



Bihari Migration to Asia: Remittance Flows, Social Transformations, and the Preservation of Cultural Identity through Language, Religion, and Festivals

Dr. Ajeet Kumar Rai

Head, Deptt. of History, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel College, Bhabua

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51583/IJLTEMAS.2026.150800016>

Received: 16 August 2026; Accepted: 21 August 2026; Published: 03 September 2026

ABSTRACT

Migration from Bihar to Asian countries, especially Southeast Asian nations like Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore, has grown into an important transnational movement since the early 20th century. People from Bihar's rural areas-mainly as laborers, traders, and skilled professionals-have built active communities by adapting to colonial times, post-independence changes, and modern globalization.

This paper looks at the different effects of the Bihari diaspora in Asia. It focuses on remittance flows, social changes, and ways of keeping cultural identity alive through language, religion, and festivals.

Remittances from Bihari migrants play a big role in supporting families back home. Recent data shows that overseas remittances to India reached record levels, with Bihar seeing steady growth as a recipient state. These funds help improve education, healthcare, housing, and local development in rural Bihar, though they can sometimes increase differences between urban and rural areas or within communities.

Socially, migration has changed over time-from earlier labor-based movement to more skilled opportunities today. This creates mixed identities, where people blend their Bihari roots with life in host countries. In places like Thailand, second-generation Biharis often achieve better jobs while staying connected to their heritage, sometimes leading to return visits or investments in areas like Bihar. At the same time, families face issues like pressures to fit in, changes in traditions across generations, and shifts in roles for women and youth.

Cultural preservation remains strong through everyday practices. Bhojpuri language and dialects keep connections alive, while religious events like Chhath Puja and temple activities build community bonds. Festivals such as Teej, Holi, and others act as lively ways to remember home and share traditions, even helping influence local cultures in Asian cities-for example, through Bihari events in Bangkok.

Using a transnational view, this study shows how the Bihari diaspora in Asia balances economic progress with cultural strength. Migrants show "strategic hybridity," staying rooted while contributing to both home and host societies. This offers useful ideas for better diaspora policies between India and Asian countries.

Keywords: Bihari diaspora, remittances, social transformation, cultural identity, Bhojpuri language, Chhath Puja, Southeast Asia migration

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF BIHARI MIGRATION TO SOUTHEAST ASIA

Migration from Bihar to Southeast Asia forms an important strand within the broader history of Indian mobility across the Bay of Bengal. Although large-scale attention in migration studies has often focused on indentured labor to the Caribbean and Africa, intra-Asian migration has been equally significant in shaping

regional economies and cultural networks.¹ The Bhojpuri-speaking belt of Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh has historically been one of the most mobile regions of the Indian subcontinent. Economic hardship, agrarian distress, population pressure, and colonial labor demands stimulated movement outward from the late nineteenth century onward.² Over time, this migration evolved from labor-intensive plantation work to diversified occupations in trade, services, and professional sectors across Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Myanmar.

The colonial period laid the structural foundations for this migration. British imperial expansion connected eastern India with Southeast Asian port cities such as Rangoon, Penang, and Singapore through shipping routes that facilitated labor circulation.³ Workers from Bihar were recruited for plantations, dockyards, railways, and municipal services. Unlike the indentured system in the Atlantic world, migration to Southeast Asia often operated through semi-contractual arrangements or informal recruitment networks, allowing greater circulation between origin and destination.⁴ These circuits created early diasporic settlements where Bhojpuri-speaking migrants established religious associations, caste-based networks, and informal credit systems.

By the early twentieth century, Bihari migrants had begun transitioning from wage labor to small-scale entrepreneurship. Petty traders, moneylenders, and shopkeepers emerged within Indian enclaves in Bangkok and Singapore, embedding themselves in local commercial ecosystems.⁵ These developments reflected broader transformations within the Indian diaspora in Southeast Asia, where mobility was not solely exploitative but also adaptive and opportunity-driven. The interwar period and subsequent decolonization reshaped political and economic contexts, yet migration flows continued, albeit in altered forms.

Post-independence India witnessed renewed migration, though the patterns differed from colonial labor circuits. Economic stagnation in Bihar, coupled with limited industrialization and high rural unemployment, continued to generate outward mobility.⁶ Simultaneously, Southeast Asian economies underwent rapid growth, especially after the 1970s, creating demand for both semi-skilled and skilled labor. Thailand's tourism expansion, Malaysia's manufacturing sector, and Singapore's financial and service industries opened new avenues for migrants from India, including Bihar.⁷ Unlike earlier labor migration, these flows increasingly involved educated youth, small business operators, and professionals in hospitality, information technology, and retail sectors.

The persistence of migration from Bihar can be understood through the framework of cumulative causation, wherein established migrant networks reduce costs and risks for subsequent migrants.⁸ Kinship ties and village-based networks have historically facilitated movement from districts such as Saran, Siwan, and Bhojpur to Southeast Asian cities. These social networks function not only as logistical support systems but

¹ See Sunil S. Amrith (2011, pp. 12–18), who conceptualizes the Bay of Bengal as a dynamic zone of circulation linking South and Southeast Asia through labor, trade, and kinship networks rather than as a peripheral migration corridor. Similarly, Chinmay Tumbé (2018, pp. 45–67) situates eastern Indian migration within a broader history of Indian mobility, emphasizing that intra-Asian movements were numerically and economically as significant as indentured flows to the Atlantic world. Together, these works challenge the Atlantic-centered bias in migration historiography and foreground the structural importance of regional migration systems.

² P. Rangaswamy (2004, pp. 23–29) identifies the Bhojpuri-speaking districts of Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh as among the principal recruiting zones for overseas labor during the colonial period. She emphasizes that chronic land fragmentation, indebtedness, and demographic pressure combined with British imperial labor demands to generate sustained outward migration. Her analysis situates Bhojpuri mobility within broader patterns of South Asian diaspora formation, demonstrating that structural agrarian distress intersected with global labor markets to produce one of the most mobile regional populations in colonial India.

³ Chatterji & Washbrook, 2013, pp. 8–15.

⁴ Sunil S. Amrith (2011, pp. 36–42) observes that labor migration across the Bay of Bengal differed from the rigid indenture system of the Atlantic world, as it frequently involved kangani recruitment, short-term contracts, and informal mobility networks.

⁵ K. Kesavapany (2003, pp. 52–58) notes that Indian migrants in Southeast Asia, including those from eastern India, gradually diversified from plantation and dock labor into petty trade, moneylending, and retail activity.

⁶ Chinmay Tumbé (2018, pp. 210–218).

⁷ G. Pillai and K. Kesavapany (2016, pp. 17–25) They note that Singapore's financial and commercial growth, along with Malaysia's manufacturing expansion, created diversified employment opportunities beyond traditional plantation labor.

⁸ Oded Stark and David E. Bloom (1985, pp. 174–176).

also as mechanisms for preserving cultural identity abroad. The maintenance of Bhojpuri language, religious rituals, and caste associations reflects this embedded transnationalism.

Remittance flows form a central component of this migration system. India has remained the world's largest recipient of remittances for several consecutive years, with inflows surpassing 100 billion USD in recent estimates.⁹ Although much of this originates from the Gulf region, Southeast Asia contributes a measurable share, particularly from Singapore and Malaysia. Remittances to Bihar have shown steady growth, playing a vital role in rural household economies. Studies on Indian remittances demonstrate their impact on poverty reduction, improved housing, education, and healthcare access.¹⁰ In Bihar's context, remittances often finance the construction of brick houses, private schooling, agricultural inputs, and small enterprises, thereby reshaping rural social hierarchies.

However, the economic implications of remittances are complex. While they enhance household consumption and social mobility, they can also exacerbate intra-village inequalities between remittance-receiving and non-receiving families. The symbolic value of migration success sometimes reinforces status differentiation, altering caste and class dynamics within rural Bihar.¹¹ Moreover, dependence on external earnings may create vulnerabilities during economic downturns in host countries, as evidenced during the COVID-19 pandemic when global remittance flows experienced temporary disruptions.

Beyond economics, migration has profound social consequences. Generational shifts illustrate how second-generation Biharis in Southeast Asia navigate dual identities. In Singapore, for example, Indian-origin youth often achieve higher educational attainment and integrate into cosmopolitan urban cultures while retaining familial connections to Bihar.¹² In Thailand and Malaysia, Bhojpuri-speaking communities participate in local religious institutions and business networks, yet maintain ritual calendars aligned with festivals observed in Bihar. These patterns exemplify transnational social fields in which migrants remain simultaneously embedded in origin and host societies.¹³

Cultural preservation operates as a central axis of diasporic continuity. Bhojpuri, though sometimes mixed with Hindi or English, remains a language of domestic interaction among first-generation migrants. Community temples dedicated to deities such as Shiva and Durga provide ritual spaces where festivals like Chhath Puja are celebrated collectively. Chhath, in particular, serves as a powerful symbol of Bihari identity, involving collective worship of the Sun God and ritual fasting that reinforces community cohesion. Its performance in Bangkok and Singapore reflects both adaptation to local environmental conditions and a commitment to ancestral traditions. Scholars have argued that religious rituals function as mechanisms for constructing diasporic solidarity and transmitting cultural memory across generations.¹⁴

Festivals such as Holi and Teej further illustrate this cultural resilience. Public celebrations in Southeast Asian cities often attract participation from broader Indian communities and even local residents, creating intercultural exchanges. These events not only preserve tradition but also project a visible presence of Bihari culture within multicultural urban contexts. Such practices align with broader patterns within the South Asian

⁹ World Bank (2023, pp. 1–4) reports that India continues to rank as the top global recipient of remittances, with annual inflows exceeding 100 billion USD in recent years. The brief highlights the resilience of remittance transfers despite global economic uncertainty, underscoring their macroeconomic significance for migrant-sending regions.

¹⁰ See Dilip Ratha, Sanket Mohapatra, and Ani Silwal (2011, pp. 6–12) show that remittances to India significantly contribute to poverty reduction and household welfare, particularly through investments in housing, schooling, and healthcare. Their analysis underscores the developmental importance of sustained remittance inflows for economically vulnerable states.

¹¹ Badri Narayan (2018, pp. 94–102) discusses how remittances generate new forms of prestige and symbolic capital in migrant-sending villages, often deepening social differentiation.

¹² R. K. Jain (2012, pp. 133–140).

¹³ Peggy Levitt and B. Nadya Jaworsky (2007, pp. 130–134).

¹⁴ P. Rangaswamy (2004, pp. 61–68)

diaspora, where cultural expression becomes both an internal marker of identity and an external representation of heritage (Chatterji & Washbrook, 2013).¹⁵

The historical trajectory of Bihari migration to Southeast Asia therefore reveals a shift from colonial labor mobility to contemporary transnational entrepreneurship and professional migration. Economic remittances, social restructuring, and cultural preservation intertwine within this process. Migration has not resulted in cultural erasure; rather, it has generated layered identities that connect Bihar's rural landscapes with Southeast Asian urban modernity. The next section will examine in greater depth the economic dimension of remittance flows and their transformative impact on rural Bihar's social and developmental structures.

Remittance Flows and Economic Transformation in Rural Bihar

The economic dimension of Bihari migration to Southeast Asia is most visibly reflected in the flow of remittances and their transformative impact on rural Bihar. While migration from the Bhojpuri-speaking belt historically began as a labor survival strategy, it has evolved into a structured transnational economic system that links households in Bihar with labor markets in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and neighboring regions. Remittances are not merely private transfers; they represent a developmental force that reshapes household economies, social hierarchies, consumption patterns, and local investment structures.

India has consistently ranked as the world's largest recipient of remittances, receiving over 100 billion USD in recent years.¹⁶ Although states such as Kerala and Punjab have traditionally dominated remittance discourse, eastern states including Bihar have experienced increasing inflows from both Gulf countries and Southeast Asia. Singapore and Malaysia, in particular, serve as important nodes within this remittance network due to their structured labor markets and strong financial transfer systems. Migrants employed in service sectors, retail businesses, logistics, and professional fields contribute regularly to household incomes in districts such as Saran, Siwan, Gopalganj, and Bhojpur.

The theoretical explanation for remittance behavior can be found in the New Economics of Labor Migration, which views migration as a household risk diversification strategy rather than an individual decision.¹⁷ In the Bihari context, families collectively invest in the migration of one or more members, expecting that remittances will stabilize income fluctuations caused by agricultural uncertainty, limited local employment, and natural disasters such as floods. These transfers serve as informal insurance mechanisms, reducing vulnerability in rural economies characterized by structural underdevelopment.

Empirical research on remittances in India demonstrates their positive correlation with poverty reduction and improved living standards.¹⁸ In rural Bihar, remittances frequently finance the construction of permanent housing structures, replacing traditional mud dwellings with brick and cement houses. Such architectural transformations symbolize upward mobility and social prestige within village settings. Investment in education constitutes another major area of expenditure. Families receiving overseas earnings often enroll children in private English-medium schools, aspiring to break cycles of agrarian dependency. This shift contributes to gradual human capital formation and intergenerational mobility.

Healthcare access has also improved among remittance-receiving households. The availability of funds enables families to seek treatment in urban medical facilities rather than relying solely on local clinics. In certain cases, migrants invest in health insurance policies or long-term savings instruments. These changes

¹⁵ Joya Chatterji and David A. Washbrook (2013, pp. 14–20) observe that public religious and cultural festivals in diaspora settings serve dual purposes: they reinforce internal community cohesion while simultaneously asserting cultural visibility within plural societies. They argue that such performances transform tradition into a public expression of collective identity in multicultural urban contexts.

¹⁶ World Bank (2023, pp. 1–3)

¹⁷ Oded Stark and David E. Bloom (1985, pp. 175–177) argue that migration decisions are made collectively within households as a strategy to diversify income sources and minimize economic risk. Their New Economics of Labor Migration framework shifts the focus from individual wage maximization to family-level risk management and remittance obligations.

¹⁸ Dilip Ratha, Sanket Mohapatra, and Ani Silwal (2011, pp. 8–11)

indicate how transnational earnings penetrate deeply into everyday life, influencing not only consumption but also risk management and future planning.

However, remittance-driven development is uneven. While some households channel funds into productive investments such as small retail shops, transport businesses, or agricultural modernization, others prioritize consumption-oriented expenditures including ceremonies, dowries, and conspicuous spending. Scholars have observed that migration can generate what Narayan (2018) terms an “emotional economy,” wherein remittances symbolize filial duty and social recognition as much as economic necessity. The cultural expectation to remit regularly reinforces familial bonds but may also create psychological pressure on migrants working abroad.

Inequality within villages has widened in certain regions due to differential access to overseas employment opportunities. Households with established migration networks find it easier to send members abroad, while marginalized families lacking resources or contacts remain excluded. This pattern aligns with cumulative causation theory, where migration becomes self-perpetuating and selectively accessible.¹⁹ In Bihar, caste and kinship networks often determine recruitment pathways, thereby shaping who benefits from transnational mobility.

The macroeconomic implications for Bihar are complex. Remittances contribute to increased purchasing power, stimulating local markets and services. Construction activities, consumer goods demand, and educational institutions often expand in high-migration districts. Yet the absence of large-scale industrial reinvestment limits structural transformation. Unlike remittance-driven development in Kerala, where diaspora associations sometimes coordinate philanthropic projects, Bihari overseas networks in Southeast Asia remain more individually oriented. Nevertheless, there are emerging examples of collective investment in temples, schools, and community infrastructure funded by migrant associations in Singapore and Malaysia.²⁰

An important dimension of remittance flows involves digitalization and financial inclusion. Modern banking systems, mobile transfers, and formal remittance channels have reduced transaction costs and increased transparency. Singapore’s regulated financial infrastructure facilitates efficient remittance transfers to Indian banks, enhancing reliability and frequency. This contrasts with earlier decades when informal hawala systems dominated cross-border transfers. The shift toward formal channels strengthens financial records and potentially increases state-level data accuracy regarding remittance inflows.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a revealing moment in understanding the resilience of remittance systems. Although global mobility restrictions initially disrupted earnings, remittance flows to India proved surprisingly robust compared to earlier economic crises.²¹ Migrants often reduced personal consumption abroad to sustain remittance commitments to families facing rural lockdowns and income loss. This behavior underscores the embeddedness of economic obligations within transnational family structures.

Gender dynamics further complicate the economic narrative. While earlier migration from Bihar was male-dominated, contemporary flows increasingly include women employed in service sectors and small enterprises. Female migrants contribute independently to household remittances, thereby influencing decision-making power within families. Research on Indian diasporic communities indicates that women’s economic participation abroad can alter traditional gender hierarchies at home, even if changes remain gradual.²² In

¹⁹ Douglas S. Massey, Joaquín Arango, Graeme Hugo, Ali Kouaouci, Adela Pellegrino, and J. Edward Taylor (1993, pp. 448–452) explain that cumulative causation occurs when earlier migration creates social networks and material advantages that lower costs for subsequent migrants.

²⁰ G. Pillai and K. Kesavapany (2016, pp. 72–79).

²¹ World Bank (2023, pp. 2–5).

²² Peggy Levitt and B. Nadya Jaworsky (2007, pp. 138–141) observe that migrant women’s economic contributions often reshape household power relations by increasing their bargaining capacity and decision-making authority. However, they note that such transformations tend to be gradual and mediated by existing cultural norms.

some cases, remittances from female migrants finance daughters' education and delay early marriage, subtly transforming patriarchal norms.

At the same time, dependency on external earnings exposes households to vulnerabilities linked to foreign labor policies. Regulatory shifts in Malaysia or Singapore's immigration frameworks can directly affect employment stability for migrants. Economic downturns in host countries reverberate through remittance-dependent villages in Bihar. This interconnectedness highlights the transnational character of economic risk.

The economic impact of Bihari migration to Southeast Asia thus operates at multiple scales. At the household level, remittances enhance living standards, support education, and expand consumption capacity. At the community level, they reshape status hierarchies and stimulate local markets. At the macro level, they contribute to foreign exchange inflows and financial circulation. Yet these benefits coexist with inequality, consumption bias, and structural limitations in long-term development planning. Understanding this economic dimension provides a foundation for examining how migration simultaneously reconfigures social identities and cultural practices, which will be explored in the subsequent section.

Social Transformation, Generational Change, and Identity Negotiation

The economic processes generated by migration from Bihar to Southeast Asia have been accompanied by deep social transformations that extend beyond material improvement. Migration reconfigures family structures, gender relations, intergenerational aspirations, and community hierarchies both in origin villages and host societies. These transformations are neither linear nor uniform; rather, they reflect negotiated adaptations shaped by local contexts, state policies, and diasporic networks. The Bihari diaspora in Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore demonstrates how social mobility intersects with identity formation in transnational spaces.

Historically, migration from Bihar was predominantly male, with men traveling abroad while women remained in rural households managing agricultural responsibilities and family care. This gendered division reinforced patriarchal authority structures while also placing new burdens on women left behind. Studies of transnational households indicate that remittance-receiving women often gained practical control over finances, even if symbolic authority continued to reside with absent male migrants.²³ In rural Bihar, wives of overseas migrants frequently manage household expenditures, supervise children's education, and oversee agricultural land, thereby assuming expanded decision-making roles.

Over time, migration patterns diversified. Contemporary flows to Singapore and Malaysia increasingly include women engaged in service sectors, small businesses, education, and healthcare. Female migration alters traditional expectations concerning domestic confinement and economic dependence. Earnings sent by women challenge entrenched gender hierarchies, enabling greater participation in decisions regarding children's schooling, marriage arrangements, and property investments. Although patriarchal norms persist, exposure to urban Southeast Asian environments—where female workforce participation is higher—gradually reshapes social attitudes within migrant families.

Intergenerational change represents another critical dimension of social transformation. First-generation migrants often maintain strong emotional attachments to their natal villages in Bihar, expressed through regular remittances, ritual observances, and periodic return visits. Their children, however, grow up within cosmopolitan urban settings such as Bangkok or Singapore, attending local schools and engaging with multicultural peer networks. This generational shift creates layered identities characterized by dual belonging. Scholars describe such processes as the formation of "transnational social fields," where individuals participate simultaneously in multiple national and cultural contexts.²⁴

²³ Peggy Levitt and B. Nadya Jaworsky (2007, pp. 136–139) discuss how transnational family arrangements frequently expand women's managerial responsibilities over remittance income and household decision-making.

²⁴ Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Szanton Blanc (1994, pp. 6–8)

In Singapore, Indian-origin communities have developed structured cultural associations that organize language classes, religious functions, and social gatherings.²⁵ Within these frameworks, Bhojpuri-speaking families negotiate identity differently from Tamil or Punjabi groups, reflecting India's internal diversity. Second-generation Biharis frequently speak English and the host country's dominant language fluently while understanding Bhojpuri or Hindi primarily as heritage languages. Language retention becomes selective rather than comprehensive, shaped by educational priorities and social integration pressures.

Identity negotiation often occurs through symbolic practices. Participation in religious events, family weddings in Bihar, and digital communication with relatives help sustain a sense of rootedness. Social media platforms enable constant interaction between migrants and their villages, reducing emotional distance. These digital connections foster what Narayan (2018) calls an "emotional transnationalism," where memory, nostalgia, and obligation intertwine with economic exchange. Virtual participation in festivals and ceremonies allows second-generation youth to remain culturally aware even if physically distant.

Social mobility in host societies also influences identity formation. In Thailand and Malaysia, some Bihari-origin families have transitioned from small-scale trading to established business ownership, embedding themselves within local commercial networks. Educational advancement among younger generations facilitates entry into professional sectors such as finance, engineering, and information technology. Such upward mobility can lead to a redefinition of class identity distinct from the agrarian background of origin villages. Nevertheless, symbolic references to Bihar—through language, cuisine, and ritual—continue to anchor community narratives.

At the same time, social challenges accompany integration. Migrants sometimes confront racial stereotyping, bureaucratic hurdles, and fluctuating immigration regulations. These experiences shape collective consciousness, reinforcing intra-community solidarity. Community temples and associations function as support systems offering legal guidance, employment referrals, and cultural familiarity. Rangaswamy (2004) emphasizes that diasporic institutions often serve both religious and social welfare roles, especially for new arrivals navigating unfamiliar urban environments.

Marriage practices provide another lens through which to examine social transformation. First-generation migrants frequently arranged marriages within Bihar, reinforcing endogamy and caste continuity. However, second-generation individuals raised in Southeast Asia increasingly consider cross-regional or intercultural marriages. Such unions reflect broader processes of assimilation and cosmopolitan exposure. While some families embrace these changes, others express concern regarding cultural dilution. The tension between continuity and adaptation illustrates the complexity of diasporic identity.

Return migration and circular mobility further complicate social patterns. Periodic visits to Bihar reinforce kinship ties and sustain property investments. In certain cases, retired migrants choose to resettle in their native villages after decades abroad, bringing accumulated savings and new social perspectives. These returnees often introduce architectural styles, consumer goods, and educational aspirations influenced by Southeast Asian experiences. Such practices contribute to subtle modernization processes within rural communities.

Youth identity formation deserves particular attention. Children of migrants often perceive themselves as simultaneously Indian and Southeast Asian, navigating hyphenated identities that resist singular classification. Educational curricula, peer interaction, and professional ambitions orient them toward host societies, yet family narratives emphasize ancestral heritage. Jain (2012) argues that diasporic identity is dynamic and relational rather than static; it evolves through negotiation between memory and present reality. Among Bihari-origin youth, pride in cultural festivals and linguistic heritage coexists with aspirations shaped by global urban culture.

²⁵ G. Pillai and K. Kesavapany (2016, pp. 101–108)

Social stratification within diaspora communities also reflects internal diversity. Not all migrants achieve upward mobility; some remain confined to low-wage sectors vulnerable to economic fluctuations. Class differentiation within the diaspora mirrors inequalities in origin regions, demonstrating that migration does not automatically erase structural disparities. Nevertheless, collective networks often mitigate vulnerability by providing informal support mechanisms.

The cumulative effect of these transformations reveals that Bihari migration to Southeast Asia is not solely an economic phenomenon but a profound social reconfiguration. Family authority structures shift, gender roles evolve, generational identities diversify, and community institutions adapt. Migration generates hybrid identities that balance integration with continuity. These evolving social realities provide the foundation for examining in greater depth how cultural identity is preserved and reinterpreted through language, religion, and festivals, which will be analyzed in the subsequent section.

Cultural Preservation through Language, Religion, and Festivals

The social transformations accompanying Bihari migration to Southeast Asia have not resulted in cultural erosion; rather, they have generated adaptive strategies for preserving identity within transnational contexts. Cultural continuity among the Bihari diaspora is most visibly expressed through the maintenance of Bhojpuri language, religious practices, and festival celebrations. These practices function as symbolic anchors that connect migrants to ancestral landscapes while simultaneously enabling integration into multicultural host societies. Cultural preservation, therefore, operates not as rigid traditionalism but as dynamic negotiation shaped by urban modernity and generational change.

Language occupies a central position in diasporic identity formation. Bhojpuri, historically associated with the agrarian districts of western Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh, traveled with migrants across the Bay of Bengal during colonial and postcolonial movements. In Southeast Asian cities, Bhojpuri often survives as a domestic and community language rather than a formal medium of instruction. First-generation migrants tend to speak Bhojpuri within households and community gatherings, reinforcing intimacy and shared memory. However, second-generation individuals frequently adopt English, Malay, or Thai as primary languages due to schooling and professional requirements. This shift reflects broader patterns observed among diasporic communities, where heritage languages gradually transform into symbolic markers rather than everyday communicative tools.²⁶

Despite this transition, deliberate efforts to preserve linguistic heritage remain evident. Community associations in Singapore and Malaysia organize cultural programs, poetry recitations, and musical performances that incorporate Bhojpuri songs and folk traditions. These initiatives function as informal pedagogical spaces where younger generations encounter ancestral narratives. Narayan (2018) emphasizes that Bhojpuri folk culture, including songs of migration and separation, encapsulates emotional histories that resonate strongly within diasporic communities. Through performance and storytelling, migrants reconstruct memory and belonging, ensuring that language remains intertwined with identity even when daily usage declines.

Religious institutions constitute another foundational pillar of cultural preservation. Temples dedicated to Hindu deities such as Shiva, Durga, Hanuman, and Kali serve not only as sites of worship but also as community centers where social bonds are reinforced. In Bangkok and Singapore, Indian temples historically established during colonial periods continue to attract diverse Indian-origin groups, including Bhojpuri-speaking families.²⁷ Within these sacred spaces, rituals replicate those practiced in Bihar, reinforcing continuity across geographical distance.

Among these rituals, Chhath Puja occupies a particularly significant position. As a festival deeply associated with Bihar, Chhath involves rigorous fasting, riverbank offerings to the Sun God, and collective prayer. Its observance in Southeast Asia illustrates how migrants adapt ritual practices to local environments. In urban

²⁶ P. Rangaswamy (2004, pp. 285–287).

²⁷ K. Kesavapany (2003)

contexts lacking accessible riverbanks, devotees may perform ceremonies near lakes, beaches, or constructed water bodies. The ritual's disciplined structure and collective participation foster solidarity among dispersed migrants. Scholars of the South Asian diaspora argue that religious rituals often become intensified in migrant settings, acquiring heightened symbolic importance as markers of distinct identity (Chatterji & Washbrook, 2013).²⁸

Festival celebrations further reinforce communal cohesion. Holi, the festival of colors, is widely celebrated among Indian communities in Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore. For Bihari migrants, Holi carries specific cultural nuances expressed through Bhojpuri songs and regional customs. Public celebrations often extend beyond the Indian diaspora, attracting participation from local residents and tourists. This intercultural dimension transforms festivals into platforms of cultural diplomacy, showcasing Bihari traditions within broader Southeast Asian multicultural frameworks.

Teej and other regional observances similarly maintain gendered and familial traditions. Women's participation in fasting rituals, devotional songs, and communal gatherings strengthens intergenerational transmission of cultural norms. Even as women engage in professional work abroad, ritual observances create continuity with ancestral practices. Such continuity does not imply static reproduction; rather, rituals may be modified to accommodate urban schedules and diverse community compositions. The flexibility of tradition enables survival within modern contexts.

Cuisine and everyday practices complement formal festivals in sustaining cultural identity. Bihari dishes such as litti-chokha, sattu-based preparations, and traditional sweets often feature in community gatherings. Food operates as an embodied expression of memory, linking migrants to rural Bihar through taste and ritualized hospitality. In multicultural urban spaces, culinary traditions also serve as markers of distinction within the wider Indian diaspora, which encompasses diverse linguistic and regional identities.

Media and digital technology have expanded possibilities for cultural preservation. Satellite television, online streaming platforms, and social media allow migrants to access Bhojpuri films, devotional songs, and regional news from Bihar. This digital connectivity reduces cultural isolation and facilitates real-time participation in homeland events. Tumbe (2018) notes that modern migration differs from earlier periods precisely because technological advances sustain continuous communication. For second-generation youth, digital media often constitutes the primary channel through which heritage culture is encountered and interpreted.

The preservation of cultural identity among Bihari migrants also interacts with host-country multicultural policies. Singapore's officially recognized ethnic categories and celebration of cultural festivals create space for diaspora communities to express distinct traditions publicly (Pillai & Kesavapany, 2016).²⁹ In Thailand and Malaysia, Indian associations operate within broader frameworks of religious and ethnic pluralism. Such environments enable migrants to celebrate Chhath and Holi openly, reinforcing visibility and legitimacy.

However, cultural preservation faces challenges. Assimilation pressures, intermarriage, and generational language shift gradually transform traditional practices. Some younger individuals may identify more strongly with pan-Indian or global identities than with specifically Bihari heritage. Yet this transformation should not be interpreted as disappearance. Diasporic identity often evolves into hybrid forms, blending regional memory with cosmopolitan belonging. Jain (2012) argues that diaspora communities construct layered identities that resist singular definitions, embodying both continuity and change.

Cultural resilience among the Bihari diaspora thus reveals a pattern of strategic adaptation. Language, religion, and festivals operate as interconnected mechanisms that sustain emotional and symbolic ties to Bihar while enabling participation in Southeast Asian urban life. Rather than existing in isolation, these practices interact with economic mobility and social transformation, forming a comprehensive transnational identity

²⁸ Joya Chatterji and David A. Washbrook (2013)

²⁹ G. Pillai and K. Kesavapany (2016) explain that Singapore's multicultural policy framework formally recognizes ethnic diversity and provides institutional space for cultural and religious expression.

structure. The final section will integrate these economic, social, and cultural dimensions within a broader analytical framework and will present the concluding discussion.

Transnational Strategic Hybridity, Policy Implications, and Conclusion

Migration from the Bhojpuri-speaking belt has never been merely a one-way departure; it constitutes a sustained transnational process shaped by remittances, kinship networks, identity negotiation, and ritual continuity. The Bihari diaspora in Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore demonstrates how regional identities endure within globalizing environments while simultaneously contributing to host-country development.

Strategic hybridity operates at multiple levels. Economically, migrants integrate into Southeast Asian labor markets while maintaining financial obligations toward their families in Bihar. Remittance flows sustain household consumption, educational investment, and modest entrepreneurial activity in origin districts. At the same time, migrants acquire new professional skills, financial literacy, and cosmopolitan exposure. This dual economic engagement reflects what scholars describe as transnational economic fields, in which individuals participate in overlapping economic systems across national boundaries. Rather than severing ties with the homeland, migration multiplies points of connection.

Socially, hybridity manifests in evolving family structures and generational identities. First-generation migrants often retain strong attachments to village life, religious calendars, and caste-based networks. Their children, raised in urban Southeast Asia, navigate multilingual and multicultural environments that reshape aspirations and self-perception. Yet these generational differences do not necessarily produce rupture. Instead, they generate layered identities combining Bihari heritage with Southeast Asian belonging. Jain (2012) argues that diaspora communities construct flexible identities that shift according to context, emphasizing heritage in some spaces and integration in others. Among Bihari-origin youth, this flexibility allows participation in global professional networks without relinquishing symbolic ties to Bihar.

Cultural practices further reinforce this strategic balance. The observance of Chhath Puja in Bangkok or Singapore exemplifies how migrants reproduce regionally specific traditions within new ecological settings. Festivals such as Holi and Teej become public affirmations of heritage while simultaneously functioning as intercultural bridges in plural societies. Language retention, though challenged by generational shift, survives through domestic use, digital media, and community associations. These practices confirm Rangaswamy's (2004) observation that diasporic communities often intensify ritual expression as a means of preserving distinctiveness.

At the same time, hybridity implies transformation. Cultural forms adapt to urban schedules, intermarriage patterns, and institutional regulations in host countries. Bhojpuri may blend with Hindi and English; ritual sites may shift from rivers to urban parks; and community gatherings may incorporate diverse Indian regional elements. Such modifications do not signify cultural loss but rather adaptive resilience. Tumbe (2018) emphasizes that Indian migration history is characterized by flexibility and reinvention, qualities equally visible among Bihari migrants in Southeast Asia.

The interplay between migration and development also invites policy reflection. From India's perspective, remittances constitute an important source of foreign exchange and rural stability. However, maximizing developmental impact requires structured engagement beyond household transfers. Diaspora investment channels, skill-sharing initiatives, and collaborative educational programs could amplify positive outcomes in Bihar's underdeveloped districts. State governments in India have increasingly recognized diaspora potential, yet engagement with Southeast Asian Bihari communities remains comparatively limited.

Host countries similarly benefit from the contributions of Indian-origin migrants, including Biharis, in sectors ranging from retail and hospitality to technology and finance. Multicultural policies in Singapore and Malaysia have facilitated community organization and religious expression, enabling migrants to integrate without forced assimilation. Continued recognition of cultural pluralism strengthens social cohesion while allowing diaspora communities to contribute productively to national economies.

Nevertheless, vulnerabilities persist. Migrants remain sensitive to immigration policy shifts, economic downturns, and geopolitical uncertainties. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the fragility of global labor mobility even as remittance resilience highlighted enduring familial commitments. Addressing these vulnerabilities requires bilateral cooperation between India and Southeast Asian states to ensure labor protections, legal security, and financial transparency.

The Bihari diaspora's experience also contributes to broader theoretical debates in migration studies. Traditional assimilation models, which predict gradual erosion of ethnic identity, inadequately capture the persistence of region-specific practices such as Bhojpuri language use or Chhath Puja celebrations. Conversely, static models of cultural preservation overlook adaptive change. The concept of transnationalism more accurately describes the simultaneous embeddedness of migrants in multiple social spheres. Bihari migrants exemplify how economic advancement, cultural continuity, and social mobility coexist within interconnected global systems.

In examining remittance flows, social transformation, and cultural preservation together, this study highlights the interdependence of material and symbolic processes. Remittances finance education that shapes generational aspirations; social mobility influences language retention; religious festivals reinforce networks that facilitate economic cooperation. Migration thus operates as a multidimensional force restructuring both origin and destination societies.

In conclusion, Bihari migration to Southeast Asia represents a dynamic transnational phenomenon rooted in historical labor circuits and sustained by contemporary globalization. Remittance flows have improved household welfare and stimulated localized development in rural Bihar, albeit unevenly. Social transformations have reconfigured gender roles, family hierarchies, and generational identities, producing hybrid forms of belonging. Cultural practices centered on language, religion, and festivals have ensured the endurance of Bihari identity within multicultural urban environments. Through strategic hybridity, migrants balance economic progress with cultural resilience, contributing simultaneously to Bihar's rural transformation and Southeast Asia's urban dynamism. The Bihari diaspora's experience offers valuable insight into how regional identities adapt and thrive within global migration systems, underscoring the importance of inclusive diaspora policies and sustained transnational engagement.

REFERENCES

1. Amrith, S. S. (2011). *Migration and diaspora in modern Asia*. Cambridge University Press.
2. Chatterji, J., & Washbrook, D. A. (Eds.). (2013). *Routledge handbook of the South Asian diaspora*. Routledge.
3. Massey, D. S., Arango, J., Hugo, G., Kouaouci, A., Pellegrino, A., & Taylor, J. E. (1993). Theories of international migration: A review and appraisal. *Population and Development Review*, 19(3), 431–466.
4. Ratha, D., Mohapatra, S., & Silwal, A. (2011). Outlook for remittance flows 2011–2013. *Migration and Development Brief*. World Bank.
5. Stark, O., & Bloom, D. E. (1985). The new economics of labor migration. *American Economic Review*, 75(2), 173–178.
6. Kesavapany, K. (2003). *Rising India and Indian communities in East Asia*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
7. Narayan, B. (2018). *Culture and emotional economy of migration*. Routledge.
8. Tumber, C. (2018). *India moving: A history of migration*. Penguin Random House India.
9. Basch, L., Glick Schiller, N., & Szanton Blanc, C. (1994). *Nations unbound: Transnational projects, postcolonial predicaments, and deterritorialized nation-states*. Gordon and Breach.
10. Jain, R. K. (2012). *Nation, diaspora, trans-nation: Reflections from India*. Routledge.
11. Levitt, P., & Jaworsky, B. N. (2007). Transnational migration studies: Past developments and future trends. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 33, 129–156.
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.33.040406.131816>
12. Pillai, G., & Kesavapany, K. (2016). *50 years of Indian community in Singapore*. World Scientific.



13. Rangaswamy, P. (2004). *South Asian diaspora: Immigrant and refugee cultures around the world*. ABC-CLIO.
14. World Bank. (2023). *Migration and development brief*. World Bank.