



Distress Seasonal Migration is The Survival Strategies For The Working Poor of Western Odisha

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ABSTRACT

It is reported frequently by the local newspapers, local NGOs and social activists of the region that the poor seasonal migrants face innumerable problems in their place of work. The poor families of the region are allured by the labour contractors and outsider employers by giving them advance lump sum cash to work with them for a fixed period on contractual basis. However, in the worksites the migrant families comprising often husband, wife and children are forced to work for more than 12 to 14 hours a day on piece rate basis at a very subliminal wage. Many employers in the worksites do not provide them minimum basic amenities although they promise rosy picture of lodging and boarding including health services for all and education facilities for the small children. They are kept in semi-starved condition by the employers. For their hand to mouth existence the employers pay them around Rs.250 to 300 per week towards food allowance. Many when fall sick do not get any health care support. It is also alleged that the migrant worker families often return with empty cash under distress condition.

Keywords: *Distress Migration, Migrants, Landless, Marginal, Poor.*

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INTRODUCTION

Odisha continues to remain one of the most backward and poverty stricken states of India. Notwithstanding its rich mineral and natural resource base and remarkable economic advancement of the country during the last 15 years of economic liberalization and globalization, the bulk of the state's population depends on subsistence agriculture vulnerable to weather God. According to latest poverty estimates based on 68th Round of NSSO survey, incidence of poverty in Odisha was highest in the country at 32.59 per cent as against 21.92 per cent at the all-India level in 2011-12. The state has around 40 per cent depressed category population (17.1% SC and 22.8 % ST), as compared to roughly 25 per cent at the all-India level (16.20% SC and 8.20% ST) according to 2011 census.

Odisha is not only a poor state; it is also entrenched with the problem of regional backwardness at the intra-state level. The highland districts of western and southern Odisha have maximum numbers of ultra-poor category population[1]. These districts namely, Bolangir, Sonepur, Nuapada, Kalahandi, Koraput, Nawarangpur, Malkangiri, Rayagada and a part of Bargarh district comprising Padmapur subdivision contiguous to Bolangir and Nuapada districts are vulnerable to recurring droughts and famine like situation almost every year. Among the districts of southwest Odisha, except Bargarh district, the rest other eight districts of present 30 districts of the state are popularly known as the backward KBK region of Odisha named after the three old and undivided districts, Kalahandi, Bolangir and Koraput[2]. Under the scenario of eroding natural resource base such as deforestation, land degradation and overall socio-economic backwardness of people, the region faces the perennial problem of distress migration of poor families to developed pockets of the state and to other states of the country during lean agricultural season. According to 1997 survey of rural families living below the poverty line (BPL), conducted by the Panchayati Raj Department, Government of Odisha, around 72 per cent of families in the KBK region are of BPL category[3]. The KBK districts are predominantly resided by the scheduled tribes and scheduled castes categories of population. As per 1991 census, the depressed category population comprising the scheduled tribes (22.21%) and the scheduled castes (16.20%) in Odisha constituted 38.41 per cent of the total population, whereas in the KBK districts they together constituted 54.55 per cent of the total- scheduled tribes 38.74 per cent and the scheduled castes 15.81 per cent[4].

Migration the only Survival Strategy

In the work site the Pathria units are forced to work for more than 16 hours a day from early morning at 4.00/5.00 AM to 10.00/11.00 PM every day. One Pathria unit is expected to lay out a minimum of 1000 bricks a day and it is not allowed to close its day's work unless it lays out 1000 bricks. The employer gives only Rs.250 to 300 per week towards food expenditure to each of the family unit comprising four/five persons including children. It is revealed from

discussion held with the workers that a Pathria unit comprising two adults and one child worker can lay out up to 1000 to 1200 bricks a day. Accordingly the family by putting services of three persons earn up to Rs.150 to 180 a day. On this basis, a Pathria unit making 1000 bricks a day can earn around Rs.3900 to 4000 a month with four days break, as the workers are allowed one day break at the weekend to buy rations for the family from local market. It is found that a migrant family in the worksite works for around eight months from October/November to May/June. Rather in some cases due to illness some of the migrant families fail to settle their advance received from the employer at the time of migration. In such case they remain bonded to work for the same employer in the next work season also.

It has been found that after adjusting cash advance very few among the migrant families get extra cash from the employer at the time of return to their native village. Sometimes, some of them return to the village in very distress condition without any money to meet their travelling expenses. According to household survey data only 10 to 15 per cent (precisely 64 out of 598 households) of the sample households have reported to have saved some money at the time of return to their village during last season 2007-08.

The children are usually asked to dry up the raw earthen bricks in the sun, while their father and mother remain engaged in earth making and laying out of bricks. The children also keep on working up to eight hours a day.

Accordingly, if the wage is worked for a Pathria unit assuming that the unit can make only 1000 bricks a day, the actual wage comes to only around Rs.50 per day per person. This is earned by putting almost 14 to 16 hours of labour by the Pathria unit, whereas the present minimum wage rate as fixed by the government is Rs.75 per day for eight hours of unskilled work. This shows that the employer by giving cash advance to these poor migrant families ensure to extract work from them on piece rate basis effectively at a very cheaper price. Since the majority of the migrant families are either illiterate or just literate type persons with very low level of formal school education, they do not know how much virtually they get per day after putting more than 12 hours labour in the worksite every day. To many of them the actual wage received per person counts very little, as they receive advance cash in lump sum amount of Rs.10,000 to 15,000 per every Pathria unit at the minimum. The workers say after receiving bulk cash amount as advance they are able to repay their debts regularly owed to the local moneylenders at one instalment. It is reported that migration works as collateral security for them to get emergency loans both in cash and kind from the local moneylenders/traders. Also, because of cash advance many become able to perform marriage of their sons and daughters in time.

Notwithstanding this there are many darker sides of this distress migration. This becomes evidently clear from a few case studies of migrant villages and statement made by the migrant workers through focus group discussions. It is revealed from the discussions held with the migrant workers in the sample villages that they mostly migrate out to a particular brick kiln worksite through the labour contractors. It has been found from people that these labour contractors get around Rs.500 as commission from the foreign employers for every Pathria family supplied by them. Apart from that taking advantage of people's illiteracy/lower education and ignorance, the labour contractors in connivance with the employers secretly extract a portion of the piece rate wage from each Pathria family by negotiating with them to pay at a lower price than the actual prevailing piece rate wage for such brick laying work in the work sites. Even many Pathria families do not keep any record about the number of bricks made by them during the period of migration. Apart from the cash advance they accept without any query whatever amount is finally worked out as their dues, be it in positive or negative after the completion of work contract. There are many instances where the Pathria families are kept half-starved by the employers. Many do not get any medical support in case of illness. Also, if somebody dies while working, the family does not get any compensation or substantial help from the employer. The contract is usually carried out verbally between the labour contractor and Pathria family without any documentary evidence. In case of any mishap neither the employer nor the labour contractor can be made accountable for any liabilities.

Voice of the Migrant Workers

In a village more than 50 per cent of the households are landless category wage worker households. However, people hardly get 30 days of wage work in the agriculture sector. So, they regularly move out as seasonal contract migrant workers from Sep-Oct to May-June. The local labour contractors hailing from Belpada and Kantabanji recruit them to work in the brick-kiln units in far off places like Hyderabad, Bijayanagaram, Vizag, Goa, etc. Although all of them have been issued job cards to work under the NREGS, they hardly get any work under the NREGS for at least 30 days in a year. More so, the payment is delayed so much that nobody likes to work in NREGS run project. People complain that it takes more than 30 days to get their wage dues from NREGS authority. In this situation people do not have any other alternative except moving out as contract migrant workers under difficult terms and conditions set by the labour contractor[5].

We come across with the fact that they very often borrow from local moneylenders at 10 per cent rate of interest per month to meet their day to subsistence needs including social needs like marriage; death rituals etc and also for emergency medical needs. As work is hardly available for less than 30 days during agricultural season and that too at a wage rate for Rs.60 to 70 for man and Rs.40 to 50 for woman, they knock the doors of local moneylenders-cum-traders

for consumption and agricultural loan. It was found that during May-June to August-September they hardly do any wage work and regularly borrow from the local trader-cum-moneylenders to meet their socio-economic needs including food. In September-October they receive substantial amount through the local labour contractors in advance cash to work as contract migrant workers in the brick-kiln units. By working in the brick-kiln units for long years, many families have developed skill in brick moulding. For that skill the local labour contractors pay each Pathria family comprising minimum three persons Rs.20 to 30 thousand advance cash at the time of migrating out from the village and the amount is adjusted from the piece rate wage that the Pathria family gets at the rate of Rs.130 to 150 per day for laying out 1000 earthen bricks in the premise of the brick-kiln unit in their place of migration. The cash advance received by the worker families is spent immediately on repaying loans borrowed at 10 per cent rate of interest per month to local trader-cum-moneylenders. The local moneylenders keep tab on cash advance received by the migrant workers through their own men and immediately collect their dues from the loanee worker families by using muscle power. Then after repaying the loan, the worker families buy other necessities like food and clothing for the family if it is left with any surplus amount of cash. Otherwise again borrow for the subsistence of the old parents and children left out in the village. Also, soon after their return to village during rainy season the borrowing spree continues due to lack of adequate wage work and very little amount of saving in their work place. The villagers report that every time they return to the village almost empty handed or with very little amount of money. Sometimes due to illness of family members in the worksite, some of the Pathria families fail to settle the cash advance paid by the employers through the local labour contractors and keep themselves mortgaged/bonded with the employer for the next work season.

Nobody is satisfied with the NREGS work. People complain that they hardly get 25 to 30 days of wage work during a year. More so, the payment is delayed for months together. It is found that people are victims of vicious circle of debt. They borrow from the local trader-cum-moneylender at the rate of 10 per cent interest per month to meet their subsistence and other contingent needs like unforeseen medical expenses, etc. The wage worker families in the village hardly get 20 to 30 days of wage work from private source. Besides that they have scope to earn around Rs.5 to 6 thousand per annum by collecting minor forest products such as Kendu leaf, Mahua flower, tamarind, Sal seeds, etc. In this scenario, the landless families do not have any other alternative except moving out of the village for subsistence. After meeting debt payment obligation, a worker family is left with very little money to save for future contingent needs. In this way the vicious circle of poverty and debt continues together, leaving little option for the wageworker family to avoid distress seasonal migration every year. It is further reported that as the area is drought prone, even the large and medium farmers also migrate out during drought years.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS AND INTERVENTION MEASURES

It is a fact to recognize that migration of the poor families from the study region has been inevitable because of famine of employment and this in turn perpetuates poverty. The distressed poor families while moving out know fully well that living will not be rosy for them in the place of migration. They face many problems in the worksite and often return to the native village in more wretched condition, sometime by losing life of self/close kin due to overwork and occupational health hazard. It is frequently reported in leading Odia dailies such as, *The Samaja*, *Dharitri* and *Sambad* that at many worksites some among the indentured migrant workers are sometimes kept as mortgaged commodities. They are not allowed to leave the place unless and until the advance received by the migrant families is realized through work. There are also many instances where workers go on missing for years together and remain separated from the other family members while travelling by train. As many of them are illiterate and they do not know any other language except Odia and that too Sambalpuri dialect or tribal dialect, it sometimes become very difficult for them to return safely to their native village in case of any mishap. Nevertheless, the cycle of migration continues as usual, as revealed from the case history of a woman in village Dabjhar.

At present migration from the region through the labour contractor is taking place in a very informal manner without any written agreement between the Pathria unit and the foreign employer. Also, as many face with the problems of prolonged illness, physical disabilities and premature deaths due to overwork, health hazards or accident, all should be covered with health and accident insurance. Here the local CBOs/NGOs can play very useful and positive role. They can sensitize the issues and problems and make the poor and illiterate Pathria families aware of their rights through various awareness generation measures. Even the release of cash advance to all Pathria units can be made through the knowledge of local CBOs. A formal agreement can be signed between the employer and the migrant worker families with clear cut terms of reference (ToR) with local CBO workers as witness.

These two intervention measures can be initiated as short term solution of the problem by the local CBOs with the help of funding given by Sir Dorabji Trust for micro finance loans and for sensitization and awareness generation in the study region.

This apart, it is necessary to develop modern skill of the younger generation people for their sustainable living in the non-farm sector economy. As there is little scope for the traditional subsistence agriculture to provide gainful employment to

the rising number of workforce by involving local CBOs and one/two leading NGOs, many modern skills building training programme can be conducted for their absorption in rural non-farm sector economy. The modern occupations that can provide gainful living to younger generation people of the region are plumbing, electrical repairing and maintenance, automobile repairing and servicing, computer servicing and repairing. Cell phone repairing and servicing, tailoring, mason work, heavy vehicle driving, carpentry and furniture making, welding and fabrication work and the like. In all such trades a good number of people can be centrally trained by the leading NGO under the initiative of local CBOs by making proper project planning and estimation of demand for such services in the region.

Odisha economy is primarily dependent upon agriculture and there has been very little sectoral transformation for absorption of the surplus agricultural workforce in rural non-farm sector economy. However, as revealed from the present survey, agriculture is not in a position to provide minimum subsistence level living to the poor mass[6]. It is not possible to absorb the idle and disguisedly unemployed workforce in the non-farm sector economy, for sustainable living of the poor from agro-based occupations emphasis should be put on development of agricultural economy in a more sustainable manner. For this the CBOs can play proactive role in building and developing agricultural infrastructure like irrigation with crop diversification measures to enable the poor and illiterate people to increase their agriculture-based income. Under poverty alleviation programmes many rural assets and economic infrastructure like minor irrigation projects, water harvesting structures, watersheds, etc. have been built up during past many years. However, due to poor maintenance of such assets by the rural community many such assets are at present in defunct and derelict state. All such assets in the region can be revived through the CBOs by mobilizing the rural community with minimum cost[7]. If grants could be made available for all such work by the charitable trust, there is scope for development of rural agricultural economy. Other than paddy cultivation the marginal and small farmers could be motivated by the CBOs to go for cultivation of many high value non-traditional crops having high demand such as oilseeds like sunflower, soybean, mustard, groundnut; vegetables like onion, potato, garlic; and pulses like black gram, green gram, Arhar, etc. All such crops can be grown during Rabi season, as they require little water and there is little risk of crop failure or glut and wastage due to lack of market demand. There is also scope in some villages to develop horticultural crops like papaya, guava, banana, Jack fruit, cashew nut, lemon, mango, pine apple, orange, etc For the success of the programme at the village level the CBOs can form farm management society and make the poor marginal and small farmers well-aware about economic use of water and growing methods of all such crops for better yield by utilizing the services of grassroots level agricultural functionaries of state government.

There is further scope to strengthen the self-employment programmes run by the government through the CBOs. Agro-based schemes like dairy farming and goatery can be started by Self Help Groups (SHGs) formed through CBOs. These groups can be given additional funding routed through CBOs to strengthen and sustain their income generating assets like milch cows and goats for sustainable earning.

The produce from agriculture, horticulture and animal products usually does not fetch high value when sold in its raw form because of their perishable quality. Their value can be enhanced by setting up many food processing plants and cold storage facilities in the region. The major fruits such as mango, guava, citrus, banana, pineapple, papaya, orange, etc. can be converted into jams and jellies. Milk can be converted into cheese, curd, butter, ghee, etc. Similarly, Non-timber forest products can be processed into more income generating products.

Last but not the least, as the majority of the poor migrant families are involved in brick kilns work and over the years they have mastered the skill in brick moulding work, many brick kiln units can be promoted in the region with minimum capital investment. Such kilns could be established in those parts of these western Odisha districts where the land is completely barren. This would require private initiatives and the CBOs could take initiative to start such ventures as cooperative units. The bricks made in the region can easily be exported to nearby districts and states for sale at a very competitive price with a brand name.

It is important to note that there is no dearth of progressive policies and programmes and also innovative ideas at the government level to fight against hunger and poverty. However, all such programmes have so far generated limited result due to poor intervention and implementation strategy through the government machinery. In this situation it is least expected that the CBOs can achieve miracles within a very short time. Nevertheless, by taking people into confidence at the grassroots level the CBOs can play useful role in checking distress seasonal migration of poor families from this backward tribal region. By intensifying awareness generation activities at the village level and by sensitizing the issues of exploitation, harassment and sufferings faced by the migrant families at their place of work, the CBOs can play pressure group role before the labour contractors and employers to ensure minimum work comfort and social security of these hapless poor.

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