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Migrant Workers from Murshidabad and the Construction Sector: A Study of the Predominance of Masonry Occupation

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Abstract

Labour migration has become an important livelihood strategy among rural households in economically less developed regions of India. Murshidabad district of West Bengal represents an important case of labour out-migration, where limited non-farm employment, low agricultural wages, landlessness, underemployment, recurrent environmental stresses and inadequate industrial development have encouraged male workers to seek employment outside the district. Among the different occupations undertaken by migrants, construction work has emerged as one of the most important destinations, with masonry occupying a particularly significant position. This paper examines the growing predominance of masonry among migrant workers from Murshidabad and explores the socio-economic, skill-related, institutional and destination-specific factors responsible for this occupational concentration. The study is based on secondary sources, including Census publications, Periodic Labour Force Survey reports, academic studies and existing research on migration from Murshidabad and West Bengal. The analysis suggests that masonry is not simply an unskilled occupation but represents an accessible semi-skilled trade through which migrants can progressively improve their earning capacity and occupational status. Existing evidence on Bengali migrant construction workers in Kerala, for example, identifies masonry as a major occupation and demonstrates substantially higher earning opportunities than those available in many areas of origin. Social networks, previous work experience, contractor-mediated recruitment, skill transfer, and the continuous demand for construction labour at destination locations reinforce this occupational specialization. The paper argues that the predominance of masonry reflects an interaction between structural distress at origin and labour-market opportunities at destination. Formal skill certification, social security, occupational safety and migrant-support mechanisms could improve the long-term livelihood outcomes of these workers.

Keywords: Labour migration, migrant workers, construction sector, masonry, occupational mobility.

1. Introduction

Internal labour migration is a key part of India's social and economic as well as spatial transformation. People move from areas of relatively poor employment and low pay to areas where there is a demand for labour in construction, manufacturing, services and so on. It's not simply a movement of people; it is an economic strategy that households adopt in an attempt to diversify their sources of income, increase their

income and manage economic insecurity. Migration and livelihoods have been the subject of a great deal of discussion in the development literature. De Haan (1999) contended that migration had to be incorporated into the analysis of rural livelihoods and poverty as mobility could be a significant household strategy. De Haas (2010) went on to stress that migration needed to be understood as the product of the interaction between aspirations and capabilities in a particular set of structural and geographical circumstances. Migration is thus simultaneously a product of the constraints at the point of origin and the opportunities at the point of destination. Murshidabad provides an important geographical setting for examining these processes. The district has historically experienced substantial seasonal and temporary male migration. Earlier research by Rogaly and Rafique (2003) specifically documented seasonal migration from Murshidabad and showed how migration was connected with the livelihood strategies of land-poor households. More recent research has shown that workers from Murshidabad increasingly migrate in search of employment and income, with construction emerging as an important occupational destination. Ansary and Rath (2021) found that landlessness, low wages, lack of employment, household pressure and the weakening of traditional livelihoods were among the important factors encouraging migration from Murshidabad. They also observed a shift of workers towards building and construction activities. Masonry in the construction sector is a case in point. The mason has a more specialised trade than the general construction helper. Masonry therefore has the potential to offer migrants higher wages, greater occupational leverage and the prospect of becoming a subcontractor or small contractor. The evidence from Bengali migrant construction workers in Kerala is particularly telling. Reja and Das (2021) found that 45.7% of the Bengali migrant construction workers they surveyed were masons and a further 2.3% were masons working as mason-cum-contractors. This clearly indicates that masonry has become a significant element of the occupational structure of the migrant workers from West Bengal. The paper looks at why masonry has become such a prominent occupation among the migrants from Murshidabad and how this occupational specialisation is linked to migration, livelihood diversification and the construction economy.

2. Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of the study area:

1. To look at the link between labour migration out of Murshidabad and employment in the construction sector.
2. To work out the key factors which account for the dominance of masonry among the migrant workers.
3. To look at the role of skills, social networks and contractors in enabling masonry migration.
4. To look at the economic pros and cons of masonry work.
5. To assess the impact of construction related migration on household livelihoods in Murshidabad.
6. To propose policy options for improving the working and socio-economic conditions of migrant masons.

3. About Study Area



MAP 1: Study area

Murshidabad district in central West Bengal, India is a district of considerable historical significance, with a rich heritage, a riverine landscape, a traditional silk industry and a wide range of cultural resources. The Bhagirathi River plays a significant role in shaping the settlement patterns, economic activities, and historical development of the region. Major heritage attractions include Hazarduari Palace, the Katra Mosque, Motijheel and the Nizamat complex. It is also an area of considerable importance in the study of migration and livelihoods.The district is characterised by economic constraints, a dearth of local employment and a reliance on traditional occupations which has led to both seasonal and long term migration to other parts of India. Migration is of course a key factor in the understanding of household livelihoods, labour mobility and regional inequalities.Murshidabad is therefore a key geographical setting in which to study the interplay between heritage tourism, employment generation, migration and sustainable regional development. The study also looks at the potential of tourism to provide an avenue for economic diversification and to improve local livelihoods and thus reduce migration as a result of economic distress.

4. Research Questions

The study addresses the following questions:

1. Why do the workers from Murshidabad increasingly opt for construction work as their mode of migration?
2. Why is masonry such a prominent trade amongst the migrant construction workers?

3. What role do skill acquisition, prior experience and migrant networks play in occupational choice?
4. Does masonry offer better prospects in terms of earning than general building labour?
5. What are the main vulnerabilities of migrant masons?
6. How could government policy improve the livelihood security of migrant construction workers?

5. Methodology

The study is a **descriptive and analytical one based largely on secondary data. The primary** sources are the Census of India, the District Census Handbook of Murshidabad, the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) reports, and a range of journal articles and published studies on migration and construction workers. The District Census Handbook for Murshidabad from the Census of India 2011 has detailed demographic, socio-economic and occupational data at the district and lower administrative levels. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) is the more up to date source of information on employment and labour market conditions in India; the Annual PLFS 2023-24 is a key contemporary source for understanding the evolution of the employment structure. The paper makes extensive use of prior empirical work. Ansary and Rath (2021) have district level evidence on out migration from Murshidabad. Reja and Das (2021, 2022) have evidence on migrant construction workers from West Bengal to Kerala. The 2022 Reja and Das study was based on a field survey of 300 migrant construction workers from West Bengal and found a high level of masonry work. The analysis is qualitative and interpretive rather than a statistical estimate of the total migrant population. The findings are therefore best viewed as an interpretative synthesis of the available evidence rather than as a replacement for a new household survey.

6. Socio-Economic Context of Migration from Murshidabad

Murshidabad's migration pattern has to be understood in the context of its rural economy. A large section of the population is engaged in agriculture and/or informal employment. There is very limited industrialisation and very few opportunities for regular non-farm employment which is why there is such a high degree of underemployment and seasonal unemployment. Ansary and Rath (2021) identified a number of push factors for labour out-migration from Murshidabad: landlessness, lack of employment opportunities, low wages, household level economic pressure and the waning of traditional occupations. They also found that the migrants tended to move from agricultural employment into construction and into petty business. Historically migration from Murshidabad was linked to seasonal agricultural labour. Rogaly and Rafique (2003) looked at the migration flows out of Murshidabad and showed how land-poor households used migration as a means of obtaining cash income. The modern migration system is increasingly linked with urbanisation and development. As towns and cities grow, there is an increasing demand for masons, helpers, plumbers, electricians, painters and all the other sorts of people you'd need in a construction project. That in turn creates an occupation for the rural worker who either has the traditional building skills or has acquired the requisite skills through having migrated previously.

Thus, a transition can be observed:

Agricultural/low-paid local employment → migration → construction labour → skill acquisition → masonry → mason-cum-contractor/contractor

This career progression is of course particularly relevant in terms of explaining the dominance of masonry.

7. Why Construction Becomes a Major Destination Occupation

The construction industry has a number of features which make it attractive to migrant workers.

Firstly construction projects are geographically dispersed. Unlike factory work which is largely confined to a few industrial areas, construction work is spread right across the country. New houses, new apartments, new roads, new offices, new schools, new hospitals and all the other types of construction project provide employment in all sorts of locations.

Secondly the entry barriers are quite low. A person without any formal qualifications can get into the industry as a helper and work their way up to gain the requisite skills. This is particularly pertinent in the case of rural migrants who may not have had the benefit of a formal education.

Thirdly, the nature of the work allows for occupational mobility. You can start off as an unskilled helper, learn bricklaying and the associated trades, become a mason and then go on to become a head mason, a subcontractor or indeed a contractor.

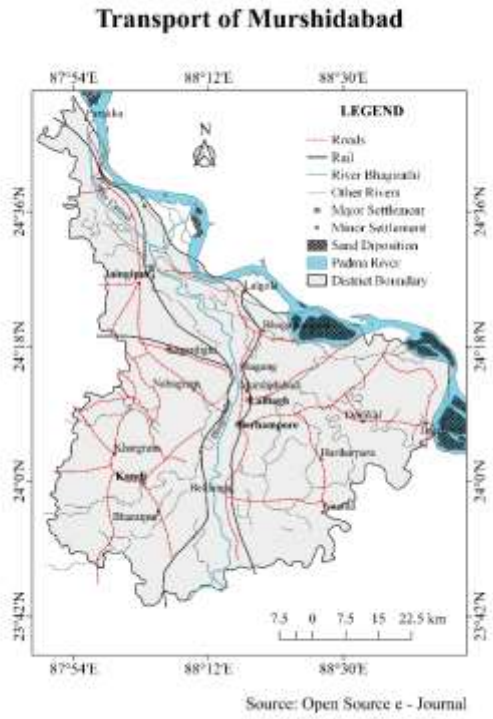
Fourth, construction employment is very much reliant on migrant networks. People typically get the information about work through their relatives, friends, village contacts and previous co-workers. Reja and Das (2019) highlight the importance of social networks in facilitating labour migration within India.

Finally destination areas can offer considerably higher wages. Research into Bengali migrant construction workers in Kerala found that the average daily wage of the group in question was considerably higher than the wages available in many of the places of origin.

8. The Predominance of Masonry Occupation

8.1 Masonry as a Semi-Skilled Occupation

The key explanation for the dominance of masonry is the nature of the skill. It lies somewhere in between the unskilled and the highly specialist. You can in fact get into masonry through an informal apprenticeship, by watching and by doing, without necessarily going through any formal vocational education at all.



MAP 2: Transport of Mushidabad

Bricklaying, wall building, plastering, measuring, squaring up and all the other practical bits of building work require a degree of skill. Once you've got that skill you can command a premium over a general helper. Evidence from Kerala is to this effect. Reja and Das (2021) report that in their sample of Bengali migrant construction workers 45.7% were masons, 52% were construction labourers/helpers and 2.3% were masons who also acted as contractors. The conclusion is that masonry is not a marginal activity in migrant construction employment.

8.2 Skill Acquisition through Migration

Migration itself can be a mechanism of skill formation. A worker might start off as a construction helper and then learn bricklaying from the more experienced workers on site. After a number of such migration cycles the worker will be sufficiently skilled to command a higher rate of pay or to take on work on their own.

This creates a cumulative process:

Migration → exposure to construction work → informal training → skill acquisition → higher wage → repeated migration → occupational specialisation.

The ILO has also stressed the importance of skills and work experience in the construction sector and the link between construction employment, migration and employability.

8.3 Role of Social Networks

Social networks are key to the spread of masonry work. The new migrant will typically be joining an existing work group at the destination. The existing migrants will provide information on contractors, wages, accommodation and work.

The network also serves to reduce the risk of migration. Rather than going into an unfamiliar labour market on your own, you might be introduced to a contractor by a relative or a village acquaintance.

Migration networks can lead to occupational clustering. If a group of workers from the same area have established themselves in construction then subsequent migrants are more likely to follow that same route and enter construction.

8.4 Contractor-Mediated Recruitment

Contractors and labour intermediaries are a significant part of the construction labour market. A skilled mason can of course go on to build up his own team and operate as a small contractor. This gives rise to an occupational hierarchy:

Helper → Mason → Head Mason → Mason-cum-Contractor → Contractor

This is one of the reasons why masonry can be such an attractive route as opposed to staying as a general construction labourer.

9. Economic Significance of Masonry-Based Migration

Masonry migration can bring about a number of economic benefits for the migrant households.

9.1 Higher Earnings

Skilled workers typically have more bargaining power than unskilled helpers. Evidence from West Bengali migrants in Kerala indicates that masons made up a significant proportion of the migrant construction workforce and were earning relatively good rates.

9.2 Remittances

Migration allows workers to remit money back to households in Murshidabad. The remittances can be used to pay for food, housing, education, healthcare, agricultural investment, debt servicing and household consumption.

Reja and Das (2021) found that migrant construction workers in Kerala used their remittances for both household expenditure and for productive purposes.

9.3 Occupational Mobility

Masonry is different from pure casual labour in that it does provide a route to upward mobility. A good mason can go on to become a self employed contractor and will be in a position to bring in labour from his own village.

9.4 Rural Household Diversification

Migration reduces the need for exclusive dependence on agriculture. A household can mix farming with local employment and income from migrants. Migration thus becomes one component of a wider livelihood diversification strategy.

10. Major Problems Faced by Migrant Masons

Despite the better earning potential, the migrant masons are still in a vulnerable position.

10.1 Informal Employment

The vast majority of construction work is on a contractual or informal basis with workers often having no written contract, no regular employment and no stable working conditions.

10.2 Occupational Safety

Construction is a high risk industry with the potential for falls, injury, exposure to dust and accidents involving plant and materials. Migrant workers may have very limited access to any formal occupational safety mechanisms.

10.3 Lack of Social Security

Migrant workers frequently find themselves in a position where they can't access social protection at their destination. Portability of benefits is thus a key policy issue.

10.4 Language and Cultural Barriers

West Bengali migrants working in other states are likely to encounter linguistic and cultural barriers. Reja and Das (2022) found that language differences made Bengali construction workers more vulnerable in terms of employment negotiations, equal pay and access to public health care.

10.5 Dependence on Contractors

Although the contractors will be facilitating employment, too much reliance on them can in fact reduce the worker's own bargaining power. Wage arrears, deductions, no written contract and dependence on the labour intermediary all serve to increase vulnerability.

11. Discussion

The fact that masonry is the dominant occupation among the migrants from Murshidabad should not be seen as simply a reflection of their poverty. It is the outcome of a combination of push factors, the migrants' own capabilities and the opportunities available in the destination.

De Haas's (2010) migration-development framework is very relevant here. Migration happens when people have the requisite capabilities to migrate and at the same time have the aspirations to improve their livelihoods. In Murshidabad there is a lack of local employment which creates the pressure to move and at the destination there is an opportunity structure in place through the construction sector.

Masonry is of course the key case as it's the area where migration experience is converted into occupational capital. You have an unskilled labourer migrating initially and through that process he can build up

masonry skills. Migration therefore is not just the movement of labour from one place to another, it can be the creation of occupational capital.

The process can therefore be represented conceptually as:

Economic constraints at origin, plus higher demand at destination, plus migrant networks, plus informal skill acquisition = concentration in construction and masonry.

The rise of the mason-cum-contractor is of particular significance in that it may well represent a move from wage labour to petty entrepreneurship. Of course this isn't a universal phenomenon and it will depend on the individual's level of experience, their social networks, their access to capital, their bargaining power and their ability to get on and keep on with the contracts.

12. Policy Recommendations

The following measures may improve the livelihood conditions of migrant masons from Murshidabad:

1. **Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): e**xisting masonry skills would be formally assessed and certified.
2. **Skill development: t**raining in modern masonry, tiling, plastering, construction technology and occupational safety should be expanded.
3. **Portable Social Security:** welfare benefits should be portable across state lines.
4. **Migrant registration: w**orkers should be encouraged to register with the appropriate labour authorities and welfare boards.
5. **Occupational Safety Training:** safety equipment and training must be compulsory at all construction sites.
6. **Transparent wage systems:** employment agreements should be in writing and wages paid on time.
7. **Migrant Facilitation Centres:** Murshidabad and the major destination cities should have Migrant Facilitation Centres providing information on employment, accommodation, healthcare and legal rights.
8. **Financial inclusion:** Migrants should have easy access to bank accounts, digital payment systems, insurance and remittance facilities.
9. **Entrepreneurship support: e**xperienced masons should be supported via credit and training to set up their own small construction businesses.

13. Conclusion

Migration from Murshidabad to construction destinations is a significant shift in rural livelihoods. In the past migration from the district was very much tied in with seasonal agricultural labour, but with increasing urbanisation and the rise in demand for construction work there are now a range of other employment options. Masonry has become a very significant occupation as it requires relatively accessible skills but offers a good return in terms of earnings and opportunities for progression. You can get into the construction industry as a helper and then go on to acquire the masonry skills through informal learning and by moving around. Social networks, contractor links and the existence of migration routes all play a part in this. The evidence from the West Bengal migrant workers (in particular the migrant workers from West Bengal working in Kerala) is that masons form a very significant proportion of the migrant construction workforce. Murshidabad construction migration is thus not simply a case of distress migration but a complex livelihood strategy which involves both economic pressure and the pursuit of better employment opportunities. Higher income does not in itself equate to reduced vulnerability.

Informal employment, occupational risks, absence of social security, contractor status and language barriers are all significant issues. The longer term developmental impact of migration will be to the extent that the skills and income of the migrant can be translated into greater household security, greater access to education and housing, more productive investment and greater occupational mobility. So the dominance of masonry in the migrant labour force from Murshidabad is a reflection of the structural deficiencies in the source region as well as the increasing demand for labour in India's construction sector. A policy framework which integrates skill certification, social protection, occupational safety, financial inclusion and migrant-friendly labour governance can turn masonry-based migration from a precarious mode of survival into a viable and sustainable livelihood.

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