International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

Development without Livelihood Security? Examining the Contradictions between Rural Employment Policies and Labour Migration in Odisha

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Abstract:
In order to prevent distress migration, employment guarantees in rural areas are often provided. Odisha offers a thorough evaluation of this claim. Seasonal outflows from the state's southern and western districts persist because of an advance-based contracting system that predates and has outlived later employment initiatives, despite the fact that the state has created new top-up programs for its most migration-prone blocks. The reasons why employment policy and labour migration continue to diverge are examined in this essay. A structured narrative review of peer-reviewed studies, working papers, and official documents identifies five contradictions: between a legal guarantee and rationed supply; between delayed public wages and immediate private advances; between wage work and debt-mediated recruitment; between a livelihood logic that sees migration as a coping or accumulation strategy and a policy logic that seeks to prevent migration; and between the promise of expanded entitlement and the fiscal recentralization brought about by the VB-G RAM G Act, 2025. The study claims that Odisha's experience reflects development without livelihood security: programs create assets and workdays but fail to address the wage, credit, and bargaining relations that require migration. The conclusion discusses the policy implications for portable entitlements, timely wage payment, credit replacement, and migrant-sensitive planning.

Keywords: Rural Employment Guarantee, Distress Migration, Odisha, MGNREGA, VB-G RAM G, Debt Bondage and Livelihood Security

1. Introduction:

India's rural employment guarantee, known as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), was passed in 2005 with the goal of reducing the desire to migrate in search of employment by providing a minimum pay job during the lean agricultural season. Twenty years later, on July 1, 2026, the Act was superseded by the Viksit Bharat-Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Act, 2025 (VB-G RAM G) (Athrady, 2026). Because of the change, it is especially important to discuss what rural employment strategy has and has not achieved for migration-prone communities. The case of Odisha is illuminating. For many years, its western and southern districts including the undivided Kalahandi-Balangir-Koraput (KBK) belt have provided seasonal workers to building sites, brick kilns,

and other unorganised industries in far-off states. According to reports from the area, landless labourers and marginal farmers leave after the autumn harvest, accept an advance from a contractor, work in kilns for about six months, and then return before the monsoon sometimes under conditions that amount to bonded labour (Thakur, 2019). In the meantime, a state-funded top-up to the employment guarantee has been implemented in thirty migration-prone blocks across nine districts, and the state government has established a high-level task group on distress migration (Department of Panchayati Raj and Drinking Water Department, Government of Odisha, 2026). Therefore, the question of whether the employment guarantee 'works' is less relevant than the coexistence of policy effort and migration. This article's main contention is that there is more to migration than just a lag in implementation. It highlights fundamental inconsistencies between the real organization of migrant lives and the formulation of rural employment strategy. Three contributions are made by the article. First, it integrates data from studies that are unique to Odisha which are frequently read separately with the larger body of Indian research on circular migration. Second, it provides an intellectual framework of five contradictions that explains how out-migration and employment provision can coexist. Third, it places the analysis in the current policy context, where Odisha must deal with distress migration within a different fiscal and temporal framework due to the switch from MGNREGA to VB-G RAM G.

This is how the article goes. The conceptual and empirical literature is reviewed in Section 2. The process is explained in Section 3. The relationship between migration and employment in Odisha is described in Section 4. The five contradictions are developed in Section 5. A livelihood-security approach's requirements are covered in Section 6, policy implications are outlined in Section 7, and limitations are noted prior to the conclusion in Section 8.

2. Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Employment guarantees as anti-migration instruments:

It is based on a labour-market premise that public works can inhibit migration. A guarantee increases the reservation wage and lessens the need to look for work elsewhere by providing local employment at a statutory rate during the slow season. Parts of this anticipation are supported by evidence from India. Imbert and Papp (2015) found that the program's phased implementation increased private sector earnings and crowded out private sector employment (Imbert & Papp, 2015). According to related research on short-term migration, the program decreased seasonal rural-to-urban mobility in states that implemented it early, and this had an impact on urban labour markets (Imbert and Papp, 2016). In other words, where the software truly produces work, the mechanism is real. That last clause has the qualification. In their research of Bihar, Dutta et al. (2014) discover that, in addition to inadequate wage payment and poor implementation capacity, the single most significant reason the system fails to achieve its anti-poverty potential is unmet demand for work. Based on this information, the guarantee is better understood as a demand-driven entitlement that is actually restricted by supply-side limitations. Delays in payment exacerbate the issue (Dutta et al., 2014). By examining salary payments in eleven states, Narayanan, Dhorajiwala, and Golani (2019) document widespread delays and demonstrate that the formula used to determine delay compensation understates what is legally owed (Narayanan et al., 2019). The consistency of salaries is just as important to households as their level when determining whether to skip a migration season.

The environments of research conducted solely in Odisha are more varied, but they are also more favourable. Based on a survey of 400 homes in Mayurbhanj and Jajpur, Parida (2016) concludes that the

job guarantee reduced a significant amount of seasonal hardship out-migration and gave impoverished and socially excluded households slack-season employment (Parida, 2016). Based on matching techniques used to a survey of 590 households in migration-prone districts, Nayak, Sahoo, and Mohanty (2023) concluded that the guarantee and its convergence measures helped minimise distress migration by raising household incomes (Nayak et al., 2023). Nayak's similar study investigates if the state's household well-being is enhanced by the convergence of rural development initiatives. When considered collectively, these studies indicate that labour programs may have an impact on Odisha's migration decisions, especially when combined with asset accumulation and income-generating convergence (Nayak et al., 2021).

2.2 Migration as livelihood strategy and as unfreedom:

Another set of research claims that migration is an essential component of rural lives rather than a disease that has to be healed. Mosse et al. (2005) demonstrate in a groundbreaking study of tribal western India that seasonal migration is essential to tribal farming families' coping and survival strategies, and that the factors causing it are as closely related to social relations of dependency and indebtedness as they are to ecological decline (Mosse et al., 2005). Migration is a defensive tactic to pay off current debts for the poorer majority of households, but also presents chances for investment and saving for a small percentage of households. Resurveying villages in Madhya Pradesh, Deshingkar et al. (2008) discovered that as urban possibilities grew, circular movement became more accumulative for impoverished households, reducing borrowing for consumption and improving debt repayment capacity (Deshingkar et al., 2008). Deshingkar contends that rather than discouraging mobility, policy should try to limit costs and increase gains because many of the risks and costs associated with migration stem from an unsupportive policy environment (Deshingkar, 2010). Unfreedom is emphasised by a critical strand at the same time. Mishra investigates how middlemen and labour contractors entice marginal cultivators and labourers into cyclical migration streams, a process entwined with agrarian change and rural poverty, based on field studies conducted in interior Odisha (Mishra, 2020). Meher investigates the socioeconomic effects of distress seasonal migration on livelihoods by looking at 225 seasonal migrant households in the Nuapada district of the KBK area (Meher, 2019). In his article on Bihar, Datta emphasises the precarity of circular migrants and how they disproportionately come from historically underprivileged Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe populations (Datta, 2020). Rao and Mitra demonstrate that the inability of state policy to promote rain-fed, low-productivity agriculture sustains low pay and seasonal movement for tribal labour from Jharkhand. Scholarships at the national level add the element of invisibility (Rao and Mitra, 2013). Rajan, Sivakumar, and Srinivasan point out that 450 million internal migrants were counted in the 2011 Census and contend that the 'crisis of mobility' during the pandemic lockdown was caused by migrants' lack of visibility in policy (Irudaya Rajan et al., 2020). Similar connections between labour migration, vulnerability, and development policy are made by Srivastava, who calls attention to the underappreciated status of migrant workers (Srivastava, 2020).

2.3 Analytical framework:

The same households are described from various perspectives in the two literary works. In the first, migration is viewed as a consequence that employment policy should lessen; in the second, it is viewed as an institution that employment policy must negotiate because it is organised by debt, contractors, and caste and tribal disadvantage. The ability of a household to meet consumption demands, absorb shocks, and avoid reliance on exploitative credit without being forced to migrate under unfavourable circumstances is referred to in this article as livelihood security. When programs grow (assets are constructed, workdays are created, budgets increase), but the credit, wage, and bargaining relationships

that necessitate migration do not change, this is referred to as development without livelihood stability. Policy-migration inconsistencies are addressed by the framework along five dimensions: entitlement, time, credit, justification, and fiscal design.

3. Methodology and Sources:

This is a desk-based, analytical investigation. It doesn't present fresh primary data. It adheres to an organised narrative review. Through searches of publisher and repository databases, as well as the reference lists of important papers, peer-reviewed research on employment guarantees and migration in India were found, with a focus on Odisha-specific material. Studies that (a) looked at the employment guarantee or its successors in connection to migration or livelihoods, or (b) offered conceptual or empirical explanations of seasonal and circular migration in tribal or underdeveloped areas of India, were kept. Only information not found in journal literature such as program provisions, official initiatives, and field descriptions was obtained from working papers, reports, and press sources; these sources are noted in the text. The present policy context is provided by official documents from the Odisha government and reports on the VB-G RAM G Act.

The method's limitations are typical of secondary analysis. The majority of studies precede the VB-G RAM G regime and vary in region, sample design, and time period. Therefore, rather than treating its claims as causal estimates, the article presents them as analytically supported hypotheses for empirical investigation.

4. The Migration-Employment Nexus in Odisha:

The western and southern regions, where agriculture is rain-fed and there is little local employment during the post-harvest season, are home to the majority of Odisha migrants. A recurring cycle is described by field reporting: labourers from districts like Bargarh and Nuapada leave after harvest to work in brick kilns in Telangana and other states, accept contractor advances and return before the rains, sometimes under conditions of debt (Thakur, 2019). According to scholarly research, labour contractors and middlemen mediate this cycle (Mishra, 2020), and in Nuapada, it affects household livelihoods in ways that go far beyond earnings (Meher, 2019). Although it has long been anticipated that the employment guarantee will break this cycle, preliminary data from the area was depressing. According to a 2011 report on migration from western Odisha, only around 61,000 of the roughly 245,000 employment card holders in Balangir were covered by the program in 2009-10, and those who were worked an average of 43 days (Baisakh, 2011). Odisha has since shifted to more focused action. In 2024, the Panchayati Raj and Drinking Water Department announced the formation of a task team on distress migration. Targeted are thirty blocks in nine districts (Bargarh, Balangir, Kalahandi, Nuapada, Koraput, Nabarangpur, Rayagada, Kandhamal, and Gajapati). The state provides an additional 200 days of labour above the 100 necessary in certain blocks, along with a top-up wage of Rs 98 per person each day. According to the same document, teams have been formed to visit both migration hotspots and destinations, the top-up has been extended until March 31, 2029, and fund transfer orders are generated at a rate exceeding 98% (Department of Panchayati Raj and Drinking Water Department, Government of Odisha, 2026). These are substantial obligations. Whether they deal with the mechanisms that genuinely force migration is the question.

5. Five Contradictions between Employment Policy and Migration

5.1 Entitlement versus rationing

The first conflict is between the guarantee's practical implementation and its legal structure. In theory, a demand-driven right to work ought to provide employment whenever households request it. The Balangir statistics above indicate a similar gap in western Odisha (Baisakh, 2011), and evidence from Bihar indicates that unmet demand is the most significant policy-relevant factor underlying underperformance (Dutta et al., 2014). Odisha's extra 200 days are an attempt to expand the entitlement, but unless work is started quickly and extensively in the particular communities from which households leave, days guaranteed on paper do not replace a contractor's offer. Rationing is not distributed equally; it disproportionately affects the poorest and most mobile households, who are also the most likely to migrate and the least able to wait for employment to be approved.

5.2 Delayed public wages versus immediate private advances:

Temporal is the second contradiction. A contractor's advance is paid in one lump sum at the time of departure. A multi-stage payment chain is used to pay public wages following the measurement of work. According to Narayanan et al, compensation for delays was underestimated and delays throughout this chain were widespread in the ten states they examined (Narayanan et al., 2019). According to the state, a high rate of fund transfer order creation is a sign of one administrative stage; it does not, by itself, indicate when money enters employees accounts. When comparing a six-month kiln contract to sporadic local labour, a household must consider both certainty and liquidity in addition to the nominal income. Even in cases where local employment is available, a debt-ridden household may choose to relocate if public pay is delayed and loans are made immediately.

5.3 Wage work versus debt-mediated recruitment

The third paradox relates to credit. According to Mosse et al., moneylenders and labour contractors are at the centre of the system, and migration from tribal western India is motivated by relationships of dependency and debt as much as ecological deterioration (Mosse et al., 2002). In Odisha, the advance serves as both a loan and a wage, binding the employee to the contractor or kiln owner until the obligation is paid off (Thakur, 2019.; Mishra, 2020). Wage flow is provided by the job guarantee, but credit is not. As a result, it only competes with the contractor on one of the two tasks that the advance completes. A household's need for a lump sum payment to settle an outstanding debt or cover an emergency cannot be met by an income that accumulates in instalments, no matter how well-paid and timely. This helps to explain why continuous migration from the most remote and indebted districts coexists with income improvements recorded in studies on the guarantee in Odisha (Parida, 2016; Nayak, Sahoo, and Mohanty, 2023). There is no contradicting evidence because the research covers a wide range of regions and households and finds effects among those whose binding constraint is income rather than debt.

5.4 Arresting migration versus governing

Rationale is the fourth contradiction. Like everywhere else, Odisha's official language presents the objective as stopping distress migration. The literature on livelihoods warns that this frame may confuse mobility with the issue. According to Deshingkar, migration is a crucial way for households in chronic poverty to manage risk, and the costs associated with it are mostly caused by the policy environment (Deshingka, 2010). According to Deshingkar et al., migration can increase bargaining power and debt repayment (Deshingkar et al., 2008). The essential distinction is added by Mosse et al., migration is defensive for the impoverished majority and accumulative for minorities (Mosse et al., 2002). The policy conclusion is that, rather than focusing on mobility, the goal should be to eliminate compulsion.

Employment opportunities and credit relief may lessen migration when it is a defensive reaction to debt. Forcing households to remain would lower wellbeing where it is a path to accumulation. The two cannot be distinguished by a single 'arresting' device. Both the precarity reported among circular migrants from underprivileged Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities (Datta, 2020; Rao and Mitra, 2013) and the invisibility of migrants in national policy (Rajan, et al., Srivastava, 2020) exacerbate the problem. Although Odisha's plan to send teams to migratory destinations is a positive step away from an origin-only strategy, documented entitlements that accompany the worker are still lacking.

5.5 Expanded entitlement versus fiscal recentralization

The new statutory framework is the subject of the fifth contradiction. In addition to revising Centre-State funding and requiring states to designate 60 days annually as peak agricultural seasons during which scheme work is not done, VB-G RAM G increases the guaranteed workdays from 100 to 125 (Statesman News Service, 2025). The majority of states split the program's costs 60:40 between the Centre and the State under the new system (Deccan Herald News Service, 2025). Through March 2029, Odisha has committed state finances to a top-up and extra days. It is an open budgetary question whether such promise, along with a higher state share, can be maintained without restricting work elsewhere. The impact of the seasonal moratorium on migration would rely on how closely the post-harvest months when departures from western Odisha start coincide with the proclaimed peak seasons. There hasn't been an evaluation yet because the Act only went into effect in July 2026; these are analytical claims that should be tested in future studies, not conclusions.

6. Discussion: From Employment Provision to Livelihood Security

The five paradoxes provide insight into how programs can expand without reducing migration when taken as a whole. They also show how important yet inadequate the employment guarantee is. Current research in Odisha indicates that the guarantee raises incomes and can reduce distress migration among households where income is the main restriction when combined with asset creation and convergence (Parida, 2016; Nayak, Sahoo, and Mohanty, 2023). Qualitative and anthropological research indicates that households engaged in contractor networks and debt are bound by liquidity and bargaining power (Mosse et al., 2002; Mishra, 2020). Therefore, livelihood security as defined in this article necessitates an integrated package that includes: timely and dependable work in the villages that require it; wage payment that is predictable enough to compete with an advance; credit options that eliminate the contractor's monopoly on lump-sum financing; and protection that follows workers to their destinations. Programs that solely provide the first component will continue to coexist exploitatively with migration.

7. Policy Implications

The analysis has five implications.

1. Start working before you leave, not after. Demand registration campaigns should be scheduled before contractor recruiting, and village-level work plans for migration-prone blocks should be approved prior to the post-harvest season.
2. Calculate the employee's remuneration. Compensation for delays should be computed for the entire payment chain, and monitoring should measure the time between task completion and wage credit in addition to the creation of payment orders (Narayanan et al., 2019).

3. Replace the advance. The contractor's advance may be replaced by emergency credit, seasonal advances secured by future earnings, or community-based savings. Prior to scaling up, the design should be tested in pilot blocks.
4. Control migration rather than just stopping it. Building on the hotspot and destination visits Odisha has started, registration, portable benefits, and destination-side protection will alleviate the expenses that Deshingkar (2010) attributes to the regulatory environment.
5. Declare agricultural pauses while keeping migratory schedules in mind. In accordance with VB-G RAM G, local migration time should be used to inform peak season notifications so that the pause does not fall during the months when households make their departure decisions.

8. Limitations:

This research is a secondary analysis. The Odisha research it draws from vary in district, sample, and time period, and it does not examine causal claims. A number of the inconsistencies are hypotheses that require empirical support, particularly those pertaining to VB-G RAM G. Future research should integrate administrative wage-payment data, qualitative studies on contractor-worker relations, and household panels in KBK blocks.

9. Conclusion

The experience of Odisha demonstrates that labour migration and the availability of rural jobs are not straightforward replacements. Employment programs preserve the credit, wage-timing, and bargaining relationships that support contractor-mediated migration, but they can increase incomes and, in certain situations, decrease distress migration. Development without livelihood security is characterised by the five conflicts (entitlement and rationing, public wages and private advances, wage work and debt, halting and controlling migration, and expanding entitlement and fiscal recentralization). Odisha's task as VB-G RAM G replaces MGNREGA is to shift from counting workdays to establishing the conditions that allow households to decide whether to relocate.

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