

FAR FROM HOME

Migrant workers load bricks onto trucks to be transported and sold. Many laborers live at the brick factory eight months out of the year, giving them enough money to send home to family in different states. | Photo by Luca Lombardi

Migrant laborers, including children, fill the factories of Haryana, working long hours to support families who live hundreds of kilometers away.

By SORAYA KEISER

Rohit cleans machinery and dyes rice in a factory. He is 13.

On the main road between Kaithal and Titram, the rice factories run 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Trucks bring bags of raw rice from the fields, which are shucked, cleaned, dyed and sorted. The rice is then exported. The best goes to countries throughout Europe and the Middle East, and the broken or discolored rice ships throughout India.

Factories run continuously primarily thanks to migrant labor. Impoverished workers find seasonal or permanent work in the fields harvesting mustard and wheat. Others send money home, predominantly to eastern states, for their work in factories processing rice, making bricks and distilling liquor. A major agricultural and industrial state, Haryana owns an abundance of hard labor jobs compared to poorer, eastern states. The promise of wages drives young men such as Rohit to make long journeys away from their families to find work.

As of 2021, the total migration rate in India was 28.9%, compared to the United States' rate of 12.6%. Migrant labor is especially common

in northern India. The Indian government does not regularly survey this data by individual state, so current numbers are difficult to find. According to the Indian Ministry of Labour and Employment, 1,333,644 people moved to Haryana for work and employment in 2011, and this number only seems to be growing.

The relativity of the value of low wages and harsh working conditions maintains the system. For workers like Rohit, the wage means survival for his family. For a factory owner, the wage means that business can expand, perpetuating wealth and exploitation.

Rohit's family lives in the town of Phulhara in Bihar, 350 miles north of Calcutta and 825 miles east of Haryana. Originally from a family of 10, Rohit is the only source of income. His five older sisters have been married off and no longer live at home. His brother works in Punjab and does not send any money back to the family. His father died of cardiac arrest while on a train to Calcutta to find work. This left Rohit, his younger brother and his mother alone.

Rohit was 7. His family was desperate.



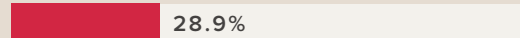
Rohit, 13, huddles up with a blanket near a fire pit at the Kisan Mazdoor Canteen outside of Titram, Haryana. Rohit is a migrant worker who has been working at the factory in front of the canteen for six months. | Photo by Devanie Andre

After dropping out of school, he found work making sweets in Calcutta, 14 hours from home.

Six months ago, he made the more than 24-hour train ride from Bihar to Haryana. He knew of work in Kaithal through Pramod, 23, who works at the rice factory and serves as an agent for the factory to find cheap migrant labor. He receives a commission for promoting work at the factory and signing laborers.

In India, child labor is illegal. The government's official website states that it is working to address child labor, but the practice has not been eradicated. In fact, according to statistics from the International Labour Organization, a United Nations initiative, more than 3.2 million children between ages five and 14 work illegally. Child labor is a cheap commodity in which employees have no power to complain about dangerous conditions. However, with 37.6% of the Indian population living under the poverty

TOTAL MIGRATION RATE OF INDIA

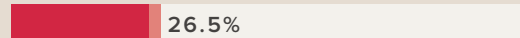


TOTAL MIGRATION RATE OF UNITED STATES

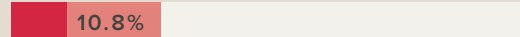


OF MIGRATING PEOPLE IN INDIA:

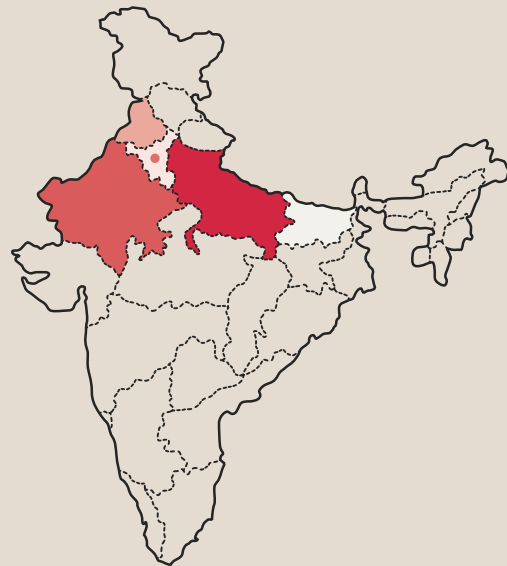
% from rural India



% employment-related



MIGRATION RATE PER STATE



The number of people moving to each state for work:

Punjab: 1,244,056

Uttar Pradesh: 3,156,125

NCT Delhi: 2,029,489

Rajasthan: 1,709,602

Bihar: 706,557

Haryana: 1,333,644

SOURCE: INDIA MINISTRY OF STATISTICS AND PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION

line, families send their children to work out of necessity.

“It is illegal to work, but at least [Rohit] is helping,” Pramod said at a roadside canteen in front of Rohit. “If he doesn’t work, who will send money to his mother?”

Pramod and Rohit both live within the walls of the factory in the worker housing behind the sheet-metal building where they process rice created to have a higher nutrition level. Inside cement walls, workers sleep four or five to a room on wooden pallet bed frames with mattresses made of used rice bags. Their clothes hang to dry along the walls, and cloth covering the iron-barred windows serves as panes to keep out the January cold. An open-air kitchen’s cement walls are blackened with ash from the fire where men and boys cook, share their meals and warm their hands.

“We live together as brothers,” Rohit said.

However, unlike his older brother, the men Rohit lives with in the cell-sized rooms also send money back home.

About 100 feet from where Rohit and Pramod sleep, Nitin Goyal, 31, sits at a glass-topped desk he shares with his brother Shubham, 29. A business graduate from Radha Krishan Sanatan Dharam College in Kaithal, Goyal also has a degree in interior design. Everything in the office has been picked out by him, from the brown ornamental wallpaper to the marble flooring to the painting of the Hindu god Ganesh in a gilded frame behind the desk. Each piece represents the professionalism and wealth of Goyal and his family.

As a multi-generational family business, Goyal and his brother were expected to get involved young and expand the company as they continued. Goyal started working for the family business when he was 23 in 2015. Since then the business has seen a 250% increase in rice production. Goyal says he shows respect to his employees because they are earning for the company.

“We don’t treat them like an employee,” Goyal said. “We treat them like a family.”

Rohit has never spoken to Goyal. Rohit makes 8,000 rupees (\$96) a month for his work at the factory. About 5,000 rupees (\$60) go to his mother.

3,000 (\$36) remain with him. He uses the money to buy snacks and train tickets home. If he didn’t send money home, his mother and brother would starve, he says. He calls his mom every day on a phone he bought with some of his earnings. She always asks: *Have you eaten? Have you eaten? How is your health?*

Workers in the rice factory are occasionally given days off, and sometimes they take longer periods to catch a bus or train home. Pramod says they don’t stay home for long, preferring more pay over the rest time. As laborers they work 12-hour shifts from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., or 9 p.m. to 9 a.m. 15 days of the night shift, then 15 days of the day shift.

When Rohit was younger, he would play the rural game *gulli-danda*. Players try to strike a small stick, the *gulli*, in midair with a longer stick, the *danda*. Now, he doesn’t have time to play. When he does have free time, Rohit watches comedy videos on Instagram Reels or plays car racing games on his phone.

Right: Raw rice is brought to the factory in roughspun bags from local rice farmers. The bags are sewn and repaired by hand by migrant workers in the factory before they are reused. | Photo by Devanie Andre

Below: Rice factory workers transport bags of raw rice that will be made into synthetic rice at the factory. The process consists of adding nutrients to the rice before preparing it for wholesale to send to places like schools. | Photo by Luca Lombardi





He dreams of going back to school, but he doesn't know what to study. Having left school at 7, Rohit doesn't know what the subjects are. He also dreams of building a bigger house for his family than their mud house in Bihar. He wants his mom to be happy, and ultimately, he wants to return home. Not abroad or off to a big city, just to his home village.

Over the phone Rohit hears about fights between his mother, uncles and other members of his extended family. Threats of violence and possibly death worry him.

"When there is no fighting, I'm happy," Rohit said.

Rohit believes if his father were alive, he wouldn't have these problems. There would be no fighting. His family would not have to worry about where money for their next meal will come from. He could go to school.

But if he does not work, he will starve, which is something Goyal has never had to worry about. Right now, Goyal focuses on his family's recent purchase of two new factories to increase production. These new factories

Opposite (top): A worker from the brick factory moves bricks from the cooling process to a cart that then will be moved to a different part of the factory for temporary storage. A wooden flatbed wheelbarrow is used to transport bricks around the factory by workers. | Photo by Emma Lovell

Opposite (bottom): The migrant workers at the brick factory live just meters from their daily workplace in an area of the factory designated as living quarters. It is common for migrant workers to live on factory premises, making it easier for them to work seasonally or permanently. | Photo by Emma Lovell

have employed about 200 people, primarily migrant workers, since they have been opened. The hardest part of his job, he says, is buying the raw rice from area farmers at a low cost so that he can make the most profit. Cheap labor costs help keep the profit margin high. But this work does not keep him from spending time with family, sometimes even bringing his 2-year-old nephew with him for meetings in the office.

Across the street from the factory, Arun, 15, flips roti, wipes tables and chops vegetables at the Kisan Mazdoor Canteen. A year ago Arun slept in the same lodgings as Rohit, working in the same factory, doing the same jobs in the same 12-hour shifts. As the cousin of Pramod, Arun traveled from the same village of Phulhara in search of the work Pramod offered at the factory. After one month, he moved on to a nearby restaurant.

Vikram, the canteen's manager, took Arun in when he was sick, and now Arun works as a cook and server at the canteen. When there are no customers, he studies. Arun hopes to become a teacher one day — something that seemed impossible while working in a factory.

Just under two miles down the road from the canteen, among the fields of Titram, smoke streams out of a brick chimney atop a brick furnace. At the brick factory, bricks are everywhere, and the migrant workers use this to their advantage, making their homes on the factory land almost entirely out of bricks. The walls are held together by cement made of cow manure, and bricks keep roofs of corrugated tin in place. Patterned scarves hang from

clotheslines to dry, but they will soon be, along with everything else in the makeshift village, covered in a layer of red dust.

Men and women alike work for eight hours a day collecting clay, making bricks, manning the furnace and transporting bricks onto trucks after they are baked. It takes 36 hours for one set of bricks to bake fully before cooling in the furnace for 15 days. The factory is set up on a rotation so that bricks are baked continuously for eight months from October to June. During monsoon season the laborers will return to their homes.

Natthuram serves as an agent for the brick factory. Originally from Badaun in the neighboring region of Uttar Pradesh, 235 miles southeast of Titram, he receives 20% commission on workers he brings to the factory. Families can make about 50,000 to 60,000 rupees (\$601 to \$721) a season.

"Just come and work," Natthuram says to potential recruits. "You'll get good money." Good money that buys vegetables or saves for a bigger house. Either way, it's more than they would be making back home. Some, like Rohit, send money to family members who remain behind.

While Rohit sweeps the cement ground of the factory collecting broken rice to be reprocessed, Goyal rarely walks the factory floor. He sticks to his office behind opaque glass doors. He chooses the best gold chain to match his outfit for a business meeting and is at work by 9:30 a.m. He is home in Kaithal by 8 p.m. with time to write songs about love and play billiards in the evening.

Rohit dreams of taking a train back to Bihar and staying for good. But only when his family isn't so desperate. X

