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Migration As An Economic Survival Strategy Evidence From Rural Households In Surankote District Poonch, Jammu And Kashmir

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Abstract

This paper examines whether, and how, migration functions as an economic survival strategy for rural households in Surankote, a border tehsil of district Poonch in Jammu and Kashmir. Using a secondary-data design, it triangulates evidence from the Census of India 2011, the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), the National Sample Survey (NSS) migration and remittance rounds, the NITI Aayog National Multidimensional Poverty Index, Reserve Bank of India and Labour Bureau rural wage statistics, the Agriculture Census, MGNREGA parameters and a 2025 humanitarian assessment of cross-border shelling. Guided by the New Economics of Labour Migration and livelihood diversification theory, four propositions are assessed: a land constraint, a days-of-work constraint, a consumption-smoothing role for remittances and a conflict-shock amplification effect. The evidence shows a rural, young, low-literacy population (94.6 per cent rural; effective rural literacy of 60.1 per cent), very small landholdings in J&K (about 0.59 hectares against 1.08 hectares nationally), unemployment above the national rate in every year from 2020–21 to 2023–24 (6.1 against 3.2 per cent in 2023–24), and Poonch multidimensional poverty that was nearly twice the Union Territory average in 2015–16 (24.27 against 12.56 per cent). A notable finding is that J&K's rural construction wage (Rs 584.5 per day in 2024–25) exceeds the all-India average (Rs 441.1), so the incentive to migrate cannot be explained by a wage gap alone. A parameter-based scenario shows that 240 days of work at the all-India wage would yield about 81 per cent more annual earnings than 100 days at the J&K wage, and MGNREGA at current average days yields only about Rs 13,000 per household per year. National NSS evidence indicates that remittances chiefly finance consumption, health, education and debt repayment. The paper concludes that migration from Surankote is best understood as necessity-driven risk diversification, and recommends measures that make migration safer while expanding reliable local work. Because no primary survey was undertaken, a sampling design and questionnaire for validation are provided.

Keywords: Rural migration; survival strategy; remittances; livelihood diversification; MGNREGA; Poonch; Jammu and Kashmir; Surankote

INTRODUCTION

Migration has long been one of the most important adjustment mechanisms available to rural households in South Asia. Where land is scarce, local labour markets are thin and public employment is limited, the movement of one or more household members to distant labour markets is often the most reliable way to convert surplus family labour into cash income (Stark & Bloom, 1985; de Haan, 1999; Deshingkar & Farrington, 2009). In India, the scale of this movement is large. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) of 2020–21 estimated that 28.9 per cent of the population were migrants, a share that rises to 47.9 per cent among women (mostly through marriage) but stays at 10.7 per cent among men, the group in which employment-related movement is concentrated (MoSPI, 2022). The Census of India (2011) recorded more than 41 million inter-state migrant workers (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2023). These headline figures conceal a great deal of short-duration, circular and seasonal movement

that surveys built around a "last usual place of residence" tend to undercount (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009; Srivastava, 2011). The Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir presents a distinctive setting in which to examine such movement. Its rural economy is dominated by very small farms: the average operational holding was recorded at roughly 0.6 hectares, against a national figure of 1.08 hectares (Department of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, 2019; Kashmir Monitor, 2026). Unemployment, especially among educated young people, is persistently above the all-India level (JKPI, 2025). And in the border belt of Poonch and Rajouri, livelihoods are periodically disrupted by cross-border firing, restrictions on movement and the long shadow of militarisation (Husain & Manchanda, n.d.; ACAPS, 2025). Poonch district also entered the national policy conversation because of its high multidimensional poverty: NITI Aayog's first National Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) reported that about 24 per cent of its population was multidimensionally poor in 2015–16 (Greater Kashmir, 2021, reporting NITI Aayog, 2021), a share that had fallen to about 6.65 per cent by 2019–21 (NITI Aayog, 2023, as reported by Brighter Kashmir, 2023).

Surankote, a tehsil and block of Poonch district, sits in the middle of these overlapping pressures. In 2011 it had 124,755 residents living in 23,056 households, 94.6 per cent of them in rural areas, with a large Scheduled Tribe population and literacy levels that trailed the Union Territory average (Census of India, 2011, as compiled by Census India 2011 portal and Villageinfo.in). Yet there is very little published research that treats out-migration from Surankote and its neighbouring blocks as a household economic strategy in its own right. This paper attempts to fill part of that gap by assembling and analysing the best available official evidence on the economic logic of migration for rural households in Surankote, and by setting out a transparent framework and instrument for the primary work that must follow.

1.2 Problem statement

Public discussion of migration from border districts of Jammu and Kashmir is usually framed either in security terms (displacement, cross-border movement) or in terms of youth unemployment. What is missing is a household-level economic reading that asks a simpler question: why does a rural household with little land, limited wage opportunities and exposure to conflict shocks send members away to work, what does it get in return, and what does it risk? Without such a reading, policy interventions such as rural employment guarantees, skilling missions and border-area development programmes risk being designed for an imagined household rather than the one that actually exists in villages like those of Surankote.

1.3 Research questions and objectives

The study is organised around four research questions:

- **RQ1.** What structural conditions (land, labour demand, human capital, poverty and insecurity) constrain livelihoods in Surankote and adjoining areas of Poonch, and hence push household members into migration?
- **RQ2.** What do wage and employment-day differentials between the origin and likely destination labour markets imply for the economic incentive to migrate?
- **RQ3.** How do remittances and public safety nets (notably MGNREGA) function in rural household budgets, and do they complement or substitute for each other?
- **RQ4.** Is migration from Surankote best understood as a survival strategy, a risk-diversification strategy or an accumulation strategy, and what are its principal risks?

Correspondingly, the objectives are (i) to profile the demographic and economic setting of Surankote from Census and related sources; (ii) to synthesise national and regional evidence on migration, wages, remittances and rural employment; (iii) to quantify, using published parameters, the earnings gap that migration is designed to close; (iv) to assess a set of testable propositions against the evidence; and (v) to propose policy measures and a primary-survey design for validation.

1.4 Significance and scope

The paper is significant on three counts. First, it brings scattered official data (Census 2011, PLFS, NSS, NFHS-based MPI, RBI wage tables, Agriculture Census) into a single analytical narrative for a border block that is rarely the unit of analysis. Second, it distinguishes between survival and accumulation motives, a distinction that matters greatly for policy design. Third, it is explicit about what secondary data can and cannot establish, which is the necessary first step before a household survey is fielded. The geographical focus is Surankote tehsil in district Poonch; where block-level data are unavailable, district or Union Territory figures are used and clearly labelled as proxies.

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2. The Study Area: Surankote in Poonch District

2.1 Location and administrative setting

Poonch is a Pir Panjal border district of the Jammu division, bounded by the Line of Control (LoC) to the west. Its 2011 population was 476,835, and the district grew by 27.97 per cent during 2001–2011 (Census of India, 2011, as summarised in Wikipedia, 2026a). Surankote is one of its administrative tehsils and blocks. It has no railway connection, and public transport and road links depend on mountain roads that are vulnerable to landslides and snow (Wikipedia, 2026b). The district has since been reorganised into additional tehsils, including Mankote and Balakote, so 2011 tehsil totals should be read as reflecting the boundaries at the time of the Census rather than today's administrative map.

2.2 Demographic and social profile

Table 1 summarises the principal Census 2011 indicators for Surankote tehsil. Three features stand out. The population is overwhelmingly rural (94.6 per cent). It is young: children aged 0–6 make up about 18.4 per cent of the population, implying a large cohort now reaching working age. And the Scheduled Tribe population numbers 50,935, about 40.8 per cent of the total, meaning that communities traditionally associated with pastoralism and seasonal transhumance form a major share of the local economy. Household size averages 5.4 persons, so that a single earner in agriculture or casual work is supporting a comparatively large family.

Table 1: Demographic profile of Surankote tehsil, Census 2011

Indicator	Total	Rural	Urban (Surankote MC)
Population	124,755	118,012	6,743
Males	65,699	62,158	3,541
Females	59,056	55,854	3,202
Households	23,056	21,689	1,367
Population density (per sq km)	499	481	1,385
Children aged 0-6	23,011	22,005	1,006
Literate persons	62,587	57,725	4,862
Scheduled Tribe population	50,935	n.a.	n.a.
Sex ratio (females per 1,000 males)	899	899	904

Source: Census of India 2011 (Primary Census Abstract), as compiled by Villageinfo.in (2026) and censusindia2011.com (2026). Sex ratio for rural area computed as 55,854/62,158. Derived shares are the author's calculations.

2.3 Literacy and human capital

Aggregator websites often publish "literacy rates" for Surankote of about 50 per cent overall and 49 per cent in rural areas. These figures are crude rates, obtained by dividing the number of literates by the total population. The Census convention of effective literacy divides literates by the population aged seven and above. Recomputing from the counts in Table 1 gives an effective literacy rate of 61.5 per cent for the tehsil (62,587 ÷ [124,755 − 23,011]), 60.1 per cent for rural areas and 84.8 per cent for the Surankote municipal committee, the last figure matching the published Census value for the town (census2011.co.in, 2026). Figure 1 compares these with the Union Territory (67.16 per cent) and India (74.04 per cent). Rural Surankote therefore trails J&K by about seven percentage points and India by about fourteen, and the urban–rural gap of some 25 points shows that educational opportunity is sharply concentrated in the single small town.

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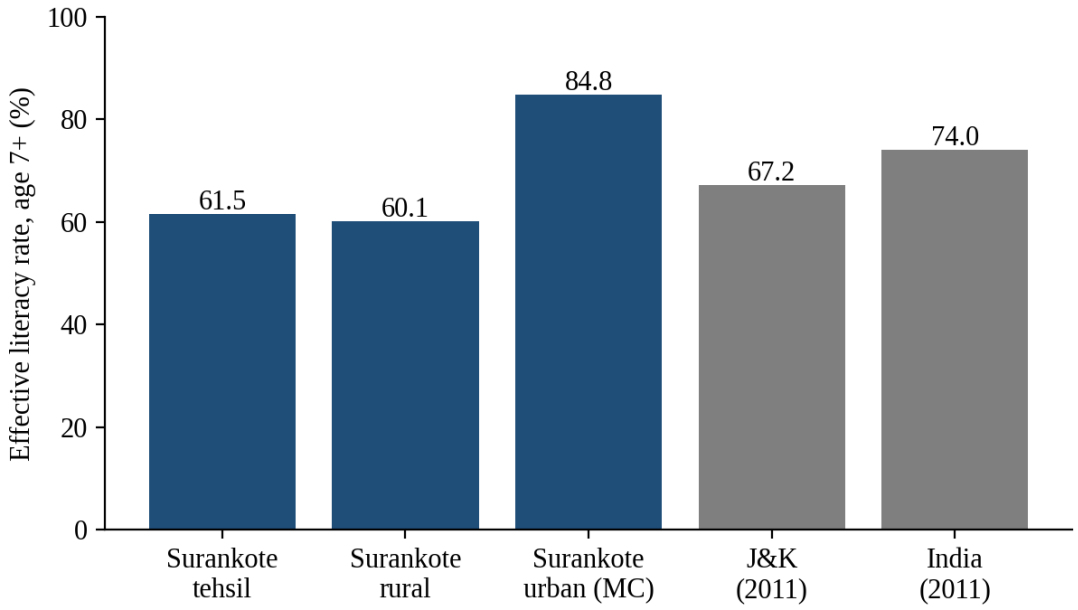


Figure 1: Effective literacy rate (age 7+), Surankote compared with J&K and India, Census 2011

Source: Author's calculations from Census of India 2011 counts (Table 1); J&K and India from Census of India 2011.

Low literacy, and the gendered gap that accompanies it (published crude rates of about 60 per cent for males and 39 per cent for females; the gap direction is robust even if levels are understated), matters for migration in two ways. It confines most migrants to unskilled manual segments of the destination labour market, where earnings are low and insecure; and it reduces the capacity of households to convert remittances into further human capital.

2.4 The local economy

The rural economy of Surankote rests on rain-fed and small-scale irrigated agriculture, livestock rearing, seasonal grazing, forest-based activity, petty trade, government and army-related services and, increasingly, casual labour. Reliable block-level income and workforce data are not published, so the paper draws on district and UT-level indicators. Two are particularly relevant. First, Poonch's rural share of about 91 per cent (as reported in MGNREGA performance studies) means that the district economy is essentially a rural one, with few urban employment nodes. Second, published sources do not point to a substantial private industrial base in the district, so formal employment is likely to be concentrated in government service, where entry is highly competitive; block-level employment data would be needed to confirm this.

2.5 Conflict and border exposure

Poonch has borne the social and economic costs of the 1947, 1965 and 1971 wars and of long periods of cross-border firing. Husain and Manchanda (n.d.) note that roughly 60 per cent of families in undivided Poonch and Rajouri found themselves divided by the Line of Control, and that some 30 villages came to straddle the fenced border. In May 2025, intense cross-LoC shelling struck the Poonch sector: ACAPS (2025) reports at least 12 civilians killed and 51 injured in the Poonch sector by 8 May, with damaged houses, displaced families sheltering in overcrowded public schools or with relatives, and severe interruption of income for informal workers, farmers and small traders. These episodes are relevant to the study not because they are the cause of migration, but because they raise the value of income sources located outside the border belt, and because they add a further layer of uncertainty to a household budget that already lacks buffers.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

3. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

3.1 Classical and neoclassical explanations

Early models treated migration as an individual response to spatial differences in opportunity. Lee's (1966) push–pull framework organised the determinants into factors at origin, factors at destination, intervening obstacles and personal characteristics. Sjaastad (1962) treated migration as an investment in human capital, in which individuals compare the discounted stream of expected earnings at destination with those at origin net of costs. Todaro (1969) and Harris and Todaro (1970) formalised the idea that rural–urban migration responds to expected rather than actual urban wages, that is, the urban wage multiplied by the probability of obtaining a job. These models predict that migration should be greatest where the wage gap is large and where origin employment is scarce, a prediction to which the analysis in Section 5 returns.

3.2 The New Economics of Labour Migration

The neoclassical approach struggles to explain why households with modest wage gaps still send members away, why migration persists when expected returns fall, and why migrants remit. The New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) shifts the unit of decision from the individual to the household (Stark & Bloom, 1985). In this view, households diversify their income sources to manage risk and to overcome credit and insurance constraints that are absent or expensive in rural areas. A household sends a member to a labour market whose returns are uncorrelated with local agricultural or conflict-related shocks, and the migrant's remittances act as an informal insurance policy. Stark and Taylor (1989) add that relative deprivation, a household's position compared with a local reference group, can also motivate migration even at similar absolute income levels. NELM is particularly suited to Surankote, where local risks (crop failure, landslides, road closures, cross-border firing) are highly covariate: everyone in the village is hit at the same time, so local risk-sharing offers little protection.

3.3 Livelihood approaches

The sustainable livelihoods literature (Chambers & Conway, 1992; Scoones, 1998) views households as combining natural, physical, financial, human and social capital into portfolios of activities. Ellis (2000) argues that diversification is the norm rather than the exception in rural developing economies and distinguishes diversification driven by necessity (distress, seasonal shortfall, shocks) from that driven by choice (accumulation opportunities). De Haan (1999) cautions against treating migration as a residual response or as a uniformly successful one; its effects depend on who migrates, how, and under what terms. This distinction between necessity and choice is central to the "survival strategy" reading tested here.

3.4 Evidence from India

Indian evidence documents a pattern of short-distance, multi-locational livelihoods. Deshingkar and Farrington (2009) show that circular migration is a major component of the livelihood portfolio of poor households in semi-arid and hill regions, often occurring alongside continued agricultural activity. Deshingkar and Akter (2009) suggest that circular migrants may number as many as 100 million, far above official counts. Srivastava (2011) documents the concentration of migrant workers in construction, brick kilns, small manufacturing and services with limited social protection. On remittances, Tumbe (2011) estimates that domestic remittances amounted to about USD 10 billion in 2007–08, that roughly 60 per cent of these were inter-state, and that about 80 per cent went to rural households. NSS data show that most rural remittance-receiving households use the money for consumption, but significant shares also use it for health (38 per cent), education (31 per cent) and debt repayment (about 10 per cent) (NSSO, 2010; Parida, n.d.).

3.5 Border, hill and conflict-affected settings

Literature specific to Jammu and Kashmir's Pir Panjal border districts is comparatively thin. Ethnographic and human-rights work (for example Husain & Manchanda, n.d.) documents how militarisation, restrictions on land close to the fence, and episodic firing shape everyday livelihoods and produce forms of displacement that are often temporary and repetitive. A general lesson from conflict-affected regions elsewhere is that violence shortens household planning horizons and increases the value of geographically diversified income; the present paper treats this as a proposition to be tested rather than as a settled fact for Surankote.

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3.6 Research gap

Three gaps emerge. There is (i) no published block-level analysis of the economics of out-migration from Surankote or comparable Poonch blocks; (ii) little work that combines wage, employment-day and remittance evidence into a household budget logic for hill border districts; and (iii) insufficient attention to the interaction between conflict risk and economic migration. The present paper addresses these by triangulating official secondary data and formalising testable propositions.

3.7 Conceptual framework and propositions

Figure 2 presents the conceptual framework. Push factors at origin and pull factors at destination are filtered through a household decision that is shaped by risk, networks and the costs of moving. Migration streams generate remittances and other returns that can raise consumption and human capital but also carry risks. Four propositions structure the empirical assessment:

- **P1 (land constraint).** Very small and fragmented landholdings make agriculture insufficient to employ or sustain the household, pushing labour out.
- **P2 (labour-demand constraint).** The binding local constraint is the number of days of paid work available, not the daily wage rate.
- **P3 (consumption smoothing).** Remittances, and to a lesser degree public works, are used mainly to smooth consumption and meet health, education and debt needs rather than to accumulate productive assets.
- **P4 (shock amplification).** Insecurity along the border raises the value of income earned outside the conflict zone and increases the tendency to diversify geographically.

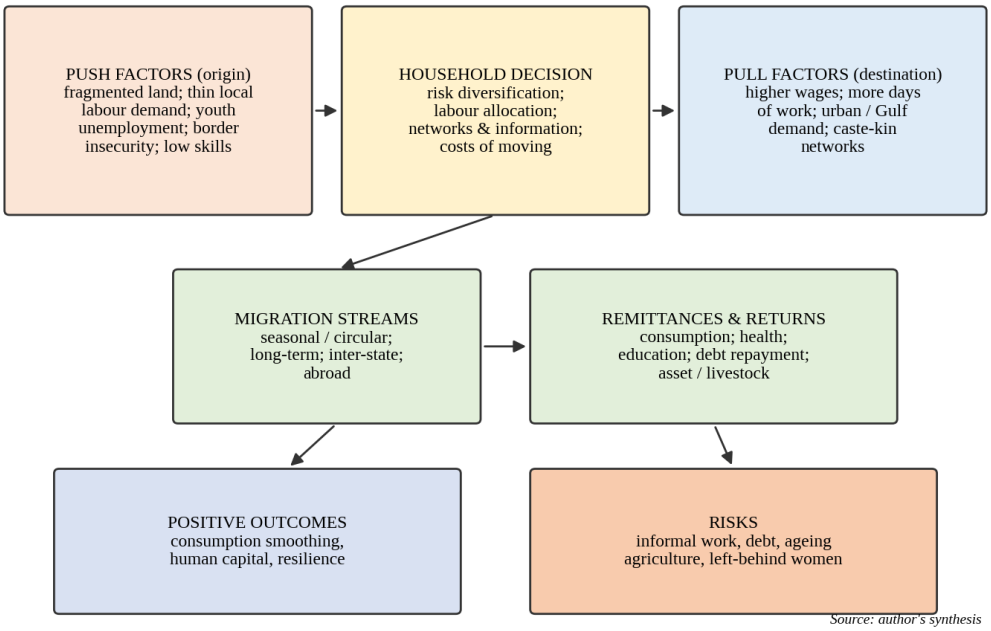


Figure 2: Conceptual framework of migration as a household survival and diversification strategy
Source: Author's synthesis adapted from Lee (1966), Stark & Bloom (1985) and Ellis (2000).

METHOD

4. Data and Methodology

4.1 Research design

The study uses a descriptive-analytical design based entirely on secondary data. **No primary household survey was conducted for this paper.** The phrase "evidence from rural households" in the title therefore refers to evidence drawn from household-based official surveys (Census, NSS, PLFS, NFHS) and administrative statistics, interpreted for the Surankote context. Where these sources report only district, Union Territory or national figures,

they are used as proxies and labelled accordingly. This choice keeps every number in the paper traceable to a published source, and it avoids presenting hypothetical field data as findings.

4.2 Data sources

Table 2: Register of data sources used

Dataset	Publisher / channel	Period	Level of detail used
Census of India, Primary Census Abstract	Registrar General of India	2011	Tehsil (Surankote)
Migration in India (PLFS)	MoSPI / NSO	2020-21	National, rural-urban, sex
NSS 64th round, Migration in India (Report 533)	MoSPI / NSSO	2007-08	National; remittance use
PLFS annual reports	MoSPI	2020-21 to 2023-24	National; J&K (secondary compilation)
National MPI	NITI Aayog (NFHS-4, NFHS-5)	2015-16; 2019-21	District (Poonch), UT
Wage rates in rural India	Labour Bureau; RBI Handbook of Statistics on Indian States	2014-15 to 2024-25	State (J&K, Kerala, Punjab, Karnataka, India)
Agriculture Census	Dept. of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare	2005-06; 2015-16	UT (J&K), India
MGNREGA wage notifications and performance	Ministry of Rural Development; secondary studies	2016-17 to 2025-26	UT (J&K)
Humanitarian situation report	ACAPS	May-June 2025	Poonch sector

Note: Several Census and PLFS figures were accessed through secondary compilations and press summaries; readers who require citation-grade precision should cross-check against the original tables listed in the References.

4.3 Analytical strategy

The analysis proceeds in five steps. First, descriptive statistics from Census 2011 are used to construct a socio-economic profile of Surankote (Section 2). Second, national migration indicators from PLFS 2020–21 and NSS 2007–08 are used to describe the general pattern of employment-related migration. Third, regional indicators (MPI, unemployment, landholding, wages, MGNREGA) are compared across J&K, India and selected destination states to identify the push and pull structure. Fourth, a parameter-based scenario calculation is used to compare annual gross earnings under different combinations of wage and days of work. This is a transparent arithmetic exercise, not an estimate of actual migrant earnings. Fifth, the four propositions are assessed against the evidence and rated as supported, partly supported or not testable with available data.

4.4 Limitations

- Block-level data on migration, workforce and income for Surankote are not available in the public domain; district and UT figures are proxies.
- Wage series for J&K rest on a small number of sample villages and may not represent remote hill blocks; state averages can mask sharp intra-state variation.
- Household surveys under-record seasonal and circular migration, so the true scale of movement is probably larger than official figures suggest.
- The scenario analysis uses assumed days of work and ignores destination living costs, recruitment costs and irregular payments; it is therefore an upper bound on net gain.

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- Causal claims are avoided. The paper identifies consistency between evidence and propositions but cannot establish causation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5. Analysis and Findings

5.1 The national pattern of employment-related migration

Table 3 and Figure 3 summarise the most recent official estimates of migration in India. The all-India migration rate in 2020–21 was 28.9 per cent, higher in urban (34.9 per cent) than in rural areas (26.5 per cent). The rate for women (47.9 per cent) is almost entirely a marriage effect: 86.8 per cent of female migrants moved for marriage. For men, by contrast, the migration rate is only 10.7 per cent overall and 5.9 per cent in rural areas, and employment-related reasons dominate. Some 49.6 per cent of male migrants moved in search of work, to take up offered work or because of job loss, and a further 17.5 per cent moved with a parent or earning member (MoSPI, 2022; PIB, 2023).

Table 3: Key migration indicators, India, PLFS 2020-21

Categories	Value (%)	Reference period
Migration rate, all persons	28.9	Jul 2020 - Jun 2021
Migration rate, rural persons	26.5	Jul 2020 - Jun 2021
Migration rate, urban persons	34.9	Jul 2020 - Jun 2021
Migration rate, males (all / rural / urban)	10.7 / 5.9 / 22.5	Jul 2020 - Jun 2021
Migration rate, females	47.9	Jul 2020 - Jun 2021
Female migrants moving for marriage	86.8	Jul 2020 - Jun 2021
Male migrants: employment-related reasons	49.6	Jul 2020 - Jun 2021
of which: in search of employment / better employment	22.8	Jul 2020 - Jun 2021
of which: to take up offered employment / proximity to work	20.1	Jul 2020 - Jun 2021
of which: loss of job / closure of unit	6.7	Jul 2020 - Jun 2021
Male migrants: moved with parent / earning member	17.5	Jul 2020 - Jun 2021
Male migrants by stream: rural-to-urban	33.5	Jul 2020 - Jun 2021
Male migrants by stream: rural-to-rural / urban-to-rural / urban-to-urban	18.0 / 20.8 / 27.6	Jul 2020 - Jun 2021

Source: MoSPI (2022), Migration in India 2020-21, as reported in PIB (2023), Rural India Online (2022) and Factly (2022).

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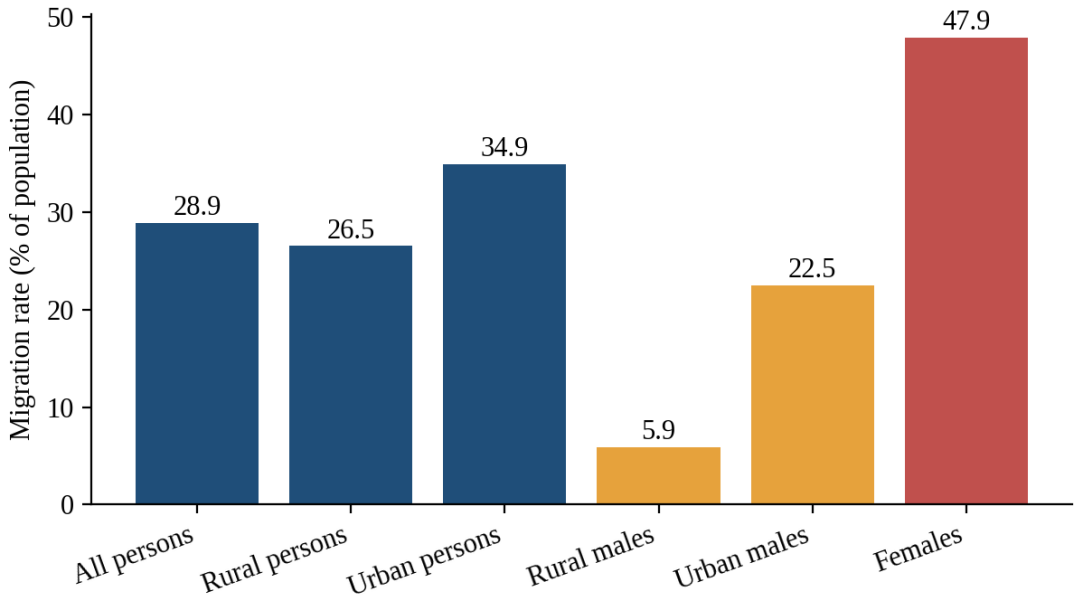


Figure 3: Migration rates in India by residence and sex, PLFS 2020-21
Source: MoSPI (2022), Migration in India 2020-21. Values as reported in Factly (2022).

Two features of these data matter for interpretation. First, the low rural male migration rate (5.9 per cent) reflects the survey definition, under which a migrant is someone whose last usual place of residence differs from the present place of enumeration. Men who leave for a few months and return home are counted as residents, not migrants. The definition therefore excludes exactly the seasonal and circular movement that most concerns hill and border households. Second, the pandemic year distorted the picture: in the post-lockdown period, urban-to-rural movement accounted for about 79.6 per cent of male migration in the survey (Counterview, 2022, citing MoSPI data), a reminder that the very destinations that pull workers are exposed to shocks that send them home.

5.2 Push factors at origin

5.2.1 Land: fragmented holdings (Proposition P1)

Figure 4 shows that the average operational holding in J&K, at 0.67 hectares in 2005–06 and about 0.59 hectares in 2015–16, is far below the national average of 1.08 hectares. In the 2005–06 census, 81.5 per cent of J&K's 1.38 million holdings were marginal (under 1 hectare), with an average size of just 0.36 hectare, and 93.8 per cent were marginal or small (Agriculture Census 2005-06, as tabulated in IISTE, n.d.; see Table 4). The average holding of 0.67 hectares is also reported by Kumar (2012). Holdings this small are unable to generate a viable annual income from staple cereals under rain-fed conditions, especially in hill terrain where cropping intensity and yields are constrained. Even after allowing for livestock and horticulture, a household with an average holding will typically have a labour surplus for much of the year. This surplus is the raw material of out-migration.

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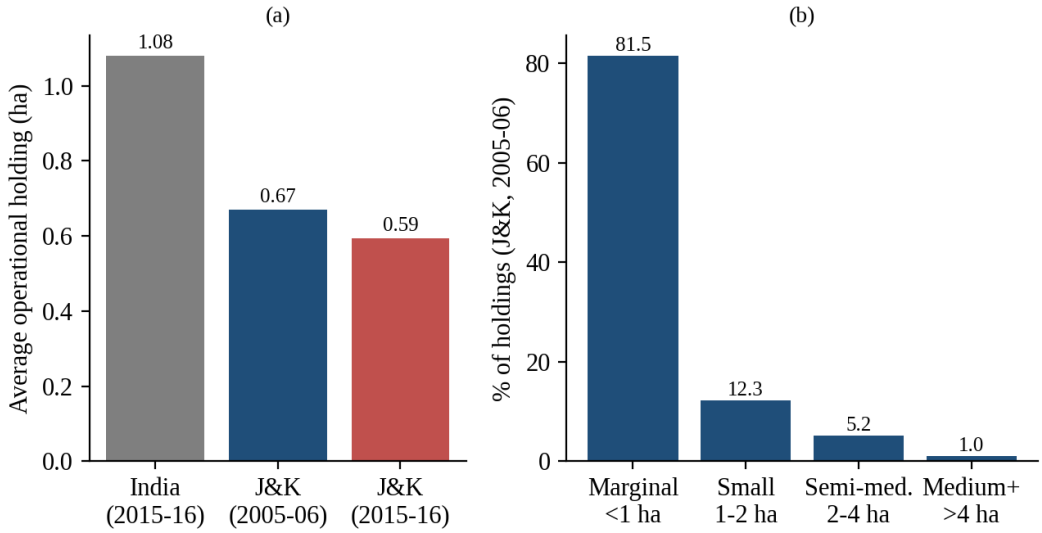


Figure 4: Landholding structure, Jammu and Kashmir compared with India

Source: Agriculture Census 2005-06 and 2015-16 (Department of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare); Kashmir Monitor (2026); Kumar (2012); IISTE (n.d.). Medium+ = medium and large holdings combined (0.99% + 0.04%).

Table 4: Distribution of operational holdings in J&K, Agriculture Census 2005-06

Size class	No. of holdings ('000)	% of holdings	Average size (ha)
Marginal (< 1 ha)	1,122.97	81.50	0.36
Small (1-2 ha)	169.17	12.28	1.40
Semi-medium (2-4 ha)	71.40	5.18	2.70
Medium (4-10 ha)	13.65	0.99	5.42
Large (10 ha and above)	0.62	0.04	19.35
All holdings	1,377.81	100.00	0.67

Source: Agriculture Census 2005-06 (J&K) as tabulated in IISTE (n.d.). Individual size-class counts were transcribed from a secondary table and should be verified against the original census report.

The direction of change is also informative. The Kashmir Monitor (2026) reports that the average operational holding fell from 0.595 to 0.593 hectares over the decade, with the growth in the family size of marginal farmers and the commercialisation of land use as contributing factors. Agricultural land is therefore not becoming more abundant per household, and, absent large gains in productivity, the labour that it can absorb is not rising. **Assessment of P1:** supported at the UT level; block-level land data for Surankote were not available.

5.2.2 Labour demand: unemployment and thin local markets (Proposition P2)

Table 5 and Figure 5 compare the PLFS unemployment rate for J&K with the all-India rate. J&K has exceeded the national rate in every year since 2020–21, and in 2023–24 it stood at 6.1 per cent against 3.2 per cent nationally. The Mission YUVA baseline report, citing PLFS 2023–24, puts J&K youth unemployment at 17.4 per cent against 10.2 per cent for India, and the overall unemployment rate at 6.7 per cent against 3.5 per cent on the current weekly status basis (JKPI, 2025). Differences between 6.1 and 6.7 per cent reflect the different activity-status definitions (usual status versus current weekly status) rather than a contradiction.

Table 5: Unemployment rate, J&K and India, 2020-21 to 2023-24 (per cent)

Region	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Jammu & Kashmir	5.9	5.2	4.4	6.1
India (usual status, age 15+)	4.2	4.1	3.2	3.2
Gap (J&K minus India, pp)	1.7	1.1	1.2	2.9

Source: J&K series from JKPI (2025), compiling PLFS annual reports; India series from MoSPI PLFS annual reports (2023-24 press note). Gap computed by the author.

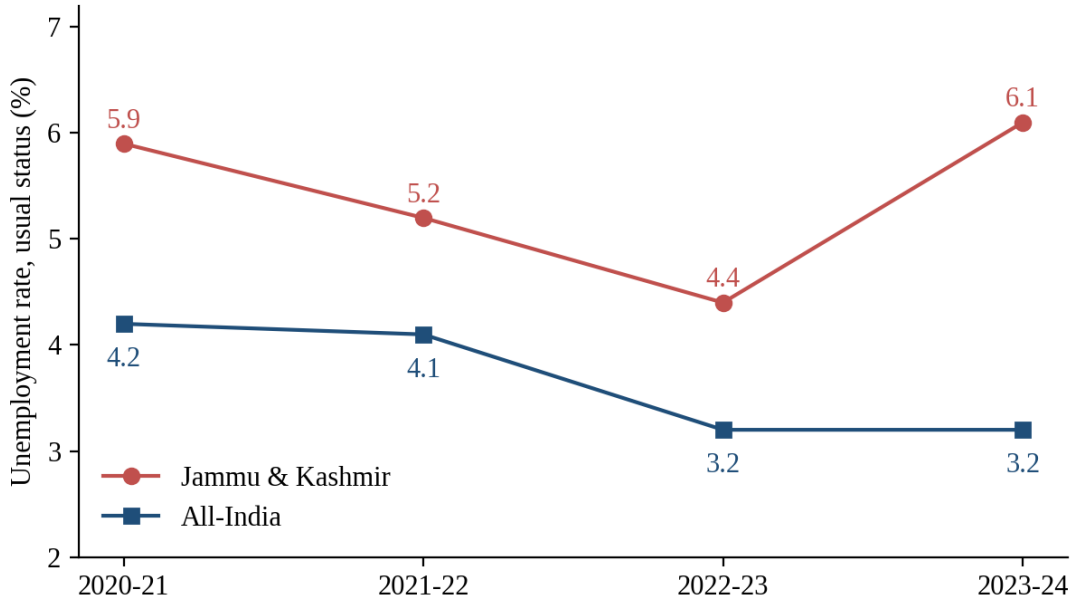


Figure 5: Unemployment rate, J&K versus India, PLFS 2020-21 to 2023-24

Source: JKPI (2025); MoSPI PLFS Annual Reports. J&K figures are as compiled in the secondary source.

For a household in Surankote, the practical meaning of these aggregates is days of paid work. Rural employment surveys show that the constraint on rural wage earners in hill districts is less the daily wage than the number of days for which it is available, because construction and agricultural work are seasonal and monsoon, snow and landslides interrupt them. This point is developed quantitatively in Section 5.3.

5.2.3 Poverty and deprivation

NITI Aayog's National MPI measures deprivation across health, education and living standards, and is the only poverty indicator published at district level for Poonch. Figure 6 shows that Poonch's headcount ratio fell from 24.27 per cent in 2015–16 to 6.65 per cent in 2019–21, a fall of about 17.6 percentage points, more than twice the fall for J&K as a whole (12.56 to 4.80 per cent) (Greater Kashmir, 2021; Brighter Kashmir, 2023; ETV Bharat, 2024). Even after this improvement, Poonch's headcount remains about 1.4 times the UT average, and in 2015–16 it was nearly twice as high.

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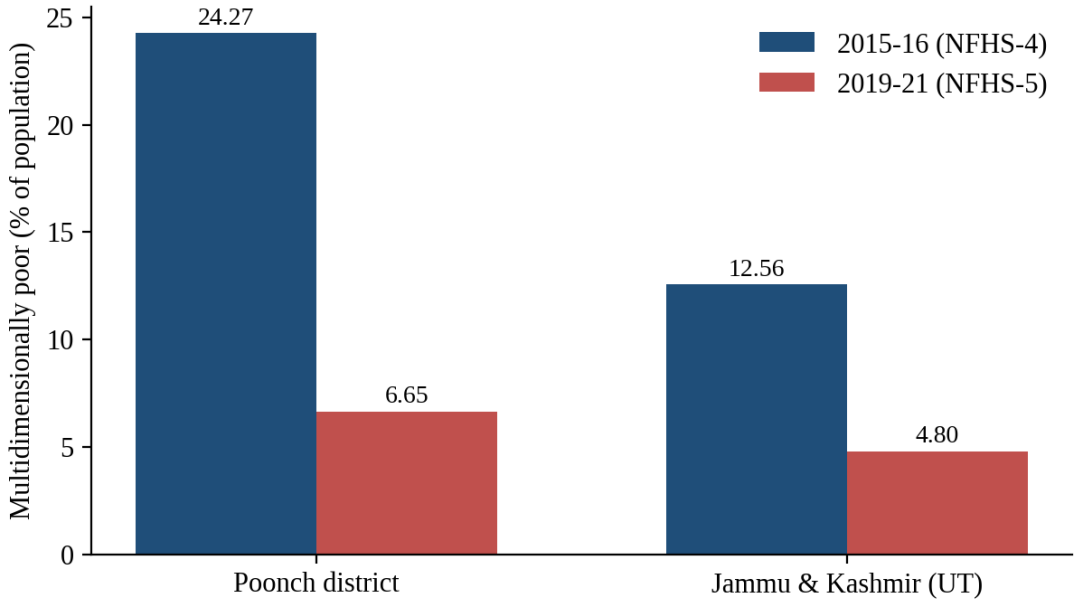


Figure 6: Multidimensional poverty headcount ratio, Poonch and J&K

Source: NITI Aayog (2021, 2023), as reported in Greater Kashmir (2021), Brighter Kashmir (2023) and ETV Bharat (2024).

The MPI is an asset-and-services measure, not an income measure. Improvements in housing, sanitation, electricity, cooking fuel and bank accounts can occur through government schemes such as PMAY-G and Swachh Bharat, which state officials credit for much of the decline (ETV Bharat, 2024). It is plausible, though not demonstrated by this data, that remittances and wage income also contributed to household asset accumulation. What the MPI does show is that, despite rapid gains in service coverage, Poonch households were among the most deprived in the Union Territory at the baseline, which is consistent with a strong distress component in migration.

5.2.4 Human capital

As shown in Section 2.3, effective literacy in rural Surankote (60.1 per cent) lags both J&K and India, and the female–male gap is wide. Limited schooling and skills reduce access to regular salaried work at destination, so that most migrants from such backgrounds enter casual manual segments. This is consistent with national evidence that migrants from poorer rural backgrounds are concentrated in construction, brick kilns and similar activities (Srivastava, 2011; Deshingkar & Farrington, 2009).

5.3 Pull factors and the earnings calculation

Table 6 reports rural daily wage rates for male construction workers from the RBI Handbook of Statistics on Indian States, based on Labour Bureau data. The most striking feature is that J&K's nominal rural wage is higher than that of most Indian states. In 2019–20 it was Rs 463.3, well above Punjab (Rs 369.5) and Karnataka (Rs 341.3), and by 2024–25 it had reached Rs 584.5, well above the all-India average of Rs 441.1. Only Kerala, at Rs 922.6, is substantially higher. A simple wage-differential model would therefore predict little economic incentive to move from J&K to most other states. Yet out-migration persists, which points to a different constraint.

Table 6: Average daily wage, rural male construction workers (Rs per day)

State / region	2014-15	2019-20	2024-25	Change 2014-15 to 2024-25
Jammu & Kashmir	413.6	463.3	584.5	+41.3%
Kerala	787.9	839.1	922.6	+17.1%
Punjab	296.2	369.5	n.a.	-
Karnataka	286.2	341.3	n.a.	-

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State / region	2014-15	2019-20	2024-25	Change 2014-15 to 2024-25
All-India	275.0	n.a.	441.1	+60.4%
J&K as multiple of all-India	1.50	n.a.	1.33	-

Source: RBI Handbook of Statistics on Indian States (Table 93, 2014-15 and 2019-20; 2024-25 edition as reported by Ambedkar Chamber, 2025). Percent changes and ratios computed by the author. n.a. = not available in the sources consulted.

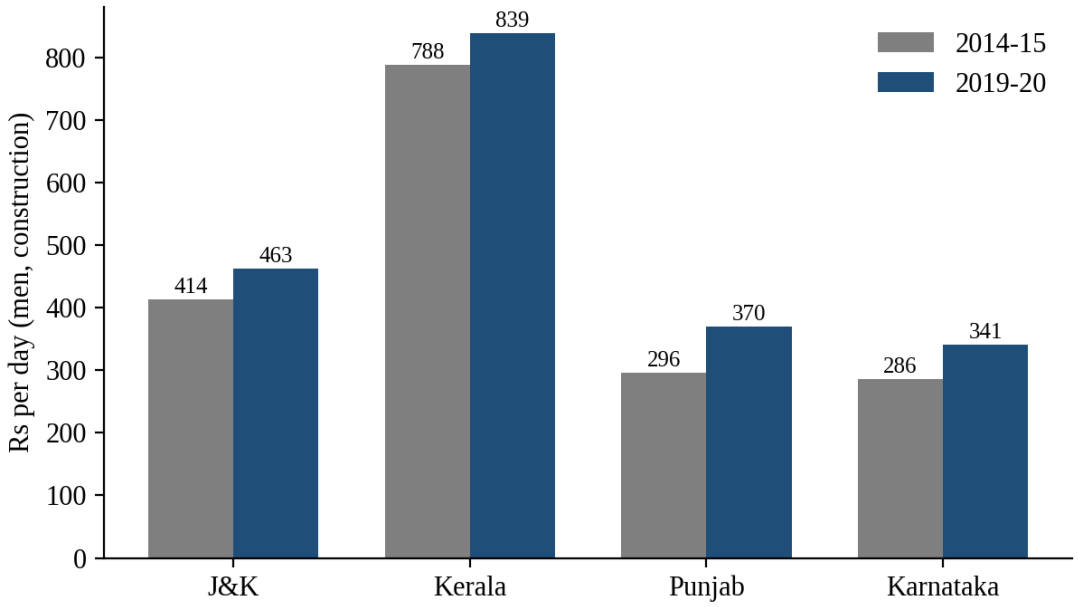


Figure 7: Rural construction wages (men), selected states, 2014-15 and 2019-20

Source: RBI Handbook of Statistics on Indian States, Table 93 (Labour Bureau data).

Two further observations follow from Table 6. First, J&K's wage advantage over the national average has narrowed (from 1.50 times to 1.33 times), because wages elsewhere have grown faster (60.4 per cent over the decade against 41.3 per cent). Second, the Labour Bureau's wage data for small states are based on a limited set of sample villages and may not represent remote hill blocks such as those of Poonch, where quoted wage rates need not translate into regular work.

5.3.1 A parameter-based earnings scenario

To test Proposition P2, Table 7 combines the published wage rates with three assumptions about annual days of work: 100 days (a locally constrained case), 180 days and 240 days (a case of near-continuous work at destination). The days are assumptions chosen to illustrate the mechanics; the wages are the published 2024–25 rural construction wage rates. The MGNREGA benchmark uses the 2024–25 J&K wage of Rs 259 and an assumed 50 days of work, which is close to the J&K average person-days per household recorded in earlier years (50.85 days in 2016–17; IJCRT, 2018).

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Table 7: Gross annual earnings by wage level and days of work (Rs)

Wage level	100 days	180 days	240 days
J&K rural wage (Rs 584.5)	58,450	1,05,210	1,40,280
All-India rural wage (Rs 441.1)	44,110	79,398	1,05,864
Kerala rural wage (Rs 922.6)	92,260	1,66,068	2,21,424
MGNREGA (Rs 259 x 50 days)	12,950	-	-

Source: Author's calculations. Wages from RBI Handbook 2024-25 (via Ambedkar Chamber, 2025); MGNREGA wage from the 2024-25 notification (Employees News, 2024). Days of work are illustrative assumptions. Figures are gross of travel, accommodation, recruitment and living costs.

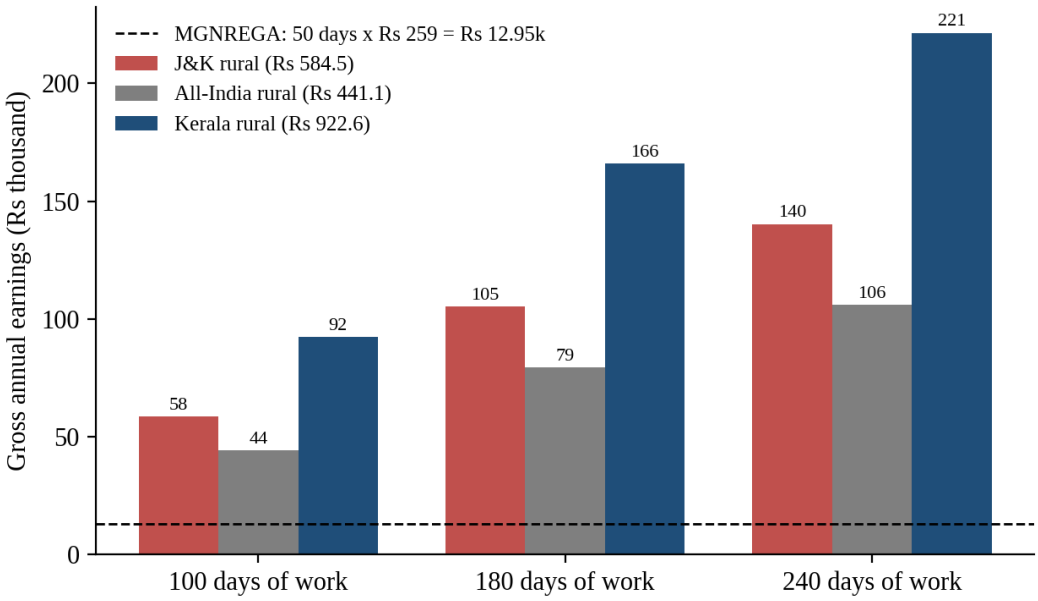


Figure 8: Illustrative gross annual earnings by wage level and days of work

Source: Author's calculations (Table 7).

The results are instructive. A worker who finds only 100 days of work per year locally at the J&K wage earns about Rs 58,450. The same worker obtaining 240 days of work at the all-India average wage would earn Rs 105,864, some 81 per cent more, despite a lower daily wage. To match Rs 58,450 at the all-India wage he would need only about 133 days of work; at the Kerala wage, about 63 days. In other words, the economic incentive to migrate in this setting is driven far more by the number of days of employment than by the wage rate. MGNREGA, at Rs 259 per day and an average of about 50 days per household, yields about Rs 12,950 per year, about 44 per cent of the daily market construction wage in J&K and roughly one-fifth of what a single migrant working 100 days at that market wage could earn. **Assessment of P2:** partly supported. The arithmetic is consistent with the proposition, but the actual days of work available in Surankote, and the actual days obtained by migrants, are unknown and must be measured in a primary survey.

5.4 Public works as a domestic safety net

MGNREGA is intended to anchor rural households by guaranteeing wage employment near home. Table 8 records its key parameters for J&K. The wage was Rs 259 in 2024–25 and rose to Rs 272 in 2025–26 (Adda247, 2025). The statutory guarantee is 100 days per household (not per worker), extended by up to 50 days in 2025–26 for disaster-affected rural areas of J&K, taking the ceiling to 150 days (Tribune, 2025). In December 2025 Parliament passed the Viksit Bharat–Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Act, which raises the statutory guarantee to 125 days and restructures funding arrangements (Parliament of India, 2025, as summarised in Wikipedia, 2026c). Since J&K has received Rs 4,174 crore under MGNREGS since 2023–24, generating some 1,263

lakh person-days for the Union Territory (KashmirPEN, 2026), the programme is a significant part of the rural economy.

Table 8: MGNREGA parameters relevant to J&K

Parameter	Value	Source
Wage rate 2024-25 (Rs/day)	259	Employees News (2024)
Wage rate 2025-26 (Rs/day)	272	Adda247 (2025)
Statutory guarantee (per household)	100 days; 150 days in disaster-affected areas, 2025-26	Tribune (2025)
Guarantee under 2025 Act	125 days	Parliament of India (2025)
Average person-days per household, J&K, 2016-17	50.85	IJCRT (2018)
Person-days generated in J&K since 2023-24	1,263.44 lakh	KashmirPEN (2026)
Central assistance to J&K since 2023-24	Rs 4,174.41 crore	KashmirPEN (2026)

Source: as indicated in the table. MGNREGA parameters change frequently; users should verify current values on nrega.nic.in.

Two limits on MGNREGA's stabilising role emerge from the earnings analysis. First, even the enhanced guarantee of 150 days at Rs 272 equals about Rs 40,800, which is below what a migrant with 100 days of work at the J&K market wage could earn (Rs 58,450) and less than half of the earnings from 240 days of work at the all-India wage (Rs 105,864). Second, because the guarantee is per household and a household typically has several adults, the per-worker entitlement is smaller than it appears. MGNREGA therefore complements migration by providing a floor for those who remain, but for most households it cannot substitute for the earnings of a full-time external worker. An early evaluation of the scheme in J&K found that Poonch spent 96 per cent of its funds and provided about 44 days per household, against roughly 20 per cent and 22 days in Kupwara (NIRD, n.d.), which suggests that the district's administrative capacity for public works is relatively strong, an asset that policy could build on.

5.5 Remittances and household welfare (Proposition P3)

No remittance data exist for Surankote. National evidence from the NSS 64th round (2007–08) is nevertheless instructive, and it is the most recent official source with a detailed remittance-use module. About 30 per cent of rural households reported at least one out-migrant among former members (NSSO, 2010). Table 9 shows how remittance-receiving households used the money. More than 90 per cent used it for household consumption; large minorities also used it for health care (38 per cent in rural areas), education (31 per cent) and debt repayment (about 10 per cent) (NSSO, 2010; Parida, n.d.; Tumbe, 2011). Annual household consumption expenditure averaged about Rs 41,000 for rural remittance-receiving households against about Rs 38,000 for all rural households.

Table 9: Use of remittances by receiving households, India, NSS 64th round (2007-08), % of households

Use of remittances	Rural	Urban
Household consumption expenditure	over 90	93
Health care	38	36
Education of household members	31	34
Debt repayment	about 10	about 13

Source: NSSO (2010), Report 533; Parida (n.d.), ISEC Working Paper 272; Tumbe (2011). Households may report more than one use, so percentages do not sum to 100. Rural consumption share reported as "over 90 per cent" in Tumbe (2011).

The pattern supports P3: remittances chiefly underwrite present consumption and human-capital maintenance, with a smaller role in investment. This is exactly what NELM predicts for households that migrate to

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manage risk rather than to accumulate. It also means that the welfare effect of migration is greater than the asset effect. A household can be lifted above a poverty threshold without acquiring the means to generate income locally, so that dependence on the migrant continues. **Assessment of P3:** partly supported at the national level; untested for Surankote.

5.6 Migration as survival, insurance or accumulation

Using Ellis's (2000) distinction between necessity- and choice-driven diversification, the evidence above suggests that migration from households in Surankote is predominantly of the necessity type: land is small, local work is limited, poverty at baseline was high and human capital is low. The Punjab and Gulf literature shows that accumulation-oriented movement, involving young educated migrants going abroad on study or skilled work visas, exists in relatively prosperous rural regions (Sharma et al., as reported in ThePrint, 2025), but such movement requires capital for visas, agents and fees that few households in a poorer hill block can command. It is likely, though untested, that a small number of better-off Surankote households finance longer-distance migration while the majority pursue short-distance seasonal work. Table 10 sets out this typology as a hypothesis for validation.

Table 10: A working typology of migration by Surankote households (hypothesis for testing)

Type	Typical migrant	Economic logic	Expected outcome
Seasonal / circular (survival)	Young to middle-aged male, low schooling	Fill slack season; repay debt; smooth consumption	Small, irregular remittances; returns to farm work
Long-duration domestic	Male with some skills	Stable wage or petty trade; family may join	Higher, regular remittances; weaker link to farm
Educational / professional	Educated youth	Access to salaried jobs unavailable locally	Human-capital gains; possible permanent exit
Distress / conflict-induced	Whole household or women and children	Escape from shelling or insecurity	Temporary; asset loss; return when safe

Source: Author's synthesis based on Ellis (2000), Deshingkar & Farrington (2009) and ACAPS (2025). Not empirical findings for Surankote.

5.7 Conflict shocks (Proposition P4)

The May 2025 shelling illustrates how a border shock intersects with an economic strategy. ACAPS (2025) found that the livelihoods of informal labourers, farmers and small traders in the affected areas were severely interrupted, and that remittance inflows in the wider Kashmir region were also disrupted by power outages. Families evacuated to public schools or to relatives; others lost homes and stock. For a household whose entire income is locally generated, such an episode wipes out weeks of earnings and consumption, with no formal insurance to fall back on. A member employed outside the border belt provides a source of income that is independent of the shock, which is the essence of geographic risk diversification. Nevertheless, no dataset links firing incidents in Surankote to changes in migration behaviour. **Assessment of P4:** not testable with available data; plausible on qualitative grounds.

5.8 Costs, risks and unintended consequences

Migration is not costless, and a survival strategy can also be a vulnerability. Five risks deserve emphasis.

- **Informality and insecurity.** Workers from poorer hill households typically enter casual, unregistered work with no social protection, so that health shocks or job loss can eliminate their earnings (Srivastava, 2011). The pandemic year showed how quickly this happens.
- **Debt.** Recruitment costs, advances from contractors and travel costs can leave migrants indebted at the start of the season. NSS data show that about a tenth of rural remittance recipients use remittances to repay debt (NSSO, 2010), which indicates that debt and migration are closely linked.

- **Pressure on remaining household members.** Male out-migration increases the workload of women, who manage farms, livestock and children with little support. Given Surankote's female literacy gap and sex ratio of 899, their capacity to take on these roles is constrained.
- **Ageing agriculture.** A 2026 study of 880 rural households in four Punjab districts found that migrant households diversify crops less than non-migrant households and that the number of migrants in a household reduces crop diversification (SN Business & Economics, 2026). Comparable effects on hill farming are plausible but unmeasured.
- **Loss of educated youth.** If educated youth leave permanently because no salaried jobs exist locally, the community loses the human capital that could support local enterprise.

6. Discussion

6.1 Assessing the propositions

Table 11: Assessment of propositions against available evidence

Proposition	Principal evidence	Assessment	Data gap
P1 Land constraint	J&K mean holding 0.59-0.67 ha vs 1.08 ha India; 81.5% marginal holdings	Supported (UT level)	Block-level land distribution
P2 Days-of-work constraint	J&K wage above India average, yet unemployment 6.1% vs 3.2%; earnings scenario	Partly supported	Actual days of work; migrant earnings
P3 Consumption smoothing	NSS: >90% consumption use; health 38%; education 31%; debt about 10%	Partly supported (national)	Surankote remittance use
P4 Shock amplification	ACAPS 2025 livelihood disruption; divided families in Poonch	Not testable	Migration response to shocks

Source: Author's assessment based on Sections 5.2-5.7.

6.2 Interpretation: why days of work matter more than wages

The clearest result of the analysis is a paradox: a region with relatively high nominal wages sends workers away. The resolution is that a wage is only half of an income: annual earnings equal the wage multiplied by the days worked. In hill and border economies, where construction seasons are short, mountain roads are closed by snow or landslides, and the local demand for labour is limited, days worked can be very low. The consequence is that a policy focus on wage rates (for instance raising the MGNREGA wage) is not enough by itself. The greater gains lie in increasing the number of reliable work days locally, for example through year-round works, all-weather roads, cold-storage and agro-processing, tourism-linked activities and stable demand for local labour.

6.3 Counter-arguments and alternative explanations

Several alternative readings should be acknowledged. First, some out-migration may be driven by aspiration rather than necessity; educated youth may reject the manual work available locally and seek salaried employment elsewhere, a pattern seen in other high-literacy regions (Kerala Migration Survey, cited in Wikipedia, 2026d). Second, improvements in Poonch's MPI between 2015–16 and 2019–21 might indicate a genuine easing of deprivation and therefore a weakening of the distress motive. Third, MGNREGA may already be reducing the need for seasonal exit for some households. All three possibilities are consistent with the evidence assembled here, and none can be excluded without micro-level data. This is why the primary survey proposed in Appendix A matters.

6.4 Implications for policy design

If migration in Surankote is chiefly a survival and diversification strategy, then policies that treat it merely as a problem to be reduced will be ineffective and possibly harmful. The more productive approach is to make migration safer and more remunerative while expanding opportunities at home. The following section sets out the measures that follow from this reasoning.

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7. Policy Recommendations

Table 12: Policy matrix linking findings to interventions

Problem identified	Proposed intervention	Evidence link and implementing agency
Too few local work days	Plan hill-appropriate works (roads, water conservation, slope protection) so that the 125-150 day guarantee is actually delivered; ensure timely wage payment	P2; Rural Development Department, Panchayats; delay compensation is already mandated under MGNREGA
Unprotected migrant workers	Register migrants on e-Shram; link to health and accident insurance; portability of ration entitlements; district migrant help-desk	Srivastava (2011); Labour Dept, Skill Dept
Low skills and literacy	Recognition of prior learning and short-course certification linked to placement in construction, hospitality and health-care assistance; women's skill programmes	PIB (2023) notes RPL/PMKVY; Skill Development Dept, ITIs
Remittances used for consumption	Encourage formal channels, savings groups and micro-enterprise finance through JKRLM/Umeed SHGs (46,811 SHGs formed since 2023-24)	P3; KashmirPEN (2026); ETV Bharat (2024)
Land fragmentation	Promote high-value horticulture, livestock and value-addition on small plots; farmer producer organisations	P1; Agriculture and Horticulture Depts
Border shocks	Community bunkers, rapid livelihood-restoration grants, crop and livestock insurance, temporary shelter and public-works employment after shelling	P4; ACAPS (2025); District administration
Data gaps	Add a migration and remittance module to block-level surveys; publish block-level PLFS-type estimates	Directorate of Economics and Statistics, J&K

Source: Author's synthesis; agency names indicate the most relevant institutions rather than confirmed responsibilities.

Four principles underlie these measures. **Safety first**: registration, insurance and legal protection for migrants reduce the costs of the strategy without discouraging it. **Days, not just wages**: interventions should be evaluated by how many additional days of decent work they create per household. **Gender awareness**: because male out-migration raises women's workload, skills, credit and extension services must reach women directly. **Data before scale**: block-level evidence should guide the design of any large programme.

8. Limitations and Directions for Further Research

The principal limitation of this paper is that it is based on secondary data and is therefore unable to measure the number of migrants from Surankote, their destinations, incomes, remittances or the households' own reasons for moving. Some source figures (Census aggregates, PLFS state values, MPI district values) were accessed through secondary compilations rather than the original statistical tables. The Census 2011 is now fifteen years old, and the 2011 tehsil boundaries no longer match the current administrative map. The earnings scenario uses assumed days of work. Finally, the paper does not attempt to estimate causal effects.

These limitations define the research agenda. A cross-sectional household survey, followed by qualitative interviews, would address them. Appendix A sets out a sampling design, a sample-size calculation and the modules of a household questionnaire that would allow each proposition in Table 11 to be tested directly. Panel data tracking

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migrant and non-migrant households across seasons would permit stronger inferences on the effect of remittances on consumption and assets, and a comparison with a non-border block would help isolate the role of insecurity.

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to examine migration as an economic survival strategy for rural households in Surankote. Drawing on Census 2011, the Periodic Labour Force Survey, NSS migration and remittance data, the National MPI, the RBI's rural wage statistics, agricultural census data and recent humanitarian reporting, it finds that the structural conditions for necessity-driven migration are firmly in place. Surankote is 94.6 per cent rural, with an average household of 5.4 persons, effective rural literacy of 60.1 per cent and a large tribal population. Landholdings in J&K are among the smallest in the country, unemployment exceeds the national rate in every recent year, Poonch's multidimensional poverty was nearly twice the Union Territory average at the 2015–16 baseline, and border communities are periodically exposed to shocks that interrupt all local income.

The most important analytical finding is that the economic incentive to migrate is not fundamentally a wage gap. J&K's rural wage is above the all-India average. What is scarce is days of work: a worker obtaining 240 days of work at the all-India average wage would earn about 81 per cent more than one with 100 days at J&K's higher wage, and a household relying on MGNREGA alone at current average days would earn only about Rs 13,000 a year. Remittances, as national data suggest, chiefly finance consumption, health, education and debt repayment. This pattern is typical of migration for risk diversification and survival, not of migration for accumulation.

The policy implication is that migration should be neither romanticised nor suppressed. Households should be helped to migrate more safely and to earn more from doing so, while the local economy is helped to offer more reliable days of work. Because the most important quantities (the number of migrants, their earnings and the days they work) remain unmeasured at block level, the immediate priority is a purpose-designed household survey. The framework, propositions and instrument in this paper provide a starting point for that work.

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