

The Increasing Trend of Labour Migration to Nagaland: A Case Study of Kohima District

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Abstract: *This paper aims to explore the growing trend of labour migration to the state of Nagaland, specifically the district of Kohima. The migration phenomenon will be analysed using push and pull theory, as propounded by Everett Lee, which suggests that the phenomenon of migration depends on the push and pull factors operating in the area of origin and destination. The absence of employment opportunities, low salaries, poverty, and inadequate facilities constitute the push factors, while the availability of good jobs, a high salary structure, and better living standards in Kohima form part of the pull factors. The socio-economic profile of migrants will be studied in relation to indicators such as gender, occupation, religion, area, level of education, etc. The above information will be obtained from a primary survey conducted among selected migrant workers in various sectors of Kohima.*

Keywords: Labour, Migrants, Migration, Push and Pull Factors

INTRODUCTION

The movement of people across physical and geographical borders has been an integral part of human history. From ancient nomadic tribes to modern-day global diasporas, human migration has shaped societies, influenced cultural exchanges and driven economic development. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, migration has morphed into a complex and multifaceted phenomenon and the inclination of humans to migrate is deeply rooted in the quest for better opportunities, better life and for safety. Labour migration is different from the broader concept of migration as it has become a feature of the worldwide trend of expanded urbanisation and advancements in transportation and communication. The difference between rural and urban areas widens, which includes the transfer of the labour force to the latter areas. In many parts of India, the loss of rural livelihoods has forced labourers to migrate from their homelands in search of work. Well-managed labour migration can mitigate labour scarcity, promote mobility, and add to the human capital stock in the places of destination where there are labour shortages.

Construction is India's second-largest employment-generating sector after agriculture, and the migrant labourers make up the majority of the labour force in this industry. The concept of mobility as a necessary concomitant to freedom and human capability has been enshrined by the Founding Fathers in our Constitution. Among the freedoms guaranteed by Article 19 of the Indian Constitution are the freedom 'to move freely throughout the territory of India' (Article 19(d)) and 'to reside and settle in any part of the territory of India' (Article 19(e)). Arguing for 'mobility as necessary for fraternity', Dr B. R. Ambedkar wrote in *Annihilation of Caste*, "an ideal society should be mobile, should be full of channels for conveying a change taking place in one part to other parts." The constitution also contains basic provisions on non-discrimination, right to work, a living wage, equal pay for equal work, humane working conditions and a decent standard of living, workers' health and strength, protection against abuse and exploitation, labourers' participation in management, and so on. Article 43 of the Indian Constitution speaks of the state's responsibility to provide social security to the citizens of this country.

According to the latest available estimates, there are 284.5 million migrants around the world, out of which 167.7 million are migrants in the labour force globally in 2022, and they constitute 4.7 per cent of the global labour force. These international migrant workers made up approximately 66 per cent of the world's international migrant population

of working age (aged 15 and over) in 2022. Among all migrant workers worldwide in 2022, 64.9 million or approximately 38.7 per cent were female (ILO, 2024), and male migrant workers made up 102.7 million or 61.3 per cent of the total and represented 4.7 per cent of the male labour force globally.

In Nagaland, the 2011 Census highlights that there are 5,49,618 total migrants in Nagaland. The top ten migrants to Nagaland are from the table shown below:

Inter-state migrants	Population
1.ASSAM	51,391
2.BIHAR	17,539
3.MANIPUR	14,093
4.UP	4,076
5.WEST BENGAL	3,746
6.TRIPURA	2,923
7.RAJASTHAN	2,480
8.MEGHALAYA	1,792
9.JHARKHAND	1,283
10.ODISHA	1,236

Source: Census, 2011

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Kaur (2010) talks on the economies of Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand, which depend heavily on the labour of foreign workers, many of whom leave their homes in search of better opportunities. *Guest worker* programs, while designed to fill labour gaps, often rely on networks of intermediaries that can trap migrants in cycles of debt and exploitation. As global migration rules evolve, countries are increasingly working together to create fairer and more humane border policies, but the human impact remains profound.

Panizzon (2015) highlights the ongoing struggle between governments determined to control their borders and the powerful economic forces that drive individuals and families to seek better lives elsewhere. This tension is not just a matter of policy, but one that affects real people, making migration faster, more widespread, and for many, more perilous. In today's globalised world, migration is influenced not only by governments but also by businesses, international networks, and legal frameworks that can either protect or exploit those on the move.

Saucedo et al. (2022) use the term "*21st century coolie*" to describe today's migrant labourers, drawing parallels to the indentured workers of the past. These workers, often pushed into vulnerable positions by unequal structures and restrictive laws, struggle to assert their rights and dignity. Their voices, as well as those of researchers and advocates, reveal how contract workers are made vulnerable not only at work but also in society, often living on the margins and facing discrimination in their daily lives. The human cost of migration is high, with many workers enduring long hours, low pay, and a lack of legal protections, all while separated from their families and communities.

Breman (1996) introduces the concept of '*footloose labour*' to describe the precarious existence of India's informal workers who migrate seasonally in search of employment. Focusing on two villages in south Gujarat, he explores the dynamics of labour migration and the pervasive nature of informal employment. The book provides an in-depth analysis of the socio-economic conditions that

compel rural workers to become part of a mobile, unprotected labour force.

Rajan et al. (2023) highlight the poorest people in India, especially those from disadvantaged groups such as the Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes, where temporary labour migration is not just a choice but a necessity for survival. Most temporary migrants move from rural to urban areas or across states, often leaving behind families and familiar support networks. The highest rates of migration are seen among the most marginalised communities, particularly from underdeveloped states like Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh.

Singh (2009) investigates the persistent issue of illegal migration into Nagaland, particularly focusing on the routes via Assam and the settlement of migrants in urban centres such as Kohima and Dimapur. The analysis highlights the state's vulnerability to cross-border migration, emphasising how migrants often use counterfeit documents to settle and integrate into local communities. The study underscores local efforts to advocate for stricter migration controls and preservation of Naga identity and way of life, pointing to the erosion of traditional community-based values and the perceived threat to local sociopolitical and economic stakes. Singh argues that despite regulatory frameworks like the Inner Line Permit (ILP) system, enforcement remains weak due to administrative loopholes and local patronage, which further complicates efforts to curb illegal migration.

Kwilly and Warjri (2021) tried to bring out the general trend in migration in the North-Eastern Region and also discuss the main characteristics of the migrant persons. We find that the general direction of migration is from the rural sector to the urban, and the seven NER states exhibit great heterogeneity with respect to migration. Despite cultural and political restrictions, Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland have a relatively high share of external migrants out of the total population. Lack of skilled workers from the local population for certain trades and specialisation may be a pull factor.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Labour Migration is characterised by a paradox of unemployment among local Naga youths while simultaneously relying on migrant workers from neighbouring states to fill the critical gaps in sectors like business services and construction activities. From the migrant workers' perspectives, they face significant challenges, including social stigma, racial discrimination, housing insecurity, unsafe working conditions and exclusion from formal protections despite their essential role in the economy. This dual problem of local unemployment and unregulated migration creates socio-economic tensions and governance challenges that demand integrated policy measures to promote dignified work, protect indigenous rights, regulate migration flows and ensure the welfare and inclusion of both local and migrant labour populations. Therefore, studying labour migration requires a holistic approach that addresses economic mismatch, social integration, protection of migrant rights and indigenous concerns. It calls for evidence-based policy interventions that promote skill development among local youth, benefitting all stakeholders without compromising Nagaland's socio-economic fabric.

OBJECTIVES:

1. To study the socio-demographic profile of the migrant workers.
2. To identify the push and pull factors driving labour migration to Kohima.

METHODOLOGY

This study has used a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The study was conducted in Kohima town, keeping in mind the vast urbanisation taking place in the capital of Nagaland. The study adhered to strict ethical guidelines, including complete anonymity, voluntary participation and informed consent. The study was based on convenience sampling to gain a holistic understanding based on questionnaires and the interview method, collected from the workers.

Sample Size: A total of 123 respondents were collected in the district of Kohima.

SOURCES OF DATA

Both primary and secondary data were used. Primary data were collected through the questionnaire method, and the secondary sources were collected from books, articles published in journals, and newspapers. It will also include statistics and reports, census data, institutional reports and online databases.

DESCRIPTION OF STUDY AREA

Kohima, the capital of Nagaland, is the principal administrative and economic centre of the state and attracts migrants because of its urban services, employment opportunities, and concentration of commercial activity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**Socio-demographic profile of the migrants****Table 1:**

Category	Count
Male	117
Female	6

Source: Fieldwork, 2026

In all, 123 migrant respondents were studied in Kohima to give us an insight into the demographic and social composition of this migrating population. There was an overwhelming male majority amongst the migrants in Kohima, and this signifies that migration to Kohima is essentially male-dominated. This may indicate that there is greater employment opportunity for males, or it is only males who migrate, owing to social norms that consider them as breadwinners of the family or simply because there are more chances of mobility and freedom for males.

Table 2:

Type of work	Count
Construction workers	86
Mechanics	4
Barber/ Cobbler	6
Vegetable vendors/Street vendors	11
Salespersons	9
Scrap collectors	2
Tailors	5

Source: Fieldwork, 2026

The majority of the migrants were in the construction sector, such as mason/bricklayer, carpenter, electrician, plumber, painter, floor and ceiling installer, road workers, etc. Some of the respondents were mechanics, barbers, cobblers, street vendors, scrap collectors, and so on. Most of them had learned the work on the job itself and later mastered the art. A few had taken formal training. Women were mostly seen in the business sector, like selling vegetables and tailoring.

Table 3:

Religion	Percentage
Muslim	60%
Hindu	35%
Others	5%

Source: Fieldwork, 2026

The fieldwork showed that Muslims form the majority at 60% and Hindus make up 35%, indicating a large but still minority group compared to Muslims. The remaining 5% follow other religions. It was noted that Muslims undertake a holiday during the Eid season, and the same for the Hindus as well. The town was visibly empty without these workers during the festive season.

Table 4:

State	Percentage
Assam	47.8
Bihar	33.9
UP	10.5
Others	7.8

Source: Fieldwork, 2026

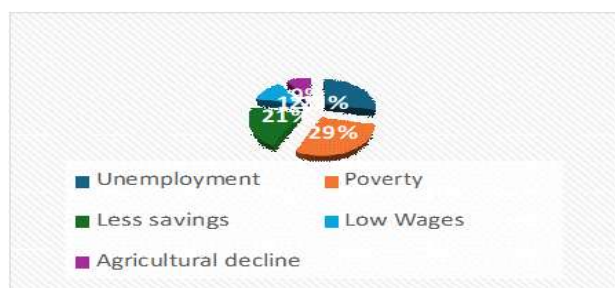
Most of the respondents were from the state of Assam, from districts like Karimganj, Sribhumi, Hojai, Dima Hasao, and so on. From Bihar, migrants from Begusarai and Kishanganj dominated Kohima. Many migrants were from UP, Manipur, Meghalaya, and Tripura.

Table 5:

Educational qualifications	Percentage
Illiterate	14%
Primary	57%
Middle	20%
Elementary	9%

Source: Fieldwork, 2026

It is also important to note here that 14% respondents were illiterate because they had very little access to formal education in their native places because of poverty. But a large number of respondents, i.e., 57% had primary education, 20% had been till middle school, and 9% had elementary education. The more education, the better the living standard of the workers was noted. The respondents who had middle and elementary level education were mostly in business establishments where they did not have to toil day and night.



Source: Fieldwork, 2026

Figure 1: Push factors driving migrants to Kohima

The push factors driving migrants to Kohima can be understood as a combination of various factors such as poverty, unemployment, low wages at places of origin, agricultural decline, less savings, etc, which together make staying back seem riskier than moving. Economic insecurity such as poverty and unemployment is central at 58%, where many households struggle to meet daily needs because their income is irregular, too low, or dependent on fragile sources like small-scale farming or casual labour. When work is not guaranteed throughout the year, families cannot plan for the future, repay debts, or invest in education and health, so migration becomes a way to stabilise their earnings. People willing and able to work cannot find jobs, or only get a few days of work in a month, especially in areas where agricultural or local nonfarm opportunities are limited. Seasonal unemployment makes the situation worse; during lean agricultural seasons, there is simply no work available in the village, forcing people, especially young men, to move temporarily or permanently to towns like Kohima in search of income.

Low rural wages stand at 9% which deepen this pressure. Even when work is available, the daily wage in rural areas is often too low to support a family, particularly when the cost of food, transport, and basic services is rising. This means that people are working hard but still remain poor, which creates frustration and a strong economic “push” to look for better-paying opportunities in urban centres. Climatic conditions add another layer: irregular rainfall, floods, drought-like situations, or other environmental problems damage crops, reduce yields, and make agriculture increasingly unreliable as a sole source of livelihood. When harvests fail or fluctuate, households lose both food and income, and those who are already poor and landless feel the impact most sharply. In this context, Kohima emerges in migrants’ perception as a relatively safe haven, a place where both skilled and unskilled workers can find some kind of work in construction, shops, transport, domestic service, small businesses, or informal activities, even if the jobs are not formal or permanent. The city offers more diverse sources of employment, more continuous work throughout the year, and often higher wages than in the migrants’ home areas. For the respondents, moving to Kohima is therefore less about seeking luxury or big-city life and more about coping with the inability of their home regions to provide secure jobs, decent wages, and stable living conditions; migration becomes a necessary strategy for survival, debt repayment, and supporting families left behind, rather than a purely voluntary choice.



Source: Fieldwork, 2026

Figure 2: Pull factors driving migrants towards Kohima

Pull factors drawing migrants towards Kohima revolve around its pleasant living conditions, steady employment opportunities, and a relatively welcoming social environment. Many migrants highlighted the favourable weather conditions in Kohima as a major attraction, noting that the cool and comfortable climate made work and daily life easier compared to the harsher conditions in their places of origin. In addition to climate, the availability of work throughout the year with comparatively good wages was a strong pull factor, as migrants could find regular employment in different sectors and rely on a more continuous income rather than facing long periods of idleness or uncertainty. This steady work, combined with better pay than what they earned in rural areas, made Kohima an appealing destination for sustaining themselves and supporting their families.

Equally important were the social and cultural aspects of the city. Migrants often appreciated the hospitality and good nature of the local population, describing people in Kohima as generally friendly, helpful, and respectful towards outsiders. The perceived absence or lesser importance of rigid caste, class, and gender hierarchies in everyday interactions made the social environment feel safer and more dignified, especially for those coming from Scheduled Caste, OBC, or otherwise marginalised backgrounds. In such a setting, migrants felt that they could live and work with a greater sense of equality and respect, without facing the same level of discrimination they might experience elsewhere. Taken together, these pull factors—pleasant climate, regular work with good wages, and a socially accepting atmosphere—made Kohima not just a place to earn a livelihood but also a place where migrants could imagine a more secure and respectful life for themselves.

Similarly, it was noted that most workers were second-generation workers, meaning they had their relatives, fathers, uncles, cousins, neighbours who were already working in Kohima, so it was easier for them to settle in Kohima without much difficulty.

CONCLUSION

The rise of labour migrants in Kohima is rooted in a structural mismatch between conditions in migrants’ regions of origin and the opportunities available in the state’s urban economy. Persistent rural poverty, unstable and seasonal employment, and low wages are pushing the workers out. In contrast, Kohima’s diversified labour markets, relatively higher wages and more relaxed social hierarchies pull them in. Migrants occupy some of the

essential positions in construction and other informal sectors, making them central for the town's growth but at the same time vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination.

At the same time, Nagaland faces a paradoxical situation: unemployment among local youth is rising even as the state economy remains dependent heavily on migrants to fill the gap. This dual reality generates socio- economic and political tensions. There should be a holistic approach that simultaneously strengthens local employability and also protects migrant workers' rights. This includes investing in skill development and job creation for Naga youth and monitoring the working and living conditions of migrants, and ensuring safety and grievance redressal mechanisms are accessible to workers.

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