

Book review: Amrita Datta, *Migration and Development in India: The Bihar Experience*

by Amrita Datta
Routledge
New York
2023
238 pp.
£39.99 (Paperback)
Paperback ISBN: 9781032340852
£35.99 (eBook)
eBook ISBN: 9781003320487
Review DOI [10.1108/SEAMJ-05-2026-103](https://doi.org/10.1108/SEAMJ-05-2026-103)

Migration plays a crucial role in shaping economic and social development, particularly in countries like India, where disparities between rural and urban areas drive large-scale movements of people in search of better livelihoods. Amrita Datta's *Migration and Development in India: The Bihar Experience* examines this dynamic, focusing on Bihar, a state historically known for its significant migrant labor population. Datta highlights how migration influences not only the individuals and families involved but also the broader regions they leave and those they move to, particularly under the influence of neoliberal economic reforms. Migration, especially circular migration, has become a dominant form of economic mobility for the poor, contributing significantly to India's GDP and fostering rural resilience through remittances and knowledge transfer (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009; Das, Badavath, Kumar, & Padhy, 2024). However, this mobility also presents challenges, such as labor shortages in agriculture, integration issues in urban areas and competition for jobs (Gopika, Hijam, Riya, Mittal, & Singh, 2022). The complexity of these impacts underscores the need for tailored policies that address the diverse challenges faced by migrant communities while maximizing positive economic and social outcomes (Das *et al.*, 2024). Datta's work, combining field research, economic theory and social analysis, offers valuable insights for policymakers and contributes to the broader discourse on migration and development.

The *Migration and Development in India* offers a comprehensive analysis of migration from Bihar, informed by empirical data and personal interviews. In the opening chapter, Datta examines the historical and structural factors driving migration, emphasizing the region's economic stagnation and lack of industrial development as critical issues. She characterizes migration as a "survival strategy" for many families, highlighting that it often represents necessity rather than choice (p. 22). Her analysis provides a nuanced perspective on migration, illustrating how historical underdevelopment and colonial legacies intersect with contemporary economic challenges.

A significant aspect of Datta's work is her critique of neoliberal economic policies. She contends that, while these policies have spurred urban economic growth, they have also intensified rural-urban inequalities, compelling individuals from impoverished areas like Bihar to migrate in search of better opportunities (p. 45). This section dispels the myth that migration alone can drive development. Instead, Datta underscores the limited role of remittances in fostering structural change, demonstrating how they often do not close the



socio-economic gap between urban and rural regions. The book's exploration of the social dynamics surrounding migration adds further complexity. Datta investigates how caste, gender and class influence migration patterns, revealing that marginalized groups, particularly lower-caste individuals and women, face heightened exploitation both in urban centers and upon returning to Bihar (p. 62). The unique challenges of women left behind to manage households underscore the unequal distribution of migration's burdens and benefits. This intersectional approach enhances the understanding of migration's broader impact.

Datta's methodological rigor is evident in her combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. By using statistical data alongside ethnographic fieldwork, she presents a multidimensional analysis. Interviews with migrants and their families lend a personal dimension to the study, vividly portraying the hardships and strategies that define the migration experience (p. 78). This strength reinforces her arguments, providing a well-rounded perspective on migration and its implications for individuals and communities. A key argument of the book is the dual impact of migration on development. Datta asserts that while remittances can enhance household income and improve access to education and healthcare, they do not adequately address the deeper structural challenges facing Bihar (p. 95). Additionally, migration often disrupts family cohesion and exacerbates inequality, particularly for those unable to migrate. This duality highlights the complex relationship between migration and development, revealing both its potential and its limitations. Datta's critique of state policies becomes particularly incisive in the final chapters. She contends that government initiatives, including MGNREGA, have achieved limited success in curbing migration, primarily due to their emphasis on short-term relief instead of long-term rural development (p. 112). Datta advocates for more inclusive policies that tackle the root causes of migration, stressing the importance of sustainable development initiatives tailored to migrant-sending regions like Bihar. Her support for local governance and community-based solutions highlights the shortcomings of top-down approaches to development.

In her analysis of migration from Bihar, Datta challenges the notion that migration is solely motivated by economic necessity. She argues that aspirations for social mobility, along with economic pressures, significantly influence migration decisions (p. 130). This perspective shifts the focus from survival to ambition, providing a more nuanced understanding of migration dynamics. Datta's historical overview of Bihar's socio-economic conditions offers essential context for grasping these motivations, illustrating how colonial and post-independence policies have perpetuated underdevelopment. Finally, Datta's exploration of the social and psychological costs of migration enriches the discussion. She underscores how prolonged separation from family can lead to social alienation and mental health issues, particularly for those left behind (p. 150). The emotional toll on women and children, often overlooked in migration studies, is a recurring theme in Datta's work. This emphasis on the human costs of migration constitutes one of the book's most significant contributions, providing a holistic view that extends beyond economic metrics to encompass the social and emotional dimensions of migration.

The book provides an analysis of migration from Bihar, integrating historical context with contemporary realities. It challenges simplistic narratives surrounding migration, presenting a complex picture of migrants' diverse experiences. Datta critiques neoliberal economic policies and advocates for inclusive development strategies, emphasizing the need to address both push and pull factors in migration. Her work highlights migration's role in shaping India's socio-economic landscape, making it a valuable resource for understanding these dynamics today.

The book's examination of socio-economic, gender and psychological dimensions provides insight into how migration impacts development in Bihar. While remittances offer short-term relief, Datta argues that long-term development requires sustainable solutions, including investments in local infrastructure, improved access to education and healthcare and agricultural diversification. She calls for policies that address structural inequalities in Bihar's economy, particularly in agriculture and advocates for stronger labor protections for migrants, especially in informal sectors, to prevent exploitation. Her recommendations extend beyond

short-term employment schemes such as MGNREGA, emphasizing the need for systemic changes in rural development. Overall, *Migration and Development in India: The Bihar Experience* is a significant contribution to migration studies, offering insights into the complex relationship between migration and development. Its detailed case studies and critical analysis make it essential for scholars, policymakers and practitioners interested in rural development. As India faces development challenges amid rapid urbanization, Datta's work highlights the importance of addressing the root causes of migration while recognizing its potential as a tool for development.

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