

Distress Labour Migration from Western Odisha: An Overview

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Abstract

For the past few decades, distress labour migration from western Odisha has served as a coping mechanism for impoverished households. The extremely underdeveloped areas of the KBK region, characterized by uneven development, poverty concentration, and ecological features, together with the socio-political conditions, are significant sources of distressed migrants. Despite frequent coverage in the media, a thorough investigation of the conditions and outcomes of widespread distress labour migration is noticeably lacking. Hence the present study based on macro level information looks into the aspects of distress labour migration and its underlying socio-economic factors with special focus on western belts (KBK) of Odisha. It also sheds light on the impact of the MGNREGA programme in regulating the distress labour migration from these rural areas.

Keywords: Distress, Migration, Odisha, KBK, MGNREGA

Introduction

In developing countries, distress seasonal labour migration has been a crucial livelihood diversification strategy of the poverty ridden households (Chandrasekhar and Sahoo, 2018). In fact, in drought prone rural areas of country, it is considered as one of the major coping strategies and most favoured mechanisms to diversify the non-farm activities by seasonally migrating to other areas (Rani and Dodia, 2001). Recent literature on migration studies has reflected it as a response of labouring poor to the limited livelihood opportunities and extreme condition of poverty (Deshingkar et al., 2008). Besides, many scholars argued indebtedness, landlessness, lack of livelihood options coupled with the ineffective public policies for employment and livelihood creation in the place of origin have contributed to a very high magnitude of distress seasonal migration among the rural poor over the last few decades (Meher, 2017; Nayyar et al., 2018; Rajagopalan, 2012; Srivastava, 2012).

The present study deals with the distress seasonal migrants from the drought prone regions of the western Odisha with specific focus on the backward Kalahandi Balangir Koraput (KBK) region and investigates the condition and outcomes of distress seasonal migration while examining its socio-economic factors. Moreover, it analyses the impact of the government launched employment programme in controlling the distress labour migration in these areas.

Methods of study

The present study is based on the macro level data by using secondary sources of information. Macro level of information is acquired through the rigorous literature review, governmental documents like Population census report, agricultural census report, National sample survey report; labour migration reported in the

newspaper and other media reports and report prepared by the NGOs and government organisation and so forth.

Background of the Study

The state Odisha continues to acquire its backward status in comparison to many other states of India in terms several indicators of socio-economic development. It also continues to perform poor pertaining to Human development Index, remains in the bottom five among other 25 states of the country. It stands in the position of 22 among other states which reflects Odisha's very poor standing in HDI. The state is still considered among the states which record high infant mortality rate of (55/1000) which exceeds the national average rate of (42/1000) (Economic Survey of Odisha, 2017-18). Odisha's per capita income has continually been lower than the national average, and the disparity between Odisha's per capita income and India's per capita income has expanded over the years (Economic Survey of Odisha 2020-21). The per capita income of the state highlights that the rank of Odisha is equal to Madhya Pradesh and it is just ahead of four states such as Bihar, UP, Jharkhand which indicate its bottom ranks in compare to other developed states in India. Unemployment rate in Odisha indicates that the state continues to have higher unemployment rate against the national average which stands 6.2 per cent and 4.8 percent respectively (Economic survey 2021-22). Poverty and hunger indicators reveals its position at 37 rank in 2009-10 where it is 29.8 at all India level. As far as the poverty scenario of the state is concerned, it is reported that 32.59 percentage population of Odisha are labelled as poor. Approximately 138.2 lakh population of the state are below poverty line by 2011-12 (Economic Survey of Odisha, 2017-18). A report released by Niti Aayog reveals that the poverty rate in Odisha which is 32.59 is highest against the national average which is just 21.92 percentage. The state has also the highest percentage of rural poor in the country and the rural poverty HCR Head count ratio for the state stands at 35.7 in 2011-12. Also, concerns persist regarding the poor head count ratios in Odisha based on social class and regions. In 2011-12, approximately 63.52 percent of the ST community and 41.39 percent of the SC community in rural Odisha were living below the poverty line. In 2011-12, 48 percent of the rural population in the southern region (including the KBK region) and 40 percent in the northern region of Odisha were below the poverty line. (Niti Aayog and Economic Survey 2017-18). Regional and social concentration of poverty indicates the interior Odisha particularly the backward pockets in KBK regions and the SCs and STs Population experience higher rate of poverty than others (de Haan and Dubey, 2005). In this context of socio-economic inequality within and across the region, spatial and social concentration of poverty, migration becomes the persistent phenomena in KBK belts of Odisha for a long time. Moreover, the geographical location, physiographical condition often associated with the climatic risks mainly draughts affecting the agrarian economy as well as the local livelihood from time to time, paves the way towards distress migration. Without sufficient farm and non-farm employment opportunities at the place of origin, migration becomes the primary livelihood response of distressed rural population to overcome the crisis. The south-west KBK regions of the state suffers from high chunk distress labour migration which occurs mostly in rural to rural and rural to urban streams at inter-district and inter-state level. Based on the various news report, it can be argued that the state Odisha experiences the growing number of seasonal labour migration in recent decades. And the number of migrant labourers from Odisha to other regions of the country is steadily rising. As per the report 87,000 of seasonal labourers from Odisha migrated to the other states in 2008 which rose to 1.05 lakh in 2012, 1.2 lakh in 2013, further increased to 1.35 lakh in 2014 and 1.45 lakh. 2015 Among all the migrant prone districts of western Odisha, Bolangir district has maximum number of migrants in all these

years that has supplied 45,000 of migrant workers in 2015 (The pioneer, 2017). Against this background, the present study focuses only on the distress migration scenario in the western pockets of Odisha with special reference to the KBK (Koraput, Balangir, Kalahandi) regions.

Objectives

The present study has two fold objectives

- a) To examine the various aspects of distress labour migration and its underlying factors.
- b) To assess the effectiveness of the MGNREGA in curbing the distress migration.

The Scenario of Distress Labour Migration

On the basis of macro level official statistics, it is reported that the number of short-term and circular migrants increased considerably in the country in the last few decades (Srivastava, 2011). It is argued that temporary migration in rural areas was mainly seasonal in nature largely driven out of distress situation. Number of micro-studies highlighted the increasing rate of distress seasonal labour migration in the countryside (Deshingkar et.al. 2008, Mosse et.al 1997). According to UNDP-HDR report, about 2 lakhs people from western Odisha seasonally migrates to the brick kilns of Andhra Pradesh was reported by INGO, indicating a high chunk of inter-state and inter-district labour migration in Odisha (Sahu,2017). A survey conducted by Ajeevika Bureau in Odisha covering data from 99, 523 households of 103 Panchayats reported that 30.83 per cent of the total households reported seasonal migration. Based on the primary data, the study estimates that Odisha sends more than 1.5 million of seasonal migrants, 0.58 million alone stands from Western Odisha who migrates in a distress conditions. For the western region particularly for the districts like Kalahandi, Nuapada, and Balangir, the average number of migrants is higher per Panchayat and the incident of household migration (family migration) is relatively high mainly from the Nuapada districts where men, women, and children migrate as a unit both to long distance destination for brick kiln work or short distance migration to neighbouring Chhattisgarh. The other two districts, Kalahandi and Balangir indicate a lower number of migrants per family, in compare to Nuapada district, indicating an increasing trend of single male migration from the two districts, especially in the construction sector. Since the native employment is prone to the natural disaster especially frequent drought time to time, and the opportunities are very few and confined to agricultural peak seasons, the out-migration acts as a coping strategy for a large number of households in this KBK region during periods of agricultural scarcity when employment opportunities are hardly available at the place of origin. This livelihood strategy is primarily adopted by the underprivileged and marginalized segments of the region who face multiple disadvantages due to their caste, persistent poverty, lack of land ownership, low levels of literacy and skills, heightened reliance on forest and agriculture, and overwhelming debt (Meher, 2017; Mishra, 2011; Tripathy, 2015, 2021). The number of factors such as the environmental catastrophes, economic destitution, gender or social subjugation, limited alternative job prospects, and the inability to sustain a dignified existence contributes the distress nature of labour migration from these areas.

Furthermore, the agricultural employment and workforce scenario in this region denotes significant changes over the decades, found in the recent 2011 census data. Between 2001 and 2011, the proportion of cultivators in the region decreased from 33 percent to 26.7 percent. Nevertheless, the decline of cultivators was offset by a rise in agricultural labourers, who grew from 44.24 percent in 2001 to 48.87 percent in 2011. Also, there was a decline in employment in household industries over the same decades

(Sethy, 2020). However, the increase in agricultural labourers without much employment prospects creates an adverse effect on the labouring population at many fronts. Further, owing to the depletion of forests and the encroachment of agricultural lands for the development of industries and mining activities in the regime of globalisation and industrialisation has put severe threat to the livelihood of the poor people of these areas particularly the socially vulnerable groups like scheduled caste and scheduled tribes. Besides, the land distribution system in this belt is highly unequal and majority proportion of land remains in the hands of the small section of wealthy people (Mishra, 2011). In several instances, the relocation and involuntary displacement resulted the deprivation of these marginally disadvantage population from their means of subsistence which relied on the surrounding ecosystem once upon a time (Jaysawal & Saha, 2016). To put succinctly, due to the dry nature of the region, poor agriculture, crop failure, catastrophic disasters, limited net irrigated area, forest depletion, land acquisition, involuntary displacement, landlessness and state's apathy in the development, the labouring poor are forced into severe poverty. Seeking alternative employment opportunities, many of the workers temporarily migrates to different informal sectors of work in rural or metropolitan regions and struggle to manage with a very minimum earning for their survival. In such context, the phenomena of wide scale distress labour out-migration becomes prominent from the rural belt of this regions.

The migration mostly becomes temporarily in nature and observed vibrantly in agricultural lean seasons. The poor labouring families during the time of unemployment, food scarcity and indebtedness conditions leave their place of origin and migrates to the distant work location to earn their livelihood from the labouring activities. This form of migration is popularly known as *Dadan* in native language. In most of the instances, the migration takes place to the brick kilns within and outside the state territory. The migrant families composed of husband and wife and children as a unit migrates from this regions to work in brick kiln sector. An empirical study undertaken by Mishra (2016) in six village in Nuapada, Kalahandi and Bolangir districts of Odisha, explains the course of labour migration and highlights the complexities associated with such distress seasonal out-migration. As per his study, the migration process starts in the month of September and October, during the time of Nuakhai festival, whereby the migrant families are offered lump sum amount of advance money with a promise of exchanging their labour through migration and agrees to stay at worksite for stipulated period of time, usually six to eight months, instructed by the labour contractor. Unemployment and hunger in the place of origin compels the poor labouring households to adopt the migration as 'choice under compulsion'. The process of recruitment is monitored by the chain of intermediaries between the place of origin and destination which includes contractors, subcontractors and number of agents up to the village level. Seasonal Migrants go to the specific and work destinations such as brick-kilns sectors of coastal Odisha and outside of state like Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Chennai, Bengaluru etc. Migrants also travels to irrigate belts of Odisha mainly in the districts of Bargarh and Sambalpur and the agricultural farms in Chhatisgarh as agricultural migrants labour. Construction sectors in different major cities like Chennai, Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru and Thiruvananthapuram. Also service sectors in urban economy particularly in Southern India provides ample of job opportunities for the seasonal migrants from Odisha (Mishra, 2016). Another micro study in south west regions of Odisha reveals that the seasonal distress migration primarily occurs as a result of limited employment and livelihood opportunities for households to meet its subsistence requirements, which leaves no option but raising debts to meet those requirements and the interconnection of credit market with the labour market push the labouring households to repay the debt through migration (Vijay and Sengupta, 2015). Besides,

the severe agrarian crisis at the place of origin becomes one of the major compelling factor in facilitating the labour out-migration from the countryside. It is viewed that the recurrent drought resulting in the failure of crops year after year and the consequent unemployment in the western belt of Odisha enforced a large number of people mainly the agricultural labourers to move out of the village in search of jobs. Lack of irrigation facilities, low productivity of land uncertainty of monsoon that leading to single crop of cultivation strengthens the pressure to migrate (Panda, 2017). Similar arguments also put forwarded by (Sahu, 2017) in his study in the drought affected backward villages from Bolangir district, which states that, for more than half of the total workers and about 40 percent of female workers opted for the migration as a major occupation in distress condition in semi-arid tribal areas. The study found that one third of the total household reported at least some migrating workers moved out with female workers. Landless and agricultural labours were found to migrate mostly out of the state almost on a regular basis due to inadequate local avenues and less opportunity within the state during the draught period. Migration appears to be worse and involuntary in nature and migrants with little or no education, skill, training, information, and other aspects of human capability adopt migration as distress coping strategy moved out without prior plan and mostly engaged in low return activities with poor work condition which does not necessarily improve their consumption, investment, saving and risk coping abilities.

However, in several instances, there are reports about the distressful experience of migrant labour at destination place where they are subjected to various forms of exploitation, coercion and violence. Based on various news reports, migrant labouring families are found in a situation of debt bondage in several brick kilns of Andhra Pradesh, Telengana and so on. There have been stories of everyday struggles of migrants as bonded labourers at the work place where they encounter with several challenges in numerous ways. They are subjected to harsh working conditions, inadequate housing and sanitary facilities, and restricted access to education and healthcare services. Due to their social, cultural, and linguistic isolation in the destination states, they are understood as cheap labour force with restricted ability to negotiate. Upon accepting the contract during the time of their financial scarcity, the migrants becomes deprived of their mobility and freedom of expression at destination place (Acharya, 2020). There have been savage cases of hand chopping, forceful confinement, sexual harassment, physical battering and mysterious death of migrant workers at the worksites. Recently on 6th February 2024, a news on the plight of migrant worker's family from Bolangir whose younger daughter was kept under mortgage at brick kiln in Andhra Pradesh while returning to Odisha left everyone shocked nationwide. In spite of the efforts that have been made by both the government and non-governmental organizations to facilitate safe migration, the results have not been satisfactory.

How far MGNREGA has reduced distress labour out-migration in the KBK region?

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme is considered to be the largest public works programme of the government of India which aims at enhancing the livelihood security of the people by providing guaranteed hundred days of wage employment to the rural households. The programme is designed to provide a floor to income through creating rural assets and restricting distress migration of the landless and land poor households who opt for migration as a means of coping with agrarian crisis and lack of employment in the village. In fact, Odisha is one of the few states in which the MGNREGA was initially established with the intention of ensuring employment for the marginalized in order to reduce the negative effects of drought and control the distress labour migration from the countryside. However, the

performance of MGNREGA in the western region particularly the KBK areas has been poor because of the several supply-side bottlenecks. There are series of common factors for the poor implementation and outcomes. Dreze, et al (2007) covering a total of 30 GPs, 5 from each of the blocks randomly selected from three districts- Kalahandi, Bolangir and Boudh identified the main distortions threatening to derail the MGNREGA in Odisha. As per the study it was discovered that the faulty design and erratic maintenance of muster roll and job cards along with the lack of transparency in muster rolls were the key reasons for distortions in the successful implementation of the programme. Another significant loophole identified was the contractor's direct or indirect involvement in this programme. Despite the significant potential of MGNREGA in poverty-stricken Odisha, widespread corruption poses a threat to the success of the programme. An analysis of MGNREGA's performance using secondary data indicates that the program performs better in KBK districts than in Non-KBK districts based on physical criteria such as 100 Days of Wage Employment, Person-days generated, ST and Women person-days, and financial indicators like total expenditure, total wages, average cost, and average wage rate per person per day. The region is falling behind in rural employability requirements, as indicated by the average number of days of employment given per household and the number of job cards issued (Sahoo et al., 2018). Further, workers in the area are not willing to participate in the MGNREGA program because of its poor execution in the state. Labourers are expressing dissatisfaction over the tardiness in payment and cases of fictitious worker names being added to MGNREGA's list of beneficiaries (KARMI, 2014). Uncertain and low wages incline these labourers to migrate to brick kilns, in anticipation of better payment (Deep, 2018). In this scenario, it could be state that the scheme has brought no such significant change to curb distress migration from the poverty-stricken KBK belt of the state.

Conclusion

The western regions of Odisha particularly the KBK (Kalahandi, Bolangir, Koraput) is witnessing a growing number of distress labour migration over the recent decades. Uneven development, spatial concentration of poverty and backwardness, ecological features along with the socio-political conditions of the state makes the highly backward districts of the KBK region as major source of distressed migrants. Since the region experiences a series of droughts, high unemployment, lack of livelihood opportunities, food shortages, hunger, and extreme poverty, distress migration is seen as the only viable choice of employment and a coping strategy to deal with these challenges at the place of origin. Additionally, accumulating debt at various intervals to cover household expenses during times of financial shortfall compels impoverished labouring families to resort to temporary migration in order to repay the debt. Since the migrants from these regions belongs to the poor and marginalised section and lacks the necessary human capital end up with working in unorganized and informal sectors with low wages and no job security. Also, a large section of the migrant works under highly exploitative conditions characterised by varying degrees of unfreedom and bondage, physical and mental harassment, and forceful confinement and so on. Despite of the implementation of government's employment guarantee program in the impoverished KBK districts, it has had minimal success in decreasing the migration of laborers from rural areas. Administrative indifference, corruption, and misappropriation of schemes have hindered the advancement of such initiatives and relatively failed to hold migrating labourers back at countryside.

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