author is a citizen of India and born in Bihar.

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