

Research Paper

A Qualitative Study of the Migration of Labourers and Factors Affecting their Well-Being in a Small Town (Leh) in North India

Mr. Ershad Hussain^{1*}

ABSTRACT

Background: Migration is a process beginning with the migrants deciding to migrate, preparing themselves physically as well as mentally, and finally shifting themselves to the place of destination. Establishing themselves in a new environment with a different cultural, geographical and social setting is a challenging task mentally as well as emotionally and can have a significant impact on the wellbeing of the labourers. **Aim & Objective:** To explore the reason for migration, and factors affecting the well-being of migrant labourers. **Methodology:** A qualitative research design was adopted for data collection and interpretation. A sample of 10 migrant labourers was included who belonged to different districts of Bihar. The data collection methods included questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and a focus group discussion. **Results:** Major factors that affect the well-being were revealed to be at different levels for labourers ranging from accommodating themselves, finding work, payment for work, dealing with the harsh weather, dealing with work-related stress, physical health, socialization with others. **Conclusion:** Favourable and convenient situations in the factors yield favourable outcomes and contribute positively to the wellbeing of migrant labourers. While on the other hand, unfavourable situations related to these factors lead to unhealthy or negative physical, emotional, mental, and social outcomes. Therefore, negatively affecting their well-being

Keywords: Migration, Well-Being

Migration
Everett S. Lee, believed that no matter how far or difficult the act of migration be, migration always has a place of origin, place of destination, and intervening obstacles. Distance of migration is no doubt one obstacle. He attaches different factors to the place of origin and destination that is, every area has certain virtues or attractions in it which hold people back in itself and other repelling factors which pushes them away and he explains it through Origin and destination factors and intervening obstacles chart, for example. He assigns (+) to attractive factors, (-) to repelling factors, and (0) to neutral factors i.e., which makes no difference to individuals and their behaviour (Lee, 1966).

¹Student, School of Human Ecology, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (Mumbai), India

*Corresponding Author

Received: June 02, 2021; Revision Received: June 22, 2021; Accepted: June 30, 2021

A Qualitative Study of the Migration of Labourers and Factors Affecting their Well-Being in a Small Town (Leh) in North India

In today's modern era of technology, efficient modes of transportation, and the growing economy, the process of labour migration has become much more convenient and a common phenomenon in every small and major economic centres. Conflicting situations, lack of livelihood opportunities and poverty enforce people to migrate to areas where the availability of jobs and hope for a better quality of life is prevalent. Bihar is marked as one of the poorest states, with almost 40% of its population living under the National Poverty Line (IFHD, 2012).

Wellbeing

Wellbeing is seen as a multidisciplinary concept and has been defined differently by different scholars. The question of defining wellbeing is still not completely resolved and therefore wellbeing is often defined broadly. For instance, Ryff (1989) believed that there has not been a completely inclusive definition of psychological well-being, whereas Thomas (2009) argues that well-being is an intangible concept and therefore difficult to measure and to bring it under a single unanimous definition.

Bradburn focused on the positive and negative affect of individuals that could be linked to psychological well-being. He stated that if an individual has an excess of positive affect over negative affect, then he/she will be high on psychological well-being and vice versa. Bradburn (1969).

Recently a major shift in understanding and defining well-being has come with Dodge and colleagues defining and explaining well-being through the see-saw model. On one end of the see-saw bar lies a set of challenges while on the other end lies a set of resources namely physical, social and psychological. When an individual is faced with challenges his/her system is imbalanced. To restore a balanced system, the individual uses the appropriate resources (Dodge et al., 2012).

Migration of Laborers from Bihar

In Bihar, the absence of growth due to social relationships, hierarchies, governance shortfalls, constraints such as credit, technological factors, and other factors trigger the movement of labour. The proportion of migrant labourers to total labourers increased from 15.7 percent in 1998-99 to 25.5 percent in 2009-10 (IFHD, 2012). The incidence of migration is higher in north Bihar and generally, the migration is seasonal in nature and male-oriented, primarily in the age group of 15-35 years. The nature of migration has shifted from seasonal to long-term, as more than half of labourers migrate for a period greater than 8 months (IFHD, 2012).

On the other hand, Leh has witnessed a massive inflow of tourists from across the globe, which caused a chain-like effect with the economic development. The growth in the economy led to the growth of employment, which further led to an increase in demand for labour and indicating an increase in the demand for migrant labourers.

Aim

To explore the reasons behind migration and factors that affect the wellbeing of migrant labourers, while they go through the whole process of migration and during their stay in Leh.

A Qualitative Study of the Migration of Labourers and Factors Affecting their Well-Being in a Small Town (Leh) in North India

Objectives

- To study the reasons behind the migration of labourers from Bihar to Leh.
- To explore the factors affecting the well-being of the migrant labourers from Bihar in Leh

METHODOLOGY

The study design was approved by the ethical committee of the institute. The research took place from March 2017 to February 2018. The data collection for the study took place in Skampari and Maney Sermo. These are the main areas in Leh where most of the Bihari labourers seek accommodation during the seasonal migration in Leh. The sample consisted of 10 migrant labourers who have at least 2 years of experience of migration to Leh. The seasonal migrant labourers are exclusively male and there is no presence of female migrant labourers from Bihar in Leh. Informed consent was sought from the participants for their participation (interviews, focused group discussion, and audio recording of the same). 10 in-depth interviews and one focused group discussion were conducted in closed rooms that ensured comfortable space and complete confidentiality for the participants. The individual interviews were completed in 30-40 minutes. The focused group discussion was completed in 1 hour.

The following tools of data collection were used:

1. A short questionnaire including the key socio-demographic details of the labourers including their age, sex, occupation, education, and marital status.
2. In-Depth Interviews: To get a comprehensive understanding of the conceptualization of wellbeing by migrants in Leh and factors affecting it, the Short-Warwick Edinburgh mental wellbeing scale was referred and an interview guide was prepared based on mental, emotional, and social domains. The interview guide consisted of 10-12 open-ended questions.
3. The focused group discussion included the questions prepared by the researcher keeping in mind the objectives of the research. The questions were prepared after having a preliminary informal discussion and brainstorming exercises with 2-3 labourers.

The procedure of Data Analysis

The audio-recorded data from the focused group discussion and in-depth interviews were transcribed and translated from Hindi into English separately for each patient. The transcribed interviews were further closely examined to compare similarities and differences, and questions were raised in terms of the meaning of the phenomena as reflected in the data. In this phase, categories were developed by grouping similar pieces of data together. Comparing incidents with other incidents was a strategy used for developing each category. In this initial coding, the researcher looked for leads, ideas, and questions in the data themselves. As a result, an initial category of codes was generated. The provisional codes noted were further checked for their similarities and closely synthesized into themes that captured the essence of the phenomenon in question. The themes generated from the analysis were described in the form of written paragraphs with supported data from the individual interview and FGD notes.

A Qualitative Study of the Migration of Labourers and Factors Affecting their Well-Being in a Small Town (Leh) in North India

RESULTS

Table 1.1 Sociodemographic details of the labourers

Serial No.	Name	Age	Sex	Occupation	Marital status	Education
1	Gopal	32	Male	Painter	married	10th
2	Dashrat	24	Male	Plumber	unmarried	11th
3	Nandlal	26	Male	Painter	married	9th
4	Tauheed	34	Male	Mason	married	5th
5	Shamsha	22	Male	un-skilled	unmarried	8th
6	Diwakar	25	Male	un-skilled	unmarried	8th
7	Vivek	31	Male	Painter	married	illiterate
8	Rooplal	46	Male	Plumber	married	5th
9	Jitendra Das	42	Male	Mason	married	5th
10	Raju Kumar	21	Male	Un-skilled	unmarried	9th

The following section describes the themes that emerged from the qualitative interviews and the focused group discussion.

Higher wage rate (the main reason for migration)

All the labourers reported that the daily wage they earn in Leh is almost the double of what they earn back at home. Similarly, as reported by Mr. Ghulam Nabi Tak, Assistant Labour Commissioner, Leh the normative wages rate for labour according to the minimum wages act 1948 is skilled ₹225, Semi-Skilled ₹ 175, unskilled ₹ 150. However, he stated that the Government of India's Wage rates is not applicable for areas like Leh due to harsh geographical and climatic conditions.

Table 2.1 Rate list fixed by the labour committee, Leh district for the year 2016 -17 Source (Reach Ladakh)

CATEGORIES	CLASS	RATE
Unskilled labour	-	369
Unskilled labour	10+2	495
Mason	A	571
Mason	B	460
Carpenter	A	571
Carpenter	B	433
Painter	-	462
Plumber	-	462
Electrician	-	462
Cook	A	633
Cook	B	584
Waiter	-	383
Sweeper	-	363
Mate supervisor	-	452
Pony trekker	-	445

However, as reported by all the labourers the minimum prevailing wage for the labourers are even more than the recommended wages by the Labour Department. The labourers reported that in today's context the minimum wage at which an unskilled labourer works from Labour Chowk is Rs. 500. / day and the semiskilled labourer is approximately 600-650.

A Qualitative Study of the Migration of Labourers and Factors Affecting their Well-Being in a Small Town (Leh) in North India

Poverty and Lack of Employment, a push factor for migration

Most of the migrants stated poverty as one of the main reasons behind their migration to Leh. Most of these workers stated that traditionally they did not own any agricultural land at home. The workers work in a semi-feudal economic system in which they provide their labour for landlords and get some share of the output in terms of crops or wages. However, most of them believe that such forms of employment hardly make it possible to meet the expenses of the household. Besides a few of them who own small landholdings also talked about the insufficiency of the output to meet the expenses of the family. Under such conditions the responsibility of earning a livelihood shifts primarily on the male members of the family. Many of the participants also linked their early school dropouts to unfavourable financial conditions at home forcing them to quit education and start earning by migrating to far areas like Leh.

Harsh working conditions in cold months

Most of the migrants reported that initially when they arrive in Leh, they face some difficulties primarily due to the cold weather. Besides when they come early in March-April, they face further difficulties due to the scarcity of important consumer goods such as fresh vegetable fruits and kerosene oil. During the winter months, the Zojila pass linking Leh to Srinagar is blocked, which opens up late in April mostly. Therefore, the whole region faces scarcity of fresh vegetables as during the winter months the agriculture is completely stagnant due to cold weather therefore no food crops can be grown during the winter locally. While those consumer items transported by flight in winter come very expensive and scarce that the labourers cannot access and afford regularly. One of the labourers stated:

“Working for us is difficult early during the working season when the weather remains very cold especially during morning and evening. However, I have no option but to go to Labour Chowk early morning in the chilling cold and look for work there. Besides, sometimes we have to wait for hours at the chowk in the cold, it makes me feel so unhappy and helpless. But as soon as I get work, I feel satisfied and work irrespective of the cold weather. The conditions are different during the mid-working season when it is warmer, the availability of work also increases and the weather is also less cold.”

Most of the migrants stated that during the initial months i.e., March-April and later in October, when the weather remains cold, the majority of the problems are faced not only in terms of cold weather but the availability of consumer goods which also affect their work and creates stressful situations negatively affecting their emotional and physical health, and therefore their wellbeing.

Initial acclimatization with the environment

Since the workers migrate from Bihar, i.e., a plain area to Leh which is located at an average height of 11,000 feet above the sea level geographically characterized by high mountains and valleys, all the migrants reported that they do not prefer to work at least 3-4 days after their arrival. During these days they take rest, meet other migrants and take walks around the town itself to acclimatize their bodies. Further, some of them also reported that working longer for a longer duration initially causes problems of breathlessness especially when they work at higher places. This would primarily be caused due to a low level of oxygen in the air at heights.

A Qualitative Study of the Migration of Labourers and Factors Affecting their Well-Being in a Small Town (Leh) in North India

Improving accommodation facilities over time

Most of the migrants admit that the situations have drastically changed in Skampari and Maney Tselding over the years. For instance, Rooplal stated that during his early years of migration most of the houses providing accommodation on rent did not even have proper toilet and bathroom facilities for the workers. Consequently, many labourers had to resort to open defecation in unhygienic places. However, things have changed now with almost every house providing minimal toilet facilities. Similarly, Mr. Ghulam Nabi also stated that the Labour department has issued guidelines of provision of basic facilities for the migrant labour that has to be followed compulsorily by every household renting rooms to migrant workers. He believes that most of the households are following the guidelines and the major problems such as sanitation and water facilities are now being provided in every household with convenience in the summer season.

Health and hygiene

The workers reported that they face a lot of problems during the initial phase of the working season and also towards the end i.e., in autumn, when the weather remains cold. Such kinds of weather affect their physical health and hygiene. Most of the labourers have no access to warm water and they normally use cold water for bathing while some of the labourers do not take baths at all for days due to cold weather. They reported that it is during this time of the season that they fall sick more often. It was observed in many places that the labourers live in unhygienic conditions in the rooms where a single room is shared on an average by 4 labourers. These situations in addition to physical and hygienic problems create psychological stress.

Living in congested spaces in unhygienic conditions is likely to make the labourers more susceptible to disease and also to communicate it to others. Besides some of the labourers workers also stated that due to their hectic work schedule in which they have to leave for work early morning around 7 and come back late in the evening around 6. Therefore, they cannot dedicate a substantial amount of time to maintaining a hygienic environment all the time especially in the cold months. In case of common medical illness, most of the labourers workers go to the private clinics in the Leh town itself. While in cases where serious medical attention is required, they go to the government hospital. Most of them are satisfied with the medical treatment facilities they get in Leh, even though the charges in the private clinic are higher. While reporting about mental health. A few of the labourers admitted being sad and worried especially during days when they do not get work, but did not seek any medical or psychotherapeutic help from any agency or hospital.

Stress Related to work

A common theme that emerged from the responses of all the participants was the stress due to work. The labourers reported this concern relatively more when they take works on contractual basis themselves from the local employers. Since it involves finishing the work on their own irrespective of the number of days it takes. However, they stated that the employers mostly wish to get the work done sooner. Therefore, under such situations the labourer who takes the contract has to look for other workers who are available for work and look for some of the resources and tools for themselves, along with the pressure to get the work done sooner. Therefore, under such conditions, they find themselves stressed and worried often. While some workers reported that even if they work on a wage basis, they do not work continuously since it also causes them to stress about not being able to take a break and rest. So, they prefer to take a break for a day or two every alternate week.

A Qualitative Study of the Migration of Labourers and Factors Affecting their Well-Being in a Small Town (Leh) in North India

Besides most of them reported having gone through the situation at times when they do not get work at all when it is not available, which also allows them to take a break for themselves. However, they stated that when they remain unemployed for more than 2-3 days they start feeling worried that eventually triggers a sense of apprehension. Consequently, they put more and more effort in looking for work impatiently. Such conditions reportedly cause them distress and therefore negatively affect their wellbeing. However, a sense of relief and satisfaction was also reported by most of them when they can meet all the resources including the manpower for a particular contract they undertake.

Importance of good relationships with contractors, employers, and co-workers

Most of the workers also emphasized the quality of relationship that they share with their employers and work colleagues as a major determinant of stress at work. Most of them stated when the employers treat them nicely by giving them enough freedom to decide about work, wages, and negotiate politely on work-related issues, they feel more comfortable working with low levels of stress and with greater commitment. Many of the workers also reported that maintaining good social relations with employers/ contractors is necessary because this helps in getting more work in the future easily. They also stated that the contractors and the local employers in some cases also play a major role in their social support especially when they are going through some difficulties. For example, Shamshad stated,

“When my friend told me about Leh, I wanted to come here at any cost but did not have enough money to travel. I did not want to make money from my family also. So, a friend who used to come to Leh introduced me to a contractor. I started my interest but incapability to migrate due to financial constraints. He was such a kind person, he told me he will take care of the expenses and that I can pay back his loan later in Leh. He took me to Leh with himself, got me to work here and I could pay him later. Even today he keeps asking about my status in Leh and always provides me guidance and support whenever needed.”

Similarly, the workers report most of the contractors and local employers are nice however few give them trouble at work. They state these kinds of contractors/ employers are the ones who delay their payments, sometimes bully them at work by not, give them at work, give them no autonomy at work, and are mostly not satisfied with the work they do. The workers find themselves under more stressful and tense situations when they have to deal with such employers or contractors. Most of the workers stated that completion of work under a stipulated time requires good coordination of the whole team of workers and good effort from all. When the whole group work as a team with good effort give rise to a sense of connectedness. As stated by one of the labourers:

“A good connection with co-workers is very important during work here. Because all of we have to share the responsibilities and work as a team that comes more effectively when we relate to each other positively”

Besides most of them admit that a good connection with other experienced workers motivate the unskilled workers to learn new skills in their work and eventually launch themselves as semi-skilled labour which can get them higher wages comparatively. Skill learning is a constant process for the workers. Not only for the new workers but for the semi-skilled workers who reportedly learn new skills throughout their engagement.

A Qualitative Study of the Migration of Labourers and Factors Affecting their Well-Being in a Small Town (Leh) in North India

Many of the new workers who directly want to launch themselves as semi-skilled labour initially work under an experienced semi-skilled worker for at least one season and later independently work as semi-skilled workers themselves.

Social Life of the labourers in Leh

Most of the migrants regarded interaction with other workers from Bihar as one of the most important aspect of their life in Leh. They stated that during the daytime all the workers are engaged in their respective work across Leh and nearby areas. While as they return from work, most of the labour gather in the streets of Skampari to meet others including their friends, relative's co-villagers. Most of them believe that social interaction amongst each other plays multiple functions for them. It keeps them updated with information about, the wages and also availability of work at different places.

Most of the workers admitted that socialization is a constant process for them during their stay in Leh. Since all of them reportedly share a room with others i.e., Friends, relatives, or fellow villagers, therefore they constantly have to communicate and interact based on issues related to work, discussions on expenditures on the kitchen, and room rent. Secondly, most of them admitted that socializing serves as a major coping mechanism wherein they do share about whatever is happening in their lives, discuss problems that help them and give them a sense of relief and reach a solution by seeking help from others.

Technology and its importance for labourers in Leh

The labourers also stated that now technology has played a major role in the socialization process, they stated, in today's era all the labourers own smartphones that help them keep in contact with others and most importantly their families back home.

Since most of them reported having a sense of satisfaction when they know about the wellbeing of their families at home. Besides, smartphones serve them as a major source of relief from work the routine stressful life.

Emphasizing the significance of smartphones for entertainment Nandlal stated, *The mobile phone has been a great source of entertainment for me. I am a big movie lover and like to watch both Bhojpuri and Hindi movies on my phone since I don't have a TV. At Least once a month I go to the mobile shop and download 10-15 movies, songs and videos. This gives me a sense of relief from the stressful work that I do during the day. Most of the labourers do the same. Now many of the workers have also bought TV and Dish TV as a source of entertainment. This keeps also gives us some relief from the exhaustion that we face during the day due to work.*

Further, some of the labourers also stated that they keep mobile internet subscriptions frequently that gives them access to a lot of other utilities such as WhatsApp and YouTube. Thus, helping them keep better contacts and access information.

DISCUSSION

The migration phenomenon of labourers from Bihar can be best explained by Everett lee's model of migration (Lee, 1966). As there are certain aspects in the labour market in Leh that creates more employment opportunities for labourers and attracts labourers from places like Bihar. In addition to this, the prevailing wage rates are also very high for labourers in Leh as compared to Bihar. On the other hand, at the place of destination i.e., Bihar, the prevalence

A Qualitative Study of the Migration of Labourers and Factors Affecting their Well-Being in a Small Town (Leh) in North India

of lower wages and lower levels of employment can be seen as push factors. Therefore, understanding the process through the framework of Everett Lee's theory, it can be observed that the pull factors (higher wage and higher employment) for the labourers compel them to migrate to Leh. On the other hand, the prevalence of lower wages and lower levels of employment in Bihar can be understood as push factors that motivate them to move out of Bihar for work.

Reviewing the early works of literature on well-being revealed that, the question of defining well-being is still not completely resolved, and therefore well-being is often defined broadly. For instance, Ryff (1989) believed that there has not been a completely inclusive definition of psychological well-being, whereas Thomas (2009) argues that well-being is an intangible concept and therefore difficult to measure and to bring it under a single unanimous definition. Any single definition of well-being as objectively applied to the whole population tends to create a general discourse of well-being that lacks a contextual understanding of the well-being of a particular population under study.

Therefore, what it means to be well, is to realize the culturally specific mandated ways of living. The understanding that the term well-being has a multidisciplinary nature as argued by many recent researchers, it is important to understand the conceptualization of the wellbeing of labourers about different aspects of life. In the present study, the deeper understanding of the subjective experiences of the workers led to emerging themes that explain their subjective meaning of the term well-being in the context of migration to Leh. The major themes that were derived from the current study suggest that the initial phase of settling down, overcome the challenges in living conditions with sufficient resources, keeping themselves healthy, acclimatizing to the harsh weather of Leh initially, promotes a sense of satisfaction amongst them that has a significant impact on their well-being.

Further, during their stay in Leh if they get work regularly and more importantly the payments are made on time, remittances sent home successfully, and gives them a feeling of satisfaction, happiness and build their self-worth. However, the conditions which lead to the contrary situations such as unemployment for days, lack of resources to cope up in the cold weather, delay in payments and other unfavourable situations give rise to negative emotions such as worry, sadness, hopelessness, and frustration. The findings, therefore, are keeping with the theory of well-being to a great extent as proposed by Bradburn (1969) based on the negative and positive emotions.

However, the findings can be more comprehensively understood through the framework of well-being as proposed by Dodge et al., (2012) which consists of a set of social, physical, and psychological challenges and the resources to meet those challenges. Since workers are faced different types of challenges since their arrival in Leh which they overcome using their resources depending on the nature of challenges faced.

Further socialization is one of the crucial aspects of their lives for most of the workers, as it reportedly plays multiple functions for them such as building better social contacts, access information about work availability, provide them a space to relieve from stressful work, encourages and provides social support, promotes the feelings of satisfaction, relatedness, and sense of belonging as the details are described in the findings. These findings can be understood concerning the theoretical proposition presented by Seligman and Diener, that

A Qualitative Study of the Migration of Labourers and Factors Affecting their Well-Being in a Small Town (Leh) in North India

people with healthy relationships and interaction with others report positive feelings more frequently than negative feelings (Diener and Seligman, 2002).

CONCLUSION

The primary reason behind migrating for most of the workers from Bihar is the scope of higher wage rates and employment opportunities than the place of origin and lack of employment opportunities at home during summer. Another major aim of the research was to find the contextual understanding of well-being for Bihari labour in Leh and the major factors affecting it. Wellbeing is itself is an amorphous concept that conveys a state of being well and being good. Therefore, major factors that affect this state, were revealed to be at different levels for labourers ranging from accommodating themselves, finding work, payment for work, dealing with the harsh weather dealing with work-related stress, physical and mental health, socialization with others, and remittances. All these are the major common factors that have a significant impact on the physical, emotional, mental and social aspects of their lives in Leh. Favourable and convenient situations in these factors yield favourable outcomes and contribute positively towards their wellbeing. On the other hand, unfavourable situations related to these factors lead to negative physical, emotional, and mental health outcomes. Therefore, negatively affecting their well-being.

REFERENCES

- Bradburn N. M. (1969). The Structure of Psychological Well-Being. *Psychological Medicine*, 6(1), 161
- Dodge, R., Daly, A., Huyton, J., & Sanders, L. (2012). The challenge of defining wellbeing. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 2(3), 222-235
- Institute for Human Development. (2012). Social and economic change in rural Bihar and in the emerging policy network
- Kimura, M.I. (2013). Understanding Change in Old Leh Town. Department of International Environment and Development Studies. Norway
- Lee, E. (1966). A Theory of Migration. *Demography*, 3(1), 47-57.
- Rao, M. S. (1986). Sociological Aspects of Migration. In M. S. Rao, *Studies in Migration* (pp. 1-19). New Delhi: Manohar Publications.
- Ryff C, D (1989). Happiness is everything, or is it? Explorations on the meaning of psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social psychology*, 57(6), 1069-1081.
- Thomas, J. (2009). Working paper: Current measures and the challenges of measuring children's wellbeing. Newport: Office for National Statistics

Acknowledgement

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Hussain E. (2021). A Qualitative Study of the Migration of Labourers and Factors Affecting their Well-Being in a Small Town (Leh) in North India. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 9(2), 2142-2151. DIP:18.01.212.20210902, DOI:10.25215/0902.212