



THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT

YASHAS S DAS

DIVERGENT DREAMS: A PAN-INDIA ANALYSIS OF MIGRATION ASPIRATIONS ACROSS AGE, GENDER, AND GEOGRAPHY

The International Institute of Migration and
Development, PO Box 695011, India,
Phone: +91 9778 355 560,
<https://iimad.org>,
Mail: info@iimad.org

WORKING PAPER **16**

What Villagers Want- A Study of the Mind of Rural
India on Migration to Urban Landscapes
(India /WP-16 IIMAD)



IIMAD
THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
MIGRATION & DEVELOPMENT

DIVERGENT DREAMS: A PAN-INDIA ANALYSIS OF MIGRATION ASPIRATIONS ACROSS AGE, GENDER, AND GEOGRAPHY

July 2026, Working Paper No. 16

Author

| YASHAS S DAS

ISBN: 978-81-989962-1-3

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21770224>

Disclaimer

The International Institute of Migration and Development does not have a Centre view and does not aim to present one. Working Papers are the work of IIMAD members as well as visitors to the Institute's events. The analyses and opinions presented in the papers do not reflect those of the Institute but are those of the author alone

IIMAD WORKING PAPER

Divergent Dreams:

A Pan-India Analysis of Migration Aspirations Across Age, Gender, and Geography

Yashas S. Das

Student Intern, The International Institute of Migration and Development (IIMAD)

L'ecole Chempaka International School | AS Level (Grade XI)

February 2026

Revised in response to IIMAD Review, April 2026

Abstract

While rural-urban migration is a defining feature of India's demographic landscape, existing scholarship predominantly focuses on the migrant at the destination. This paper shifts the analytical lens to the source, utilising a primary dataset of 4,931 respondents across 99 villages in 28 states and 2 Union Territories to examine the aspirations of non-migrant rural population. The study uncovers a significant “aspiational wedge” between emotional attachment and latent mobility: although 87% of respondents express a preference for village life, only 40% would actually remain in the village if structural constraints were removed — a gap of 47 percentage points that, read across its three differently framed constituent questions, quantifies the scale of suppressed aspiration in rural India.

This wedge is not uniform. It is fractured along the axes of age, gender, and geography in ways that challenge prevailing assumptions. A stark inverse relationship between age and migration desire shows 75% of youth (under 16) opting for urban settlement when unconstrained, compared to only 35% of the elderly. Contrary to the associational migration narrative, females display a marginally higher latent desire for urban settlement (62%) than males (59%), driven primarily by educational rather than purely economic aspirations. Regionally, respondents from economically stagnating states such as Bihar (84%) exhibit high migration desire, while states with stronger rural infrastructure such as

Karnataka (36%) demonstrate effective retention. A critical policy failure is documented: while 75% of youth express migration aspirations, 96% remain unaware of DDUGKY — the government's flagship rural skilling scheme. This mismatch between state intervention and rural ambition demands urgent course correction.

1. Introduction

Rural-urban migration in India is not merely a demographic event — it is the lived expression of unequal development. The Census of India (2011) records 31% of the population residing in urban areas, a figure projected to reach 40% by 2030 (United Nations, 2018). Yet behind this aggregate lies a more complex story: the rural populations who have not moved. Do they stay because they prefer the village, or because they lack the capability to leave?

Existing migration scholarship has long suffered from what may be termed a “destination bias” — an overwhelming focus on migrants once they arrive in cities, their integration struggles, and their economic contributions (Tumbe, 2018). Far less attention has been paid to the source population: the 70% of Indians who still reside in rural areas and contribute only 46% to national GDP (Ministry of Rural Development, 2019). Among these, a critical and understudied group is the aspirational but immobile: those who would migrate if they could.

This paper addresses that gap through a source-based, pan-India study of migration aspirations among non-migrated rural populations. The fieldwork underpinning this research involved a 21,000-kilometre journey across 99 villages in 28 states and 2 Union Territories over 10 months (June 2024–March 2025). To access the remotest survey locations in Ladakh, the researchers undertook a 3,000-kilometre motorbike journey along the Great Himalayas, navigating difficult routes including the Kaza–Manali pass and the Pangong Tso–Chushul axis. This unconventional fieldwork approach ensured that the data reflects the deep interior of rural life, not convenient roadside samples.

The central argument of this paper is that rural India's relationship with migration is highly stratified, where age, gender, land ownership, caste, and regional geography create divergent aspirational trajectories. A key methodological innovation is the use of hypothetical questioning (“Given an option, will you settle in a city?”) to disentangle aspiration from amenability, revealing the contours of suppressed desire. Where the aspiration to migrate is high among youth but awareness of rural skilling schemes remains negligible, there is a fundamental mismatch between state intervention and rural ambition that warrants urgent attention.

2. Literature Review

The dominant theoretical framework for understanding rural-urban migration remains the push-pull model, wherein rural economic stagnation acts as a push and urban wage premiums act as a pull (Bhagat, 2017). Despite housing the majority of India's population, rural areas contribute disproportionately little to national GDP, creating a structural driver for urban transition. This economic determinism treats migration as an inevitable consequence of development and the rural populace as a homogeneous labour reserve — a framing this paper explicitly challenges.

Recent scholarship has complicated this narrative by foregrounding social dimensions. Keshri and Bhagat (2013) highlight the gendered structure of migration: male movement is predominantly economic, while female migration in North India is largely dictated by marriage and family relocation, portraying female migration as passive or “associational.” The present study interrogates this characterisation by isolating female aspirations in a hypothetical framework, finding that 62% of rural women would independently choose urban settlement — largely for education — challenging the traditional narrative and aligning with perspectives that view urban migration as a potential site of female emancipation.

The role of caste and land ownership in structuring migration decisions is well-documented. Deshingkar and Start (2003) argue that seasonal migration functions as a coping strategy for the poor, while capital accumulation migration is reserved for better-resourced households. This paper extends that insight to the question of permanence: land ownership acts as an anchor for circular migration, while the landless — disproportionately drawn from marginalised caste groups — are more likely to seek permanent urban exit as an escape from social exclusion, aligning with Kundu and Saraswati's (2012) analysis of exclusionary urbanisation.

Regional heterogeneity in migration patterns is well-established. Srivastava (2020) identifies clear migration corridors from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh linked to chronic underdevelopment, and Gupta (2018) documents how environmental distress amplifies urban inflows from Maharashtra. This paper confirms these findings but adds comparative value by juxtaposing “exit states” against “retention states” such as Karnataka, where rural infrastructure investment has demonstrably reduced distress migration.

Theoretically, this paper engages with Amartya Sen's Capability Approach. The gap between the 87% who prefer village life and the 60% who would migrate if unconstrained represents a form of “unfreedom” — a condition where people cannot pursue lives they have reason to value due to lack of resources, information, or social permission. Crucially,

the Capability Approach also recognises genuine preference as a legitimate form of agency: the Punjab/Sikh data, where 59% explicitly choose not to migrate even when the option is offered, illustrates that not all rural immobility reflects constraint. De Haas (2021) extends the Capability Approach into migration theory, arguing that aspirations and abilities to migrate are analytically distinct dimensions — a distinction operationalised in this study through the paired survey design separating practical desire from unconstrained latent aspiration. Datta (2019) advocates precisely for such source-based studies to capture latent aspirations that destination-focused research inevitably misses. By measuring the divergence between amenability and aspiration, this paper provides empirical weight to the concept of the “involuntary non-migrant” and quantifies the capability gap across 28 states for the first time.

Carling’s (2002) concept of involuntary immobility — the condition of those who aspire to migrate but lack the means or permission to do so — provides a direct theoretical precursor to the aspirational wedge documented in this study. Where Carling theorised the phenomenon from Cape Verdean migration patterns, the present study offers one of its largest empirical demonstrations across a single national context.

3. Research Focus

The primary objective of this paper is to deconstruct the monolithic narrative of the “rural non-migrant” by analysing how migration aspirations vary across intersecting identities. The core research question is:

How do migration aspirations from villages to cities differ across age groups, gender, and geography in India, and what does this divergence reveal about the capability gap between aspiration and mobility?

This is addressed through three sub-questions:

Sub-question 1 — The Aspiration-Capability Gap: What is the divergence between an individual’s expressed preference for village life and their willingness to migrate when structural constraints are hypothetically removed? This sub-question quantifies suppressed aspiration by comparing responses to “Do you wish to settle in a city?” with “Given an option, will you settle?”

Sub-question 2 — Demographic Determinants: How do age and gender shape migration desire? Does youth translate into a migration aspiration bulge, and do female aspirations differ from the associational marriage-migration narrative?

Sub-question 3 — Regional and Social Heterogeneity: How do aspirations differ between high-outflow and high-retention states, and how do land ownership and caste shape the preference for temporary (circular) versus permanent migration?

The paper additionally examines awareness of three major government schemes — the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MNREGS), Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana – Gramin (PMAY-G), and Deen Dayal Upadhyay Grameen kaushalya Yojna (DDUGKY) — to test whether state policy is aligned with the aspirational realities documented above.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Sampling

This study employs a quantitative, source-based approach targeting non-migrant populations in rural India. A stratified random sampling method ensured pan-India representativeness. States were classified by area into “big” (>50,000 sq km) and “small” (<50,000 sq km) categories; four villages were selected from distinct districts in big states and two in small states (one in Goa), totalling 99 villages across 28 states and 2 Union Territories. Within each village, 50 respondents were targeted, yielding a total dataset of 4,931 respondents. In a small number of villages, logistical constraints and respondent availability resulted in fewer than 50 completed interviews; the shortfall of 19 respondents against the theoretical maximum of 4,950 reflects this. The intra-village sample was stratified by age — under 16 years (10% with respondents drawn from the 13–15 range who could answer independently), 16–40 years (60%), 41–60 years (20%), and above 60 years (10%) — with a gender ratio of 60:40 (male: female).

A key methodological note on the scope of this study: the imposed uniform stratification — 60% male, 40% female; 60% aged 16–40 — does not reflect actual village demographic compositions, which vary considerably across India’s regions. This study is therefore best understood as exploratory and hypothesis-generating in character, rather than as a definitive demographic census of rural migration aspirations. Its contribution lies in identifying robust directional patterns across a uniquely wide geographic canvas — 99 villages across 28 states and 2 Union Territories — and in generating hypotheses that population-representative surveys can subsequently test and refine.

4.2 Data Collection

Primary data was collected between June 2024 and March 2025 using structured questionnaires administered via Kobo Toolbox, enabling GPS tagging and timestamping of all interviews. In-person administration combined engagement in public spaces (village squares, markets, worksites) with house-to-house visits to ensure inclusion of women and elderly respondents. Locally sourced guides assisted with translation across linguistically diverse regions. The fieldwork involved significant logistical challenges — including detentions by police in Mandi (Himachal Pradesh) and Tinsukia (Assam) and health

setbacks in Uttar Pradesh — ensuring the sample reflects genuinely remote communities rather than accessible roadside populations.

4.3 Analytical Approach

A suite of six core survey questions measured migration intent across a spectrum from emotional preference to unconstrained aspiration. Two methodological innovations are particularly notable. First, a paired design contrasts actual amenability (“Is it agreeable for you to leave your village?”) with unconstrained hypothetical choice (“Given an option, will you settle in a city?”) — separating what people want from what they feel able to do. Second, a final question on migration type (“If you migrate and settle in a city, will you ever choose to come back?”) distinguishes circular from permanent migration preferences. Analysis used cross-tabulation and descriptive statistics in Microsoft Excel. AI tools were used for data-cleaning tasks, specifically standardising landholding units and classifying sub-caste identities into SC, ST, OBC, and General categories.

Survey-based measurement of migration aspirations has been validated as a meaningful predictor of subsequent mobility decisions (Czaika and Vothknecht, 2014), lending empirical credibility to the source-side aspiration framework employed in this study.

To validate subgroup differences, chi-square tests of independence were conducted on five key comparisons: gender versus latent aspiration, age group versus latent aspiration, social group (caste) versus migration preference, land holding versus permanent migration preference, and state cluster versus migration desire. All five tests returned statistically significant results — four at $p < 0.001$, and the gender-based aspiration gap at $p = 0.037$ — confirming that the observed differences between subgroups are not attributable to sampling variation. Full test statistics are reported in the supplementary data workbook.

5. Findings

5.1 The Aspirational Wedge: Preference Versus Unconstrained Choice

The most foundational finding of this study is a three-way divergence in stated rural-urban preference, which the paper terms the “Aspirational Wedge.” When asked which life is better, 87% nominate village life. When the question shifts to a practical desire, the city share rises to 34%. When constraints are hypothetically removed, 60% choose the city — meaning only 40% would actually stay in the village if truly free to choose. This 47-percentage-point gap between emotional preference (87%) and unconstrained revealed preference (40%) is the central empirical contribution of this paper. It is best understood as a proxy indicator of latent aspiration rather than a direct measure of suppressed preference, since each figure arises from a differently framed question.

Table 1: The Aspirational Wedge — Preference, Desire, and Latent Aspiration

Metric	% Village	% City	Insight
Emotional Preference ("Which life is better?")	87%	13%	Deep normative attachment to rural identity; opinion anchored in lived experience, not knowledge of city.
Practical Desire ("Do you wish to settle?")	66%	34%	Practical aspirations surface: economic pull factors override idealised rural preference.
Latent Aspiration ("Given an option, will you settle?")	40%	60%	True aspiration revealed: 47-percentage-point wedge vs. emotional preference when constraints removed.

Source: Primary Survey Data, 2024–25 (n = 4,931).

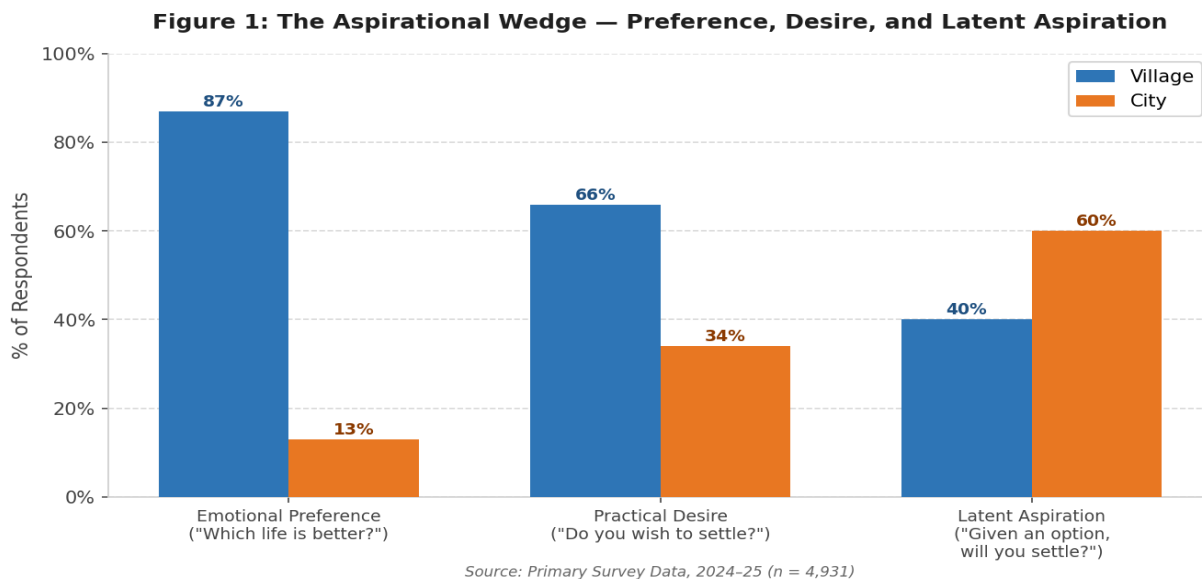


Figure 1: The Aspirational Wedge visualised across three question framings. Source: Primary Survey Data, 2024–25 (n = 4,931).

The primary driver of constraint is social: 70% of respondents state they are not amenable to leaving their village. For women, the dominant barrier is separation from family and relatives (37.5% of female non-amenable respondents); for men of birth (34.6%); for the elderly above 60, attachment to place is similarly primary, (Primary Survey Data, 2024–25). These are unfreedoms in Sen's sense — structural impediments preventing people from pursuing the mobility they aspire to.

5.2 Demographic Determinants: Age and Gender

Migration aspirations are strongly and consistently structured by age in an inverse pattern. As shown in Figure 2, 75% of respondents under 16 would migrate if unconstrained, falling to 60% for the 16–40 cohort, 52% for the 41–60 cohort, and just 35% for those above 60. The practical desire (current wish) figures follow the same downward gradient — 43%, 40%, 23%, and 15% respectively — confirming that the inverse age relationship holds whether aspiration is measured in hypothetical or practical terms. The reasons also shift across the life course: youth prioritise better education; the working-age cohort prioritises better wages; the elderly cite better facilities. The finding that 47% of under 16 respondents believe their ambitions cannot be fulfilled in the village signals an emerging generational rupture between rural life and youthful aspiration that will shape India’s urban transition over the next two decades. This inverse age gradient is statistically robust ($\chi^2(3) = 182.897$, $p < 0.001$), highlighting the strong relationship between age and migration aspiration.

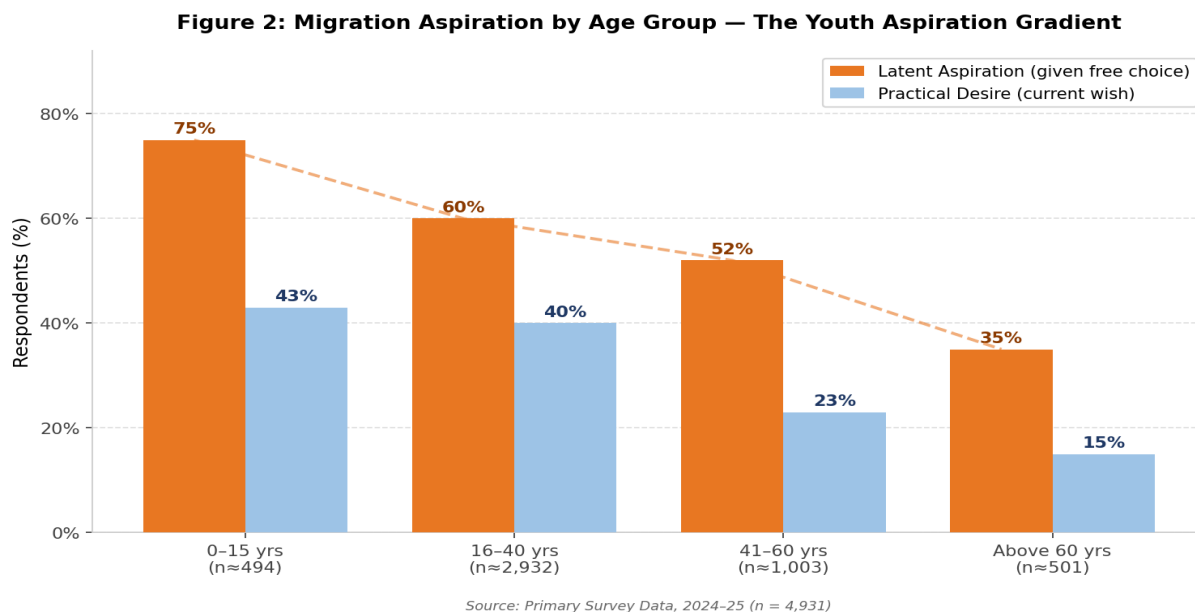


Figure 2: Migration aspiration by age group — both unconstrained (latent) and practical desire. Source: Primary Survey Data, 2024–25 (n = 4,931).

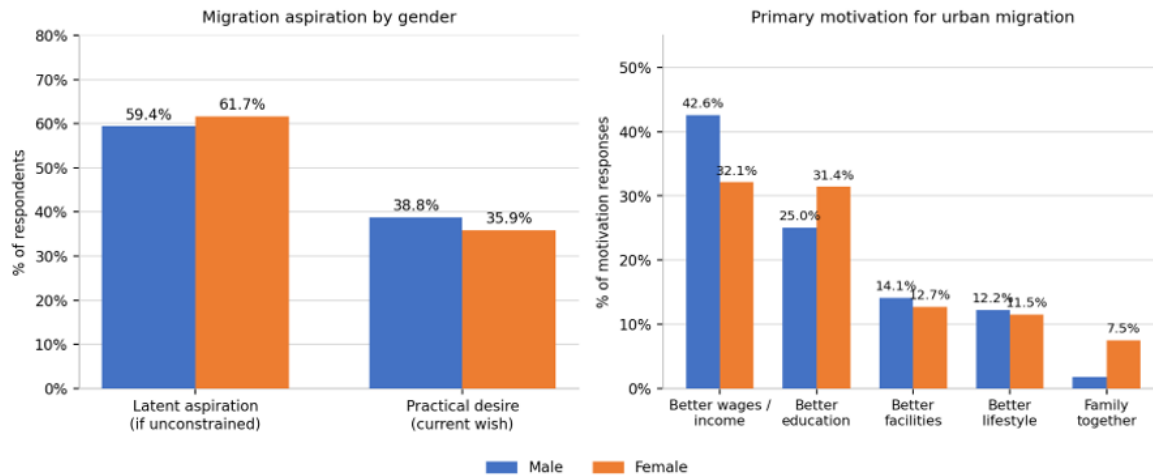
Figure 2b — Gender-disaggregated Migration Aspiration and Motivation

Figure 2b: Gender-disaggregated migration aspiration and primary motivation for urban migration. Left panel shows latent aspiration (% who would migrate if unconstrained) and practical desire (% who currently wish to migrate) by gender. Right panel shows primary motivation breakdown among those who would migrate (multi-response question; figures reflect % of total motivation responses). Female respondents: $n = 1,968$ (aspiration); $n = 1,366$ (motivation responses). Male respondents: $n = 2,962$ (aspiration); $n = 1,952$ (motivation responses). Source: Primary Survey Data, 2024–25

Turning from age to gender, the survey reveals a further and analytically significant dimension of aspirational variation, presented in Figure 2b above. Chi-square testing confirms that the 3-percentage-point gap in latent aspiration between females (62%) and males (59%) is statistically significant ($\chi^2(1) = 4.356$, $p = 0.037$). Its analytical importance lies in its direction: women's latent aspiration exceeding men's runs directly counter to the associational migration narrative. More robust is the qualitative difference in motivation: while males primarily cite better wages, females give equal weight to better education and better wages — suggesting that for rural women, urban migration represents not just economic gain but access to educational capital and social mobility. The barrier for women is not lack of desire but lack of social permission: separation from family is their dominant reason for non-amenability to leave. This data flatly contradicts the characterisation of female rural-urban migration as predominantly passive or marriage-driven, at least at the level of aspiration.

5.3 Regional and Social Heterogeneity

Analysing the full dataset across all 30 surveyed states and UTs reveals that how people want to migrate matters as much as whether they want to. Mapping migration desire against permanence of intent produces a four-quadrant typology that captures the diversity of rural aspirations far more precisely than a simple exit-versus-retention ranking allows. Figure 3 plots all 30 states on this two-dimensional plane; Table 2 summarises the four clusters.

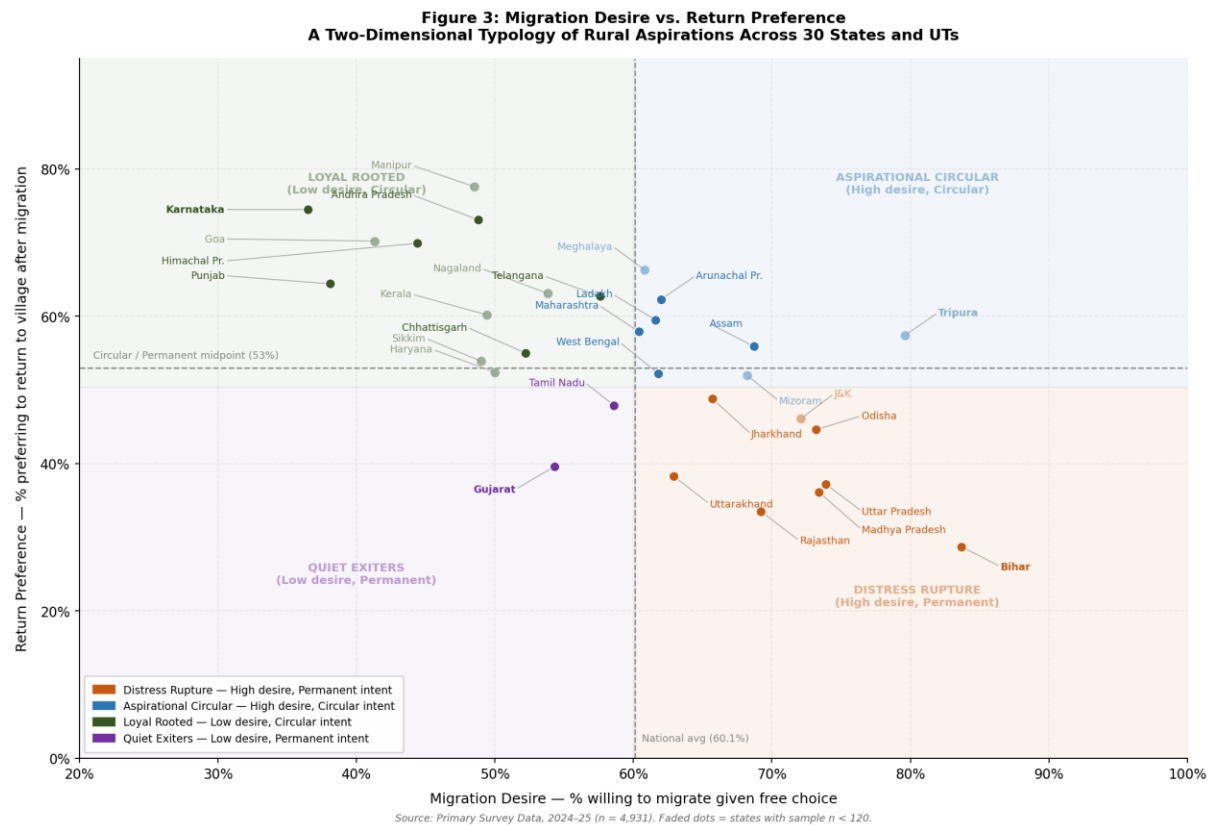


Figure 3: Migration desire vs. return preference across all 30 surveyed states and UTs. Quadrant boundaries at national average migration desire (60.1%) and national average return preference (53%). Both boundaries are empirically validated: $\chi^2(1) = 179.034$, $p < 0.001$ (migration desire axis); $\chi^2(1) = 230.017$, $p < 0.001$ (return preference axis). † = sample $n < 120$ (interpret with caution). Source: Primary Survey Data, 2024–25 (n = 4,931).

The choice of national averages as quadrant boundaries is both theoretically grounded and empirically validated. Theoretically, each national average represents the central tendency of that dimension across India's diverse states — the natural dividing line between above-average and below-average orientation rather than an arbitrary cut-point. Empirically, chi-square testing confirms that both boundaries produce statistically distinct groupings. States above and below the 60.1% migration desire threshold differ significantly in their aspirational orientation ($\chi^2(1) = 179.034$, $p < 0.001$), with high-aspiration states averaging 68.1% migration desire against 49.1% in low-aspiration states. Similarly, states above and below the 53% return preference threshold differ significantly in their mobility orientation ($\chi^2(1) = 230.017$, $p < 0.001$), with high-return states averaging 63.6% return preference against 42.0% in permanently-oriented states. The typology's four quadrants capture real and measurable differences in aspirational orientation across Indian states along both dimensions.

Table 2: A Two-Dimensional Typology of Migration Aspirations — Four State Clusters

	Circular intent — plan to return (>53%)	Permanent intent — plan to stay (≤53%)
Above national avg — Migration desire >60%	ASPIRATIONAL CIRCULAR Tripura (80%), Assam (69%), Mizoram (68%), Arunachal Pr. (62%), Ladakh (62%), Meghalaya (61%), West Bengal (62%), Maharashtra (60%) High desire to leave; strong cultural pull to return. City as resource, not destination.	DISTRESS RUPTURE Bihar (84%), UP (74%), MP (73%), Odisha (73%), Rajasthan (69%), Jharkhand (66%), Uttarakhand (63%) High desire to leave and no plan to return. Structural rural rupture — not a coping strategy.
Below national avg — Migration desire ≤60%	LOYAL ROOTED Karnataka (37%), Punjab (38%), Goa (41%), HP (44%), AP (49%), Kerala (49%), Manipur (49%) Low overall desire to leave; those who do go plan to return (Karnataka 75%, AP 73%, Manipur 78%). Strongest evidence for infrastructure-retention thesis.	QUIET EXITERS Gujarat (57%), Tamil Nadu (59%) Moderate desire to leave but permanent exit when they do. Entrepreneurial (Gujarat) or transitional (TN) profile.

Source: Primary Survey Data, 2024–25 (n = 4,931). States with n < 120 should be interpreted with additional caution.

The Distress Rupture cluster combines above-average migration desire with a strong preference for permanent urban settlement. Bihar (84%), Uttar Pradesh (74%), Madhya Pradesh (73%), Odisha (73%), Rajasthan (69%), Jharkhand (66%), and Uttarakhand (63%) all sit here. The defining feature is not just the high aspiration to leave, but the intention not to return: in Bihar, 70% of those who would migrate do not plan to come back. This is a structural rupture, not a coping strategy. It validates the migration corridor literature (Srivastava, 2020) while extending it — corridor analysis captures the flow, but this data reveals the finality behind it. Policy focused on rural retention in these states without addressing the underlying collapse in rural viability is fighting a structural tide.

The Aspirational Circular cluster shows equally high migration desire but a fundamentally different relationship with the city — as a resource to be used, not a permanent home. Tripura (80%), Assam (69%), Mizoram (68%), Arunachal Pradesh (62%), Ladakh (62%), Meghalaya (61%), West Bengal (62%), and Maharashtra (60%) fall here. In Arunachal Pradesh, 62% want to migrate and 62% plan to return; in Meghalaya the return preference reaches 66%. This is predominantly a Northeast and East India pattern, where deep cultural attachment to community land persists even at high aspiration levels. That states with comparable or higher aspiration to Bihar produce fundamentally different migration intent — circular rather than permanent — demonstrates that the type of movement cannot be predicted from economic variables alone. These states demand a different

policy response: not retention, but infrastructure for circular mobility — portable social security, temporary urban housing, and guaranteed protection of village land rights during periods of absence.

The Loyal Rooted cluster is the most analytically important for retention policy. Karnataka (37%), Punjab (38%), Goa (41%), Himachal Pradesh (44%), Andhra Pradesh (49%), Kerala (49%), and Manipur (49%) show below-average overall migration aspiration — but among those who do say they would migrate, the return preference is overwhelming: Karnataka 75%, Andhra Pradesh 73%, Manipur 78%. These states do not merely keep people from leaving; they produce the most committed circular migrants when movement does occur. This is the strongest available evidence for the infrastructure-retention thesis (Gupta, 2018): good rural development does not just reduce the desire to leave, it changes the character of movement when it happens.

The Loyal Rooted cluster raises a theoretically important interpretive question. Low migration aspiration in states like Karnataka and Punjab may reflect genuine agency — satisfied preferences formed in conditions of relatively better rural infrastructure, stronger social networks, and lower economic precarity. The high return preference among even the minority who do aspire to migrate in these states (Karnataka 74.5%, Punjab 64.4%) is consistent with deep voluntary attachment to place rather than resigned immobility. However, Sen's Capability Approach cautions against reading stated preferences at face value where structural constraints are longstanding. Adaptive preference formation — the internalisation of limits to the point where people stop desiring what they cannot access — would produce identical survey responses to genuine contentment. Distinguishing between these two mechanisms requires longitudinal tracking and qualitative depth — and therein lies a productive frontier for future research. The aspiration data presented here establishes that the Loyal Rooted cluster may not be homogeneous in its underlying logic; disaggregating genuine agency from structural anchoring in these states is the natural next question this study opens up.

The Quiet Exiters cluster contains states with below-average migration desire but high permanent exit preference among those who do go. Gujarat (57%, with 60% permanent intent) is the clearest case — when Gujaratis move, they move to build, not to remit and return, consistent with the state's entrepreneurial culture. Tamil Nadu sits at the boundary with near-equal return and permanent preferences. J&K warrants separate note: its high migration desire (72%) paired with a near-even circular/permanent split plausibly reflects the tension between conflict-driven push and deep cultural attachment to homeland.

Land ownership and caste reinforce the circular-permanent divide at the individual level, consistent across all quadrants. Among the landless, 47% prefer permanent urban

settlement, falling to 37% among those holding above 3 hectares — land functions as both economic anchor and social identity. Scheduled Castes show the highest propensity for permanent urban settlement (55%), plausibly seeking to escape entrenched rural hierarchies, echoing Kundu and Saraswati’s (2012) account of exclusionary urbanisation. Scheduled Tribes show the lowest preference for permanent settlement (40%), prioritising maintenance of ties to community land. These individual-level patterns map directly onto the state-level clusters: the landless and SC-concentrated districts of Distress Rupture states face the most acute combination of high aspiration and permanent exit intent.

5.4 The Policy Mismatch: Safety Nets Versus Ladders

The study’s examination of government scheme awareness reveals a critical and actionable finding, summarised in Table 3 and Figure 4.

Table 3: Government Scheme Awareness and Benefit Utilisation

Scheme	Awareness	Utilisation	Top Barrier
MNREGS (Rural Employment)	68%	20%	"Not Aware" (32%) + "Not Eligible" (16%)
PMAY-G (Rural Housing)	63%	17%	"Not Aware" (37%) + "Not Eligible" (13%)
DDUGKY (Rural Skilling) ★ Critical Policy Failure	4%	1%	"Not Aware" — 96% non-proliferation. Only 1% of total sample has ever availed its benefits.

Source: Primary Survey Data, 2024–25 (n = 4,931).

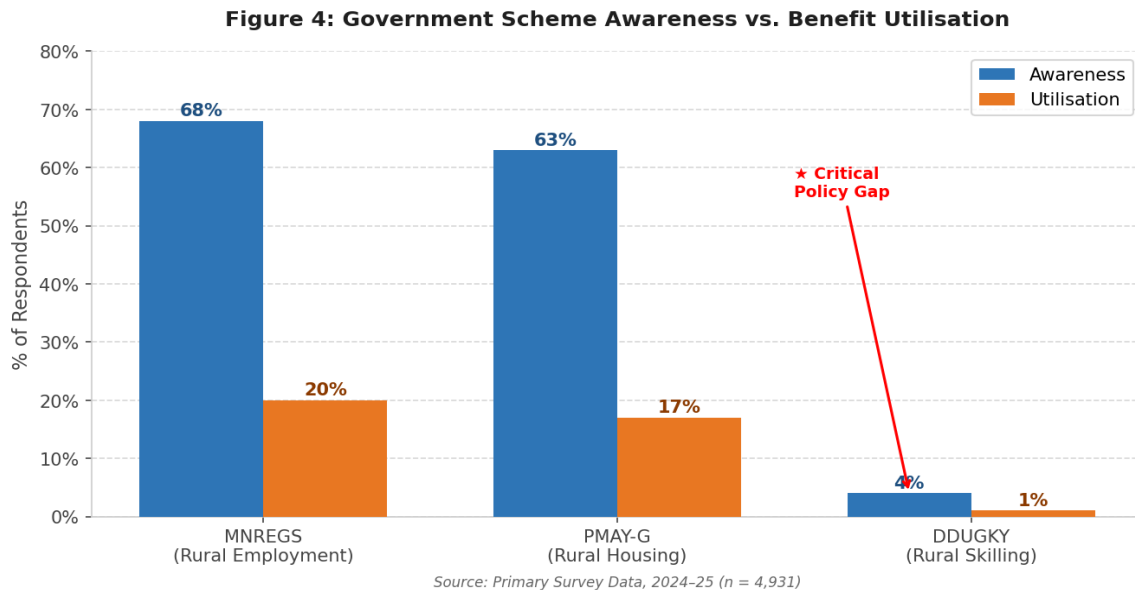


Figure 4: Awareness vs. benefit utilisation across three major rural development schemes. Source: Primary Survey Data, 2024-25 (n = 4,931).

The contrast between MNREGS (68% awareness) and DDUGKY (4% awareness) is analytically significant beyond mere administrative failure. MNREGS is a safety net — it keeps people anchored in the village. DDUGKY is a ladder — explicitly designed to skill rural youth for urban employment. The state has successfully disseminated the former and been near-totally absent in disseminating the latter. While low scheme-name awareness does not preclude access to equivalent programmes under different labels, the near-total non-recognition of DDUGKY by exactly the demographic it targets is a damning policy signal. Given that 75% of rural youth aspire to urban settlement and cite education and income as primary motivations, the near-total non-proliferation of the skilling scheme represents a fundamental misalignment between policy architecture and rural ambition.

6. Discussion and Policy Implications

The findings converge on a single overarching insight: rural India contains a large, stratified, and largely uncaptured mass of aspirational energy — 60% of respondents who would move if they could — held in place by social ties, financial incapacity, and information deficits. Existing migration studies, focused on the destination, have been blind to this reservoir. This paper makes it visible and quantifies it. The dominant push-pull framework treats migration as an inevitable rational response to wage differentials, and the rural non-migrant as either economically satisfied or structurally trapped. This paper's findings challenge both assumptions.

The aspiration-capability gap has direct implications for how policymakers conceptualise rural development. The choice is not, as is often framed, simply between retaining people in villages and enabling migration. For the majority — particularly the 53% who prefer to migrate temporarily and return — both dimensions are simultaneously relevant. Policy must support quality of life in the village (to enable a dignified return) while enabling safe and skilled movement out (to honour the aspiration to leave).

The female aspiration data demands particular policy attention. A 62% latent desire for urban settlement among women, driven by educational rather than purely economic motivations, points to a specific need: investment in rural higher education and vocational training that extends choices for women without requiring physical departure. The regional data validates an infrastructure-retention thesis: states that have invested in rural connectivity, healthcare, and education retain their populations at significantly higher rates — a policy proof of concept that high-aspiration states like Bihar and Mizoram must urgently emulate.

Policy Recommendations

- **Overhaul DDUGKY dissemination.** The near-total non-awareness of the government's flagship skilling scheme among exactly the demographic it targets constitutes a policy emergency. Outreach must move beyond bureaucratic channels to leverage digital platforms, local youth networks, and community radio, with particular focus on high-aspiration states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.
- **Invest in rural educational infrastructure as retention policy.** Given that education is the primary motivation for young and female aspirational migrants, expanding accessible higher education and vocational institutions in rural areas is both a development imperative and the most cost-effective migration management tool.
- **Support circular migration with enabling urban policy.** Since 53% of aspirational migrants prefer to return to their village, urban policy must provide affordable rental housing, portable social security, and guaranteed land rights protection for temporary migrants — enabling genuinely circular mobility.
- **Prioritise land reform and alternative livelihoods for the landless.** The landless and SC communities exhibit the highest propensity for permanent urban exit. Where retention is the goal, it must be accompanied by tangible rural economic alternatives and social equity measures, not merely employment guarantee schemes.
- **Adopt identity-differentiated policy targeting.** The breadth of variation documented — across age, gender, caste, region, and land-holding — argues against uniform national interventions. Policy effectiveness requires disaggregated data literacy and programmes responsive to specific demographic and regional aspiration profiles.

7. Conclusion

This study of 4,931 non-migrated rural Indians provides an empirical foundation for a fundamental reframing of how migration is understood. The village is not a static reservoir of labour; it is a space of profound tension between emotional attachment and suppressed aspiration. While 87% prefer the village in the abstract, only 40% would remain there if truly free to choose — a 47-percentage-point aspirational wedge that is the defining finding of this paper. This large divergence between emotional preference for village life and latent mobility aspiration is itself evidence against economic determinism: if migration were purely rational economic calculation, non-economic attachment to place would not independently suppress mobility at this scale.

The stratification of this aspiration is equally significant. The divergent dreams of a 15-year-old girl in Bihar seeking education and a 65-year-old farmer in Punjab contented on his land are not merely sociological curiosities — they are the data points that policy must take seriously. A uniform approach to rural development will satisfy neither. Age-specific, gender-sensitive, region-calibrated, and caste-aware policies are the minimum requirement for effective intervention.

The DDUGKY finding crystallises the paper’s policy argument with unusual clarity: the government has built a ladder for rural youth to climb toward urban opportunity and then failed to tell them it exists. The 96% non-awareness of this scheme, against a 75% aspiration rate among youth, is a quantified measure of policy failure — one that is correctable with political will and administrative creativity.

Future research should extend this framework through longitudinal tracking of aspirational respondents to map conversion of aspiration into movement, expanded qualitative inquiry into the mechanisms of social unfreedom constraining female mobility, and a parallel destination-side study of whether the urban experience confirms or confounds the aspirations documented here. The breadth of the dataset — 99 villages, 28 states, 4,931 respondents, gathered over 21,000 kilometres and 10 months — gives the findings a pan-India validity that is rare in source-based migration research. The chi-square validation presented in this revision strengthens the inferential basis for the key subgroup findings. For the Indian youth, the village remains an emotional home. The city, for most, is the functional destination. The task of policy is to honour both sides of that tension.

References

- Bhagat, R. B. (2017). Migration and urban transition in India: Implications for development. United Nations Expert Group Meeting on Sustainable Cities.
- Carling, J. (2002). Migration in the age of involuntary immobility. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 28(1), 5–42.
- Census of India. (2011). Primary Census Abstract. Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India.
- Czaika, M., & Vothknecht, M. (2014). Migration and aspirations — are migrants trapped on a hedonic treadmill? *IZA Journal of Migration*, 3(1), 1.
- Datta, A. (2019). Source-based migration studies: A new approach to understanding rural-urban dynamics. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 65, 112–120.
- De Haas, H. (2021). A theory of migration: The aspirations-capabilities framework. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 9(1), 8.
- Deshingkar, P., & Start, D. (2003). Seasonal migration for livelihoods in India: Coping, accumulation, and exclusion. Overseas Development Institute Working Paper.
- Gupta, A. (2018). Environmental distress and migration in Maharashtra. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 53(12), 45–52.
- Keshri, K., & Bhagat, R. B. (2013). Socioeconomic determinants of temporary labour migration in India. *Asian Population Studies*, 9(2), 175–195.
- Kundu, A., & Saraswati, L. R. (2012). Migration and exclusionary urbanisation in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 47(26–27), 219–227.
- Ministry of Rural Development. (2019). Annual Report 2018–19. Government of India.
- Sen, A. (1999). *Development as Freedom*. Oxford University Press.
- Srivastava, R. (2020). Regional disparities in migration patterns in India. *Journal of Development Studies*, 56(4), 789–805.
- Tumbe, C. (2018). *India Moving: A History of Migration*. Penguin Random House India.
- United Nations. (2018). *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision*. Department of Economic and Social Affairs.