International Journal of Social Science and Human Research

ISSN (print): 2644-0679, ISSN (online): 2644-0695

Volume 09 Issue 06 June 2026

DOI: 10.47191/ijsshr/v9-i6-02, Impact factor- 8.361

Page No: 4706- 4717

The Great Rural Drift: Destination Dynamics of Migration amid Agrarian Hardship

Mansoor Ali (PhD)

Associate Professor, Department of Geography and Environmental Studies,Samara University, Afar, Ethiopia.

ABSTRACT: This research paper, "The Great Rural Drift: Destination Dynamics of Migration amid Agrarian Hardship," critically examines the complex relationship between marginal landholdings, rural agrarian distress, and the patterns of internal migration in India over the three decades from 1990–91 to 2020–21. Drawing on longitudinal data on landholding size, foodgrain productivity, and migration destinations—disaggregated by gender and occupational category—the study reveals a deepening agrarian crisis manifested in the predominance of marginal farms and declining average landholding sizes. While foodgrain productivity has modestly improved, it remains inadequate for subsistence among small and marginal cultivators, forcing large segments of the rural population, particularly the land-poor, to migrate.

The migration patterns that emerge are overwhelmingly short-distance and intra-state in nature, concentrated within districts or neighbouring areas. These flows are highly gendered, with women dominating local agricultural labour migration and men gradually diversifying toward inter-district or non-farm destinations. Among both cultivators and labourers, the overwhelming tendency is toward circular or seasonal migration, rather than permanent relocation, indicating the persistence of structural dependence on rural agrarian economies, even amid their decline.

The study underscores that migration in this context is not voluntary or aspirational, but a compulsion borne out of land fragmentation, stagnant agricultural incomes, and lack of viable rural employment. It concludes by advocating for an integrated policy framework that includes land reform, investment in rural employment, gender-sensitive migration governance, and institutional support to transform migration from a survival strategy into a pathway of economic mobility.

KEYWORDS: Marginal Landholdings, Foodgrain Production, Rural Migration, Gender and Migration, Agricultural Labour, Cultivator Migration, Intra-State Mobility.

INTRODUCTION

Over recent decades, rural India has been enmeshed in a profound agrarian crisis, where structural factors—such as land fragmentation, stagnating productivity, and rising input costs—have eroded the viability of small-scale farming. The resulting economic fatigue has compelled vast numbers of agricultural workers, many of whom are marginal farmers or landless agricultural labourers, to embark on migratory journeys in search of livelihoods. This phenomenon, aptly termed 'The Great Rural Drift,' represents more than mere displacement; it signifies a deeply ingrained transformation in rural life, with profound implications for who migrates, where they go, and under what conditions, particularly amid the backdrop of agrarian hardship.

India's agricultural landscape is marked by persistent land fragmentation. Between 1990–91 and 2020–21, the average holding size shrank precipitously—from 1.20 hectares to just 0.87 hectares—with marginal holdings (under 1 ha) growing to encompass nearly 69% of all farms (GOI, 2021). These tiny parcels yield minimal returns, often falling short of even subsistence-level foodgrain production—around 855 kg per marginal holding, against a minimum family requirement of 778 kg based on ICMR nutritional standards (ICMR, 2020). Such insufficient output reinforces food insecurity and exposes marginal farm households to economic vulnerability, making migration seldom optional and frequently essential.

Coupled with fragmentation, agricultural employment dynamics have shifted sharply. The share of cultivators in the rural workforce declined from 60.5% in 1990–91 to just 49.5% in 2020–21, while casual agricultural labour rose from 39.5% to 50.5% (GOI, 2021). This shift illustrates the structural disintegration of smallholder agriculture, with self-dependent farmers increasingly forced into precarious labour arrangements or displaced into migration. For marginal landholders and agricultural labourers, migration serves as a livelihood survival strategy, rather than a step toward upward mobility.

The key to understanding this drift is its destination dynamics. Historically, rural-to-rural migration prevailed, with intra-state seasonal labour moving for cropping or construction work. But recent patterns indicate increasing urban-bound and interstate migration. Workers from economically distressed regions—such as eastern Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Odisha now funnel

into urban centres like Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore, as well as into peri-urban and industrial zones across states such as Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, and Maharashtra (Keshri & Bhagat, 2013). This shift denotes a significant transition from agricultural reliance to urban informal-sector dependence.

Concurrently, the gender profile of migrants is transforming. Contrary to the conventional portrayal of male-dominated migration dynamics, emerging data reveal a marked feminization within agricultural migration. In 1990–91, women represented 73.1% of agricultural migrant workers, a figure that increased to 88.9% by 2020–21 (GOI, 2021). This overwhelming female presence in migration points to a gendered dimension of the agrarian crisis: men increasingly remain in villages to safeguard land titles or tend to family farms, while women bear dual burdens—on-farm work and migrating for wage labour, training, or support activities. This challenges typical patriarchal assumptions and highlights women's agency in rural livelihood negotiation.

The occupational experiences of these migrant women further differentiate migration paths. Compared to men—who often find jobs in construction, logistics, and transport—women are more frequently found in agricultural labour, domestic work, and informal services both within their home regions and at destinations. The pattern indicates a circular or seasonal migration trend, where women travel for short periods—often during sowing or harvesting seasons—then return to their villages, thus enabling households to maintain continuity in agricultural operations while supplementing income through migration.

The combination of destination and gender dynamics creates a complex rural mobility matrix. Migrants from distressed agricultural regions no longer move as single, precursor workers, but increasingly in family groups or as cross-gender cohorts dictated by agrarian need. Women, in this sense, do not simply fill the void left by male out-migration—they shape the migration economy in their own right. Their decisions are strategic, balancing farming responsibilities, village social obligations, and the economic necessity of wage work.

Moreover, the social and developmental implications of this migration pattern are material and structural. Migration by marginal farmers and women can inject remittances into local economies, supporting rural consumption and occasionally enabling small investments. However, the precarity of these migrant labour arrangements—lacking job security, access to social benefits, and legal protections—makes them vulnerable to crises. Additionally, the long-term exodus of able-bodied women from rural spaces, even seasonally, disrupts farming cycles, alters household labour divisions, and reshapes gender norms in communities.

Simultaneously, the increasing remittance-dependency risks entrench low-wage labour equilibria both in destination centres and in the home villages, where wages remain stagnant. With agricultural productivity still low and scant alternative livelihood opportunities in rural areas, households face constraints in resource capitalization. These constraints perpetuate rural fragility, catalysing cyclical or permanent patterns of migration among the poorest.

This paper explores the destination-specific migration patterns of agricultural workers in India, with particular emphasis on marginal cultivators and agricultural labourers. It seeks to uncover the complex dynamics that drive migration from the agricultural sector by closely examining how various destinations—such as rural-to-rural, rural-to-urban, and intra-district or interstate locations—are selected by migrants. These choices are often shaped by underlying socio-economic compulsions, notably the growing unviability of small-scale agriculture. The analysis focuses on how agrarian distress, compounded by land fragmentation and declining agricultural productivity, prompts distinct migratory responses and determines both the type and location of employment that displaced agricultural workers pursue.

A central focus of this study is the intersection of agrarian hardship with migration decisions, as it seeks to identify how specific destination patterns are influenced by class, occupation, and the changing rural economy. Particular attention is given to mapping the occupational trajectories that emerge from these transitions, revealing how cultivators and labourers shift roles based on the opportunities and constraints presented by their chosen destinations. In doing so, the study not only categorises migratory trends by region but also investigates the socio-economic logic that underpins them.

Importantly, the paper interrogates the gender composition of the migrant agricultural workforce. It challenges the often uncritical assumption that rural out-migration is a predominantly male process. By analysing both direct and indirect forms of female migration, especially among women from marginal farming households, the study highlights the growing feminization of both agriculture and migration. Many women remain in villages to manage agricultural work in the absence of men, while others migrate independently, taking up employment in domestic service, informal labour, or seasonal agricultural tasks in different regions.

Finally, the research assesses the broader implications of agrarian inefficiencies—such as low productivity, rising input costs, and lack of infrastructure—and their role in pushing individuals out of farming. It examines whether migration primarily serves as a coping mechanism in response to livelihood collapse or can also function as a route to upward mobility. By linking rural distress to migratory patterns, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how agricultural decline is reshaping the rural labour landscape in India.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

This study is employing a mixed-methods approach based entirely on secondary data sources, using a longitudinal and comparative design to analyse the transformation of rural agrarian livelihoods over three decades, from 1990–91 to 2020–21. The research relies

on datasets from National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) rounds, Census of India, Agricultural Census, and publications from NITI Aayog, and other governmental reports that track landholding patterns, workforce composition, and migration statistics.

The methodology involves quantitative analysis of macro-level trends through descriptive statistics and percentages that reveal changes in landholding size, foodgrain production per household, agricultural employment, and migration. Tables on land fragmentation, agricultural workforce participation, and gender-specific migration are analyzed to identify temporal patterns and correlate them with agrarian indicators such as production insufficiency and landholding viability.

Given the focus on marginal farmers and agricultural labourers, the design includes a disaggregated analysis by size-class of holdings, type of agricultural worker (cultivator vs. labourer), and gender. The study uses thematic analysis to interpret statistical findings in light of theoretical frameworks such as push–pull theory of migration, agrarian crisis narratives, and feminization of agriculture.

To ensure analytical rigour, this study adopts a gender-sensitive approach, carefully documenting both male and female migration patterns, including direct migration and indirect participation such as increased involvement in agriculture due to male outmigration. The research employs critical triangulation of data sources to enhance the reliability and validity of its findings. By combining quantitative data with interpretive insights drawn from existing secondary literature, the study offers a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of rural transformation and the structural forces driving migration from the agricultural sector.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on rural migration in India, particularly concerning marginal landholding farmers, has evolved significantly in response to structural transformations in agriculture and growing economic insecurities. A key theme that emerges from recent scholarship is the increasing vulnerability of marginal farmers, those with landholdings of less than 1 hectare, who are disproportionately impacted by the ongoing agrarian hardship. These farmers often resort to migration as a coping strategy, leading to distinct destination patterns shaped by their socio-economic status, regional disparities, and access to networks and resources (Deshingkar & Start, 2003; Mishra, 2007).

Several studies emphasise that the fragmentation of landholdings has rendered agricultural livelihoods increasingly unviable. The average size of operational landholdings in India has declined steadily, from 1.55 hectares in 1990–91 to 1.08 hectares in 2015–16, a trend largely attributed to inheritance customs and population pressure (Government of India, 2018). This fragmentation, in turn, limits the productivity and income potential of small and marginal farms, pushing rural households, especially the youth, towards migration. These migratory movements are not random but structured along particular destination trajectories shaped by both push and pull factors (Rogaly, 1999; Srivastava, 2011).

Migration destinations are highly stratified, reflecting the class and caste positioning of the migrants. For marginal farmers, the most common destinations include nearby towns, peri-urban areas, and secondary urban centres, which offer opportunities in construction, informal services, and low-end manufacturing. These locations are often preferred due to lower costs of migration and the presence of existing kinship or community networks that ease the initial transition (Deshingkar & Farrington, 2009; Keshri & Bhagat, 2013). In contrast, medium and large landholders, who are better resourced, often migrate to more distant or metropolitan urban centres, sometimes even abroad, thus reflecting a form of stratified mobility (Breman, 1996; Sharma, 2016).

Importantly, the literature also highlights the phenomenon of ‘circular’ or ‘seasonal' migration, which dominates the mobility patterns of marginal landholders. This form of migration involves temporary movement to destinations during agricultural lean seasons and return during sowing or harvest periods. Studies from states such as Bihar, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and Madhya Pradesh have documented how rural workers, particularly land-poor households, engage in cyclical migration to work in brick kilns, sugarcane fields, or construction sites in states like Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh (Mosse et al., 2002; Rogaly et al., 2002; Jha, 2018). Such migration is usually distress-driven and rarely results in social mobility or asset accumulation, further embedding the precarity of marginal farming households.

The destination dynamics also reveal gendered patterns. Male migrants from marginal farming households are more likely to take up physically demanding, low-skilled jobs in construction or manual labour, while female migrants—where migration occurs—are often absorbed into domestic work or small-scale service sectors (Tumbe, 2012; Agrawal & Chandrasekhar, 2015). This gender segmentation reflects both the rigid gender norms of rural India and the informal nature of employment available in urban peripheries. In some cases, women are left behind to manage the farms, leading to the feminization of agriculture, which itself is a growing area of concern in agrarian studies (Agarwal, 2014; Kelkar, 2009).

The decision to migrate and the eventual choice of destination are also closely linked to the deteriorating institutional support for agriculture. The withdrawal of state support in the form of subsidies, extension services, rural credit, and price assurance has further marginalised small farmers, especially in rainfed regions (Ramakumar, 2010; Patnaik, 2003). Without sufficient institutional backing, marginal farmers are forced to diversify their income sources through migration, yet the destinations they access rarely provide long-term security. This is reflected in the lack of social protection, insecure housing, and informal labour conditions in destination areas (Desai et al., 2020).

Urban destinations themselves are often unprepared for the influx of rural migrants. The National Sample Survey (2017–18) and reports by the Working Group on Migration (2017) note that most migrants from rural areas live in slums or informal settlements with limited access to public services. These conditions are especially harsh for migrants from marginalised castes and tribes, who face systemic discrimination both in rural sending areas and urban destinations (Bhagat, 2011; Shah et al., 2006). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the structural vulnerability of these populations, as millions of rural-origin migrants were stranded without income, shelter, or transport, highlighting the fragility of their integration into urban economies (Srivastava, 2020).

Emerging literature also points to new and less traditional migration destinations, particularly in industrial corridors, special economic zones (SEZs), and rural-urban transition spaces. These "in-between" destinations, such as Gurgaon-Manesar, Sanand, and Sriperumbudur, have attracted rural migrants due to the proliferation of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which require cheap and flexible labour (Neetha, 2002; Sinha, 2014). However, employment in these zones is typically contractual, unregulated, and marked by labour rights violations, thus reproducing rural insecurity in new urban contexts.

Finally, a growing body of research emphasises the need to see rural-urban migration not just as a one-way movement but as part of a larger livelihood strategy that includes remittance flows, land leasing, and informal tenancy arrangements in home villages. Migrants often maintain ties with their places of origin through periodic returns, land cultivation by women or elders, or investing remittances in housing or education. However, the transformative potential of such mobility remains limited for marginal farmers, who remain trapped in a cycle of agrarian distress and low-end urban labour (de Haan & Rogaly, 2002; Sharma & Singh, 2020).

In sum, the literature reveals that the destination dynamics of migration among marginal landholding farmers are shaped by a complex interplay of agrarian distress, caste and class hierarchies, regional disparities, and the informal nature of labour markets. Migration remains a vital survival strategy, but it often reinforces rather than alleviates the vulnerabilities of India's rural poor. Future research and policy must pay greater attention to the intersectional nature of migration, the conditions in both origin and destination regions, and the broader political economy that structures the rural drift.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Analysis of Landholding Patterns and Average Holding Sizes under Foodgrain Cultivation in India

India's agrarian structure has seen significant changes over the past three decades, particularly in landholdings for food grain cultivation. The data in Tables 1 and 2 reveal increasing land fragmentation, which contributes to the ongoing agrarian crisis. The proportion of marginal landholdings (less than 1 hectare) dedicated to food grain cultivation rose sharply from 59.4% in 1990-91 to 68.6% in 2020-21. This trend highlights the vulnerability of rural farmers, who often lack resources and face significant risks from crop failures and market fluctuations, despite their crucial role in food security.

Table 1: Distribution of Landholding under Foodgrain Crops Cultivation (%) - INDIA

Landholding Size Categories		1990-91	2000-01	2010-11	2020-21
i.	**Marginal (< 1 ha)**	**59.4**	**63**	**67.1**	**68.6**
ii.	Small (1.0-2.0 ha)	18.8	18.9	17.9	18.3
iii.	Semi-Medium (2.0-4.0 ha)	13.1	11.7	10.0	9.0
iv.	Medium (4.0-10.0 ha)	7.1	5.4	4.2	3.6
v.	Large (> 10.0 ha)	1.6	1.0	0.7	0.5

Conversely, the share of medium (4.0–10.0 hectares) and large (>10.0 hectares) landholdings has declined, with medium holdings dropping from 7.1% to 3.6% and large holdings from 1.6% to 0.5% between 1990-91 and 2020-21. This decline signifies a reduction in larger, commercially viable farms without accompanying agricultural modernization.

Meanwhile, small (1.0–2.0 hectares) and semi-medium (2.0–4.0 hectares) holdings have shown minor fluctuations, with small holdings stable at 18.3%, while semi-medium holdings declined from 13.1% to 9.0%. This indicates some mid-sized farms are being fragmented, but others may survive due to secure tenure and better access to resources. However, even semi-medium holdings face pressure from market uncertainties and rising cultivation costs.

Table 2: Average Size of Landholdings under Foodgrain Crops Cultivation (ha) - INDIA

Landholding Size	1990-91	2000-01	2010-11	2020-21
Marginal (< 1 ha)	**0.37**	**0.34**	**0.37**	**0.37**
Small (1.0-2.0 ha)	1.22	1.08	1.19	1.11
Semi-Medium (2.0-4.0 ha)	2.21	1.93	2.21	2.04
Medium (4.0-10.0 ha)	4.23	3.88	4.54	4.30
Large (> 10.0 ha)	10.09	9.51	12.23	11.21
Overall	1.20	0.95	0.96	0.87

Table 2 shows the average size of landholdings by category, echoing trends from Table 1. The average landholding for foodgrain cultivation fell sharply from 1.20 hectares in 1990–91 to 0.87 hectares in 2020–21—a nearly 28% decrease. This decline reflects the scaling down of Indian agriculture, which negatively impacts productivity and profitability (Sarris et al., 2006).

While average marginal holdings remained steady at 0.37 hectares over three decades, this indicates stagnation rather than efficiency. The inability to consolidate these holdings suggests systemic failures in land reforms and rural employment.

Examining small, semi-medium, and large holdings reveals fluctuations: large holdings increased from 10.09 hectares in 1990–91 to 12.23 hectares in 2010–11 but then fell to 11.21 hectares in 2020–21. Small holdings decreased from 1.22 hectares to 1.08 hectares before slightly rising again, only to drop. Such volatility can be linked to local land markets, inheritance practices, and urban expansion (Lerman et al., 2004).

The data indicates significant rural sustainability challenges. By 2020–21, nearly 87% of the rural population comprised marginal and small farmers, highlighting an economy increasingly reliant on vulnerable cultivators. Shrinking land sizes lead to distress-driven migration to urban areas in search of precarious employment. This agrarian crisis is closely tied to migration patterns, as smaller holdings limit employment and investments, trapping rural India in a cycle of poverty and underdevelopment.

Analysis of Foodgrain Production on Average Size of Landholdings under Foodgrain Crops

The insights into the dynamics of foodgrain production (minus 3.2% of farm-level wastages) across different landholding categories over three decades, contextualised against the standard foodgrain requirement per household, calculated using ICMR dietary recommendations. The data allows for an intersectional analysis of land size, productivity, and subsistence capacity across agrarian classes in India. It reveals the stark inequality in production output and food security between marginal farmers and those operating on larger landholdings.

Table 3: Foodgrain Production (Kg) on Average Size of Landholdings under Foodgrain Crops-INDIA

Items		1990-91	2000-01	2010-11	2020-21
i.	Marginal (< 1 ha.)	494	535	691	855
ii.	Standard Requirement Per Household [Calculation based on ICMR Recommendation (165.56 Kg/Capita/Year)]	927	877	811	778
iii.	Small (1.0-2.0 ha)	1630	1700	2223	2564
iv.	Semi-Medium (2.0-4.0 ha)	2952	3038	4129	4712
v.	Medium (4.0-10.0 ha)	5651	6107	8482	9931
vi.	Large (> 10.0 ha)	13479	14968	22849	25891
vii.	Overall Average Size	1603	1495	1794	2009

The data reveals that while foodgrain production on marginal holdings (<1 ha) has improved over time from 494 kg in 1990–91 to 855 kg in 2020–21, this growth remains inadequate when compared to the standard household requirement, which stood at 778 kg in 2020–21. Though the production in 2020–21 finally surpassed the standard requirement (855 kg vs. 778 kg), this narrow margin masks significant disparities: household sizes vary, consumption needs are diverse, and most marginal farmers have limited access to irrigation, inputs, and extension services. Furthermore, with high post-harvest losses, storage limitations, and market dependency, this theoretical surplus may not translate into actual food security.

In earlier decades (1990–91 and 2000–01), the production was far below subsistence levels, at 494 kg and 535 kg respectively, highlighting a chronic production deficit that would likely have forced marginal farmers into wage labour, distress migration, or debt cycles to meet their nutritional needs (Patnaik, 2003). Even in 2010–11, the production (691 kg) fell short of the household requirement (811 kg), emphasising continued agrarian stress. This lag between productive capacity and basic subsistence thresholds underscores why marginal landholders have remained structurally food-insecure and economically fragile.

The small (1.0–2.0 ha) and semi-medium (2.0–4.0 ha) categories demonstrate better performance in foodgrain output. In 2020–21, small holdings produced 2,564 kg, and semi-medium holdings yielded 4,712 kg, figures far exceeding the standard household requirement. The gradual increase in production across the decades, especially the sharp jump from 1700 kg in 2000–01 to 2223 kg in 2010–11 and 2564 kg in 2020–21, may be attributed to improved input use, diffusion of agricultural technology, and more consistent access to irrigation and institutional credit.

However, this relatively higher production does not necessarily guarantee income security or food sovereignty. Many smallholders cultivate foodgrain primarily for subsistence, often engaging in market-oriented agriculture only marginally. Their exposure to input cost inflation, market price volatility, and lack of bargaining power often leads to suboptimal returns despite their higher production

levels. Moreover, rising production in this category could also be a result of greater input intensity rather than structural improvements in farm economics.

Medium (4.0–10.0 ha) and large (>10 ha) holdings exhibit dramatic growth in foodgrain production. In 1990–91, medium-sized farms produced 5,651 kg on average, rising to 9,931 kg in 2020–21—a near-doubling over 30 years. Large holdings, meanwhile, saw an even more pronounced increase from 13,479 kg to 25,891 kg, a 92% jump, making them the primary contributors to India's marketed food surplus.

This scale of production allows for significant commercial activity, capital accumulation, and reinvestment—opportunities rarely available to marginal and small farmers. These landholders benefit from mechanisation, higher input-use efficiency, diversification, and direct linkage with procurement systems (e.g., MSP regimes). This growing gap in productive capacity reinforces agrarian polarisation, with a shrinking class of large cultivators commanding disproportionate market and policy influence, while the majority remain trapped in low-yield, low-surplus agriculture.

The overall average foodgrain production per landholding has increased from 1,603 kg in 1990–91 to 2,009 kg in 2020–21, a modest increase of 25.3% over 30 years. This gain, though statistically significant, must be interpreted in light of declining landholding sizes (see previous analysis). As the average farm size has shrunk from 1.20 ha in 1990–91 to 0.87 ha in 2020–21, rising per-farm production suggests improved yield efficiency or input intensity. However, it also reflects the limits of such growth: as land becomes increasingly fragmented, intensification has diminishing returns, especially for resource-poor farmers with little room to scale.

Additionally, the contrast between marginal holdings and the rest remains stark. While marginal farms in 2020–21 produced 855 kg—just surpassing the household requirement—the next category (small holdings) produced three times that amount (2,564 kg), and large holdings produced more than 30 times as much. This inequality in productive outcomes reinforces the socioeconomic disparities within the agrarian structure.

Analysis of Rural Migrants' Status

The insights from Table 4, into the structural dynamics of rural migration in India over 30 years, emphasise the shifting occupational patterns of rural migrants and the growing economic pressures within the agrarian sector. A clear trend emerges: even as the overall share of rural migrants in the national migration framework declines, the proportion of agricultural workers among rural migrants has steadily increased. This evolution signals a deepening agrarian crisis where farming, particularly for marginal and smallholders, is no longer a secure or sustainable livelihood, compelling individuals to seek work outside their native villages.

Table 4: Rural Migrants Status (%) - INDIA

S.No	Parameters	1990-91	2000-01	2010-11	2020-21
i.	TRW (M) to TW (M)	82.8	76.7	77.6	72.1
ii.	TAGW (M) to TRW (M)	63.1	62.1	65.4	67.5
iii.	TCULT (M) to TAGW (M)	49.0	48.8	48.9	49.5
iv.	TAGLAB (M) to TAGW (M)	51.0	51.2	51.1	50.5
Note	**TRW (M)**-Total Rural Workers (Migrants), **TW(M)**-Total Workers (Migrants), **TAGW (M)**-Total Agricultural Workers (Migrants), **TCULT(M)**-Total Cultivators (Migrants), **TAGLAB(M)**-Total Agricultural Labourers (Migrants)				

The most striking finding from the data is the declining percentage of total rural workers (TRW) among total migrant workers (TW). This share fell from 82.8% in 1990–91 to 72.1% in 2020–21. Such a decline reflects the broader transition in India's migration geography, wherein urban-origin and semi-urban migrants are becoming more prominent, while the dominance of rural-origin migrants is waning. This shift is linked to multiple factors, including rising urbanization, improved infrastructure, declining viability of small-scale agriculture, and limited rural employment opportunities. It underscores the waning capacity of rural areas—especially agrarian economies—to retain their labour force in productive livelihoods, pushing a significant segment toward cities and peri-urban regions.

At the same time, the share of total agricultural workers (TAGW) among the rural migrant population has increased, from 63.1% in 1990–91 to 67.5% in 2020–21. This upward trend highlights that agriculture remains the primary background of rural migrants, even if agriculture itself is failing to sustain their livelihoods. The rising number of agriculturally rooted migrants points to the increasing dispossession and marginalisation within the agrarian economy. Particularly for marginal landholders, this migration is not a choice born out of opportunity but a necessity forced by structural distress, such as unviable landholdings, poor facilities, lack of institutional credit, and volatile market prices for foodgrain crops. The rise in agricultural-origin migrants indicates that farming is no longer a dependable base for rural households, and many are being displaced from their farms either permanently or seasonally.

Interestingly, despite broader transformations in India's rural economy, the ratio between cultivators (TCULT) and agricultural labourers (TAGLAB) among migrant agricultural workers has remained remarkably stable over the decades. The share of cultivators

in the agricultural migrant population has hovered around 49%, while that of agricultural labourers has stayed around 51% between 1990–91 and 2020–21. On the surface, this may suggest equilibrium, but beneath this statistical stability lies a profound occupational and structural churn. Many small and marginal cultivators are increasingly compelled to supplement their income as agricultural labourers during lean agricultural seasons or when their farms fail to generate sufficient yields. The boundary between cultivator and labourer is becoming increasingly porous, indicating a shift from land-based identities to flexible, hybrid livelihoods that oscillate between wage labour and small-scale farming.

The data further reflects the growth of a "floating" rural workforce—a labour force not firmly anchored in either farming or formal wage employment. This workforce is highly mobile, shifting between rural and urban areas and between sectors depending on seasonal demand and income opportunities. Such flexibility, while enabling survival, often traps individuals in low-paid, insecure, and unregulated employment without social protection or labour rights. The persistence of a near 50:50 split between cultivators and agricultural labourers among migrants suggests that even owning land does not guarantee livelihood security, especially in an era marked by land fragmentation, climate shocks, and unstable commodity prices.

Analysis of Cultivators (Rural) Migration Pattern

Table 5 offers a disaggregated and gender-sensitive view of the migration patterns of rural cultivators in India, focusing on their destination dynamics across intra- and inter-state movements. The data spans four census periods (1990–91 to 2020–21), shedding light on both temporal and spatial shifts in how and where rural cultivators migrate. A striking feature of this migration pattern is the overwhelming dominance of intra-state migration, particularly within the same district or state, and the significant gendered asymmetry, where female cultivator migration vastly outnumbers male migration across all destinations.

Table 5: Cultivators (Rural) Migration Pattern (%) By Destination - INDIA

S.NO	Cultivators Migration Dynamics		1990-91	2000-01	2010-11	2020-21
i.	Within the state of enumeration but outside the place of enumeration	T	**95.4**	**94.8**	**97.8**	**96.4**
		M	30.4	12.4	14.9	16.9
		F	69.6	87.6	85.1	83.1
ii.	States in India beyond the state of enumeration	T	**4.6**	**5.2**	**2.2**	**3.6**
		M	44.6	19.7	31.5	29.7
		F	55.4	80.3	68.5	70.3
iii.	Elsewhere in the district of enumeration	T	**83.0**	**82.3**	**83.1**	**80.3**
		M	29.5	11.8	13.7	17.1
		F	70.5	88.2	86.3	82.9
iv.	In other districts of the state of enumeration	T	**17.0**	**17.7**	**16.9**	**19.7**
		M	34.8	15.2	21.1	22.9
		F	65.2	84.8	78.9	77.1

a. Dominance of Intra-State Migration among Cultivators

Throughout the thirty years, the vast majority of rural cultivator migration occurred within the state of enumeration but outside the place of enumeration, constituting between 94.8% and 97.8% of all movements. This reflects a strong locality-based migration trend, whereby most cultivators relocate within familiar socio-ecological and linguistic contexts. Such patterns suggest that rural-to-rural migration dominates over rural-to-urban migration among cultivators, likely due to seasonal agricultural labour demand, temporary relocation due to climatic variability (e.g., drought or flood), or changes in tenancy arrangements.

The "elsewhere in the district" category also shows strong and consistent representation, hovering around 80–83%, further reinforcing the idea that rural cultivator migration is highly localised. In contrast, migration to "other districts within the same state" remains relatively low but stable, increasing modestly from 17.0% in 1990–91 to 19.7% in 2020–21. These internal patterns indicate that cultivators, especially small and marginal farmers, prefer proximity to their original landholdings, familial networks, and social support systems, often migrating temporarily for wage labour or kinship-based assistance in agricultural operations.

b. Low but Notable Interstate Migration

The proportion of rural cultivators migrating beyond their home state remains minimal, just 2.2% to 5.2% during the period under review. While this number is small, it signals a structural constraint for cultivators in accessing distant markets or employment regions, possibly due to barriers such as unfamiliar agrarian systems, lack of land rights elsewhere, and limited financial and social capital. Cultivators are less mobile across state boundaries, which may also reflect the immobility of land-based occupations compared to labour-intensive roles like construction or factory work, which dominate urban migration circuits.

However, the modest increase in inter-state movement from 2.2% in 2010–11 to 3.6% in 2020–21 suggests a growing, if cautious, outward drift among a section of cultivators, possibly due to worsening agrarian distress or climate-induced displacement in their

home states. Yet, the persistence of such low figures underscores how cultivators, compared to landless labourers, are more rooted in their local economies and less likely to undertake long-distance relocation.

c. Gendered Dimensions of Cultivator Migration

One of the most compelling aspects of this data is the gender asymmetry in rural cultivator migration. Across all destinations and periods, female migrants vastly outnumber male migrants. For instance, among those migrating within the same state but outside the place of enumeration, female migrants accounted for 83.1% in 2020–21, while males comprised only 16.9%. This feminisation of rural migration among cultivators is evident across every category. Even in inter-state migration—a domain often assumed to be male-dominated—women made up 70.3% of cultivator migrants in 2020–21.

This trend suggests that much of female cultivator migration is likely driven by marriage-related relocation, a major component of recorded female migration in India, particularly in rural contexts. However, the persistently high proportion of female cultivator migrants also raises important questions about the increasing feminisation of agriculture and the changing structure of agrarian labour. As more men exit agriculture for non-farm employment—especially in cities or through circular migration—women are left to manage farms, leading to a rise in de facto women-headed farms.

This also reflects deeper transformations in rural India, where gender roles in agriculture are being redefined due to both necessity and socio-economic pressures. While women may not hold land titles in their names, they are increasingly responsible for agricultural production, management, and seasonal migration to nearby farms as wage labourers.

d. Temporal Trends and Shifts in Male Migration

Male cultivator migration, while consistently lower than female migration, has shown a slight but noticeable increase over the decades across various destination categories. For example, within-district migration among men rose from 11.8% in 2000–01 to 17.1% in 2020–21, and inter-district migration rose from 15.2% to 22.9% during the same period. This modest increase may reflect growing agrarian distress compelling male cultivators to migrate seasonally or semi-permanently in search of supplementary income or alternative livelihoods.

Yet, overall, the data suggest that male cultivators are relatively immobile, at least in comparison to agricultural labourers and non-farm workers. This limited spatial mobility could be due to the perceived value or attachment to their landholdings, no matter how small or unproductive, or due to their role in maintaining family holdings while other members—often women—migrate for marriage or supplementary labour.

Table 5 points to a nuanced picture of rural cultivator migration in India, marked by high spatial containment, gender asymmetry, and a dominant intra-state character. Cultivators tend to migrate short distances, often within the same district or state, reflecting strong ties to land, community, and agrarian institutions. The data also reflects the feminisation of rural migration, as women consistently outnumber men in cultivator migration statistics. This shift underscores the changing gender dynamics of Indian agriculture, where women are increasingly managing agricultural responsibilities amidst the male exodus from farming.

The persistence of low interstate migration among cultivators also points to the limits of agrarian mobility in the face of economic stress. While migration is often seen as a response to rural hardship, for cultivators—especially marginal ones—mobility is constrained by their rootedness in land, their dependence on local ecological and social systems, and the structural barriers to accessing distant labour markets. These findings highlight the importance of regionally grounded rural development strategies that enhance agricultural viability, recognise the central role of women in farming, and support smallholders with resources and institutional backing to stay and thrive, rather than being forced to migrate.

Analysis of Agricultural Labourers (Rural) Migration Pattern

Table 6 presents an important longitudinal view of migration patterns among rural agricultural labourers in India, segmented by destination and gender across four decades from 1990–91 to 2020–21. Agricultural labourers, being typically landless or near-landless, are among the most vulnerable in the rural workforce and often migrate under conditions of economic compulsion. The data in this table confirms that their migration is largely intra-state, short-distance, and overwhelmingly female-dominated. These trends not only reflect the structural precarity of agricultural labourers but also highlight the gendered burden of rural economic distress.

Table 6: Agricultural Labourers (Rural) Migration Pattern (%) By Destination - INDIA

S.NO	Agri. Labour Migration Dynamics		1990-91	2000-01	2010-11	2020-21
i.	Within the state of enumeration but outside the place of enumeration	T	**95.6**	**94.7**	**97.7**	**97.0**
		M	22.2	11.1	13.6	15.5
		F	77.8	88.9	86.4	84.5
ii.	States in India beyond the state of enumeration	T	**4.4**	**5.3**	**2.3**	**3.0**
		M	36.6	20.7	28.9	32.5
		F	63.4	79.3	71.1	67.5

iii.	Elsewhere in the district of enumeration	T	**81.4**	**82.1**	**82.2**	**79.3**
		M	21.2	10.2	12.4	13.5
		F	78.8	89.8	87.6	86.5
iv.	In other districts of the state of enumeration	T	**18.6**	**17.9**	**17.8**	**20.7**
		M	26.7	15.3	21.1	22.1
		F	73.3	84.7	78.9	77.9

a. Overwhelming Dominance of Intra-State Migration

The most immediate observation is that the vast majority of rural agricultural labourer migration takes place within the same state, accounting for over 94% of total migration in all four time points. In 2020–21, for instance, 97% of all agricultural labourers migrated within their state but outside their immediate place of residence. This pattern is echoed in the "elsewhere in the district" category, which consistently records high values between 79.3% and 82.2%. Such spatial concentration of migration reveals that rural agricultural labourers overwhelmingly migrate short distances, possibly for seasonal wage employment during peak agricultural cycles (e.g., sowing, harvesting) or to offset income shortfalls caused by drought, declining wages, or local job saturation.

This trend further suggests that migration for agricultural labour is primarily cyclical or temporary, rather than permanent relocation. Workers maintain connections to their villages while engaging in seasonal work elsewhere, often in nearby farms or villages within the district. This also indicates the persistence of informal rural labour markets, where recruitment is driven by traditional kinship networks, caste affiliations, and patron-client ties rather than formal job markets.

b. Low and Fluctuating Inter-State Migration

While inter-state migration among agricultural labourers remains relatively low—between 2.3% and 5.3%—there is a notable dip in 2010–11 (2.3%), followed by a slight rebound to 3.0% in 2020–21. This relatively low rate can be attributed to several structural constraints: the lack of social capital in distant locations, language barriers, and the absence of formal labour contracting mechanisms. Yet, unlike cultivators, landless labourers have shown slightly greater inter-state mobility, possibly due to their higher economic desperation and less rootedness in a specific place (since they do not own land or homes in many cases).

Interestingly, the share of male migrants among inter-state migrants is growing—from 20.7% in 2000–01 to 32.5% in 2020–21. This trend points to the emergence of a male-centric, long-distance labour circuit, especially to agriculturally prosperous states like Punjab, Haryana, and parts of western India, where seasonal labour demand remains high. These migrations often involve men working on high-value crops like wheat, sugarcane, and rice, sometimes under exploitative conditions without adequate labour rights or security.

c. Gendered Nature of Agricultural Labour Migration

Gender differences are stark and consistent across all destinations. Female migrants consistently outnumber males, especially in intra-state movements. In 2020–21, 84.5% of intra-state agricultural labourer migrants were women, while only 15.5% were men. Similar trends hold across district-level and intra-district migration, underscoring the feminisation of agricultural labour migration in rural India.

This feminisation is partly due to the demographic pattern of marriage migration, where women move to their spouse's village and continue agricultural wage work there. However, the persistently high presence of female agricultural labour migrants also reveals their increasing role in sustaining agrarian economies amidst growing male out-migration toward urban centres and non-farm sectors. As men seek better-paying and less physically demanding jobs in cities, women remain in rural areas and fill the demand for local agricultural labour.

Additionally, women's agricultural work tends to be undervalued and underpaid, especially in casual or seasonal wage contexts. They often engage in physically taxing labour (weeding, sowing, harvesting) under informal arrangements with minimal legal protection or bargaining power. Their high representation in migration data suggests not only their increased mobility but also their increased vulnerability within rural labour markets.

d. Gradual Increase in Male Participation

Although women dominate rural agricultural labour migration, there has been a modest rise in male participation across intra- and inter-district categories. For instance, male migration to "other districts in the same state" rose from 15.3% in 2000–01 to 22.1% in 2020–21, and in "elsewhere in the district", male migration rose from 10.2% to 13.5%. This increase could reflect growing rural distress, pushing even men, who traditionally avoided low-paid manual labour, into agricultural wage work across nearby areas.

However, these increases remain modest compared to female migration figures, reaffirming that male migration patterns are more associated with urban-bound and non-agricultural destinations, while female migration remains embedded within the rural agrarian economy. The gendered segmentation of migration and labour mobility thus reinforces broader social norms and economic roles in rural India, wherein agriculture increasingly depends on women, often without conferring them ownership rights or decision-making authority.

The data from Table 6 highlights the spatial and gendered contours of rural agricultural labour migration in India. Migration remains overwhelmingly intra-state and intra-district, indicating that landless labourers are not part of the high-mobility migration streams to cities, but instead circulate within rural economies to survive agrarian distress. The high proportion of women among these migrants underscores the gendered burden of rural economic hardship, where women are left behind to sustain agricultural activities in the face of male urban outmigration.

The low inter-state mobility of agricultural labourers also reveals deep-rooted structural barriers—economic, social, and institutional—that prevent them from accessing wider labour markets or improving their conditions through migration. Thus, migration for agricultural labourers is not so much a strategy of economic opportunity, but one of survival, and is embedded within informal rural economies marked by low wages, seasonal vulnerability, and gender-based exploitation.

Policymakers must take note of these dynamics to craft more inclusive rural development and migration governance frameworks. Measures such as ensuring wage parity for women, providing social protection for seasonal labourers, and formalising rural labour recruitment could improve the conditions of this vital yet marginalised segment of India's workforce.

CONCLUSION

The empirical exploration of rural migration amid agrarian hardship in India, as examined in this study, offers a sobering insight into the deepening agrarian crisis and its far-reaching socio-spatial consequences. Drawing from longitudinal data on landholding patterns, production capacities, and migration destinations over the last three decades (1990–2021), the study foregrounds how marginal and smallholder farmers, facing the erosion of viable landholdings, stagnation in foodgrain productivity, and increasing precarity in rural employment are being propelled into circuits of migration that are increasingly fragmented, gendered, and locally circumscribed.

The growing predominance of marginal landholdings, now accounting for nearly 69% of all land under foodgrain cultivation by 2020–21, signals not only the fragmentation of agrarian assets but also the failure of rural land reforms and agricultural modernisation to secure subsistence livelihoods. While productivity per unit land has increased modestly, it remains grossly insufficient for marginal farmers to meet even the minimum nutritional requirements of their households. This production-consumption mismatch underscores the agrarian contradiction, where land remains the primary asset but fails to sustain those who depend on it.

Migration emerged as a critical livelihood strategy in this context, not as a mark of opportunity, but as an imperative born out of agrarian distress. However, the data reveal that this migration is largely short-distance, intra-state, and intra-district, with a clear gender divide: women dominate local and short-range migratory flows, especially within rural agricultural labour, while men are increasingly drawn toward inter-district or non-farm urban destinations, though only in limited proportions. The feminisation of rural migration, particularly among cultivators and labourers, demands a gender-sensitive policy approach that acknowledges not just economic need, but the social vulnerabilities and invisibilities that women migrants face within informal agrarian labour markets.

Moreover, the overall migration trends both among cultivators and agricultural labourers expose the structural stagnation of rural employment, where neither farming nor wage labour offers security or dignity. Migration, instead of acting as a transition to better livelihoods, often reproduces cycles of spatial displacement, informal exploitation, and economic marginalisation. The shrinking average size of landholdings, rising landlessness, and inadequate access to social security further exacerbate the crisis, pushing rural populations into increasingly precarious migratory routes.

In conclusion, the rural migration landscape in India is a reflection of agrarian decay and developmental imbalance. Addressing this drift requires a multi-pronged strategy: land consolidation and redistribution, revitalisation of public investment in agriculture, employment generation in rural areas, and gender-equitable migration and labour policies. Only through such integrated approaches can the rural economy be stabilised, and migration be transformed from a distress-driven necessity into a choice-based opportunity that contributes meaningfully to both rural and national development.

REFERENCES

1) Agarwal, B. (2014). Food Security, Productivity, and Gender Inequality. Journal of Agrarian Change, 14(4), 519–547.
2) Agarwal, Bina (2018). Gender Challenges: Agriculture, Property Rights and Economic Empowerment. Oxford University Press.
3) Agrawal, T., & Chandrasekhar, S. (2015). Short Duration Migration in India: An Appraisal. Economic and Political Weekly, 50(37), 12–15.
4) Basole, A., & Basu, D. (2015). Agrarian crisis and wage labour: A regional analysis. Economic and Political Weekly, 50(26–27), 58–66.
5) Bhagat, R. B. (2011). Emerging Pattern of Urbanisation in India. Economic and Political Weekly, 46(34), 10–12.
6) Breman, J. (1996). Footloose Labour: Working in India's Informal Economy. Cambridge University Press.

7) Chand, R., Prasanna, P. A. L., & Singh, A. (2011). Farm size and productivity: Understanding the strengths of smallholders and improving their livelihoods. Economic and Political Weekly, 46(26–27), 5–11.
8) de Haan, A., & Rogaly, B. (2002). Labour Mobility and Rural Society. Frank Cass.
9) Desai, R. M., Vashishtha, P., & Joshi, O. (2020). Migration and the Welfare State: Modernizing India's Social Safety Net for Urban Migrants. Brookings India Policy Brief.
10) Deshingkar, P., & Farrington, J. (2009). Circular Migration and Multilocational Livelihood Strategies in Rural India. Oxford University Press.
11) Deshingkar, P., & Start, D. (2003). Seasonal migration for livelihoods in India: Coping, accumulation and exclusion. Overseas Development Institute.
12) Garikipati, S. (2009). Landless but not assetless: Female agricultural labour on the road to better status. Journal of Peasant Studies, 36(4), 517–545.
13) Government of India (GOI). (2021). Agricultural Census 2020–21 & Labour Bureau Statistics. Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare.
14) Government of India. (2018). Agricultural Census 2015–16. Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare.
15) ICMR (Indian Council of Medical Research). (2020). Nutrient Requirements and Recommended Dietary Allowances for Indians.
16) Jha, P. (2018). Seasonal Migration in India: Its Role and Challenges. Indian Journal of Labour Economics, 61(2), 225–241.
17) Kelkar, G. (2009). The Feminisation of Agriculture in Asia: Implications for Women's Agency and Productivity. IFAD Report.
18) Keshri, K., & Bhagat, R. B. (2013). Socioeconomic determinants of temporary labour migration in India: A regional analysis. Asian Population Studies, 9(2), 175–195.
19) Keshri, K., & Bhagat, R. B. (2013). Temporary and Seasonal Migration in India. Genus, 69(3), 25–45.
20) Lerman, Z., Csaki, C., & Feder, G. (2004). Agriculture in Transition: Land Policies and Evolving Farm Structures in Post-Soviet Countries. Lexington Books.
21) Mishra, S. (2007). Agrarian Scenario in Post-reform India: A Story of Distress, Despair and Death. Working Paper No. 2007/001, IGIDR.
22) Mosse, D., Gupta, S., Mehta, M., Shah, V., & Rees, J. (2002). Brokered Livelihoods: Debt, Labour Migration and Development in Tribal Western India. Journal of Development Studies, 38(5), 59–88.
23) Neetha, N. (2002). Flexible Production, Feminisation and Disorganisation: Evidence from Tiruppur Knitwear Industry. Economic and Political Weekly, 37(21), 2045–2052.
24) Patnaik, U. (2003). Global Capitalism, Deflation and Agrarian Crisis in Developing Countries. Journal of Agrarian Change, 3(1–2), 33–66.
25) Ramakumar, R. (2010). Agrarian Crisis and Rural Distress in Post-Reform India. In India Development Report 2011. Oxford University Press.
26) Rao, C. H. H. (2006). Agriculture, food security, poverty and environment. Oxford University Press.
27) Rao, C. H. H. (2013). Agriculture, Food Security, Poverty and Environment: Essays on Post-reform India. Oxford University Press.
28) Rao, Nitya (2014). Migrating out of Poverty? Gendered Livelihoods and Women's Mobility in Contemporary South India. Indian Journal of Gender Studies, 21(2), 249–274.
29) Rogaly, B. (1999). Agricultural Growth and Labour Migration: A Study of Two Districts in West Bengal, India. Journal of Development Studies, 35(4), 139–163.
30) Rogaly, B., Biswas, J., Daniel, S., Abdur, R., Sengupta, A., & Piya, P. (2002). Seasonal Migration and Welfare/Illfare in Eastern India: A Social Analysis. Journal of Development Studies, 38(5), 89–114.
31) Sarris, A., Savastano, S., & Christiaensen, L. (2006). Agricultural Landholding Distribution and Productivity in Developing Countries: A Global Perspective. World Bank Working Paper.
32) Shah, A., Mander, H., Thorat, S., Deshpande, S., & Baviskar, A. (2006). Untouchability in Rural India. Sage Publications.
33) Sharma, A. N. (2016). Flexible Accumulation and Labour: Reflecting on the Informal Sector in India. Indian Journal of Labour Economics, 59(3), 321–340.
34) Sharma, D., & Singh, S. (2020). Migration, Agrarian Crisis and Livelihoods: A Study of North India. Indian Journal of Human Development, 14(2), 167–182.
35) Sinha, S. (2014). Industrialization and Labour in Rural India: Precarity, Capital and Mobility. Cambridge University Press.
36) Srivastava, R. (2011). Internal Migration in India: An Overview of its Features, Trends and Policy Challenges. UNESCO.
37) Srivastava, R. (2020). Understanding Circular Migration in India during COVID-19. The Indian Journal of Labour Economics, 63(4), 879–897.

38) Tumbe, C. (2012). Migration Persistence Across Twentieth-Century India. Migration and Development, 1(1), 87–102.
39) UN Women India (2018). Gender and Migration in India: A Policy Brief.
40) Working Group on Migration. (2017). Report of the Working Group on Migration. Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, Government of India.

There is an Open Access article, distributed under the term of the Creative Commons Attribution – Non Commercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/), which permits remixing, adapting and building upon the work for non-commercial use, provided the original work is properly cited.