

# Peasants to Migrants: A Neo-Marxist Perspective on Indentured Labour System in Rural India

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## ABSTRACT

Labour migration has been a complex phenomenon that has been affecting the lives and livelihood of the marginalized and resource deprived people. The push and pull factors extending from origin to destination has been a well- established cause for this form of mobility. But the major factor which influences the process is the decision-making for migration, whether man decides on the basis of his own free will to migrate calculating the pros and cons of migration before taking the journey, or they are forced, entrapped and enslaved through economic coercion and physical force. There has been conflicting interpretation of labour migration. A group of anti-colonial, neo-Marxist scholars argue it as a process of indentured labour system; a ‘new form of slavery’, where the labour is a victim of various forms of deception, coercion and manipulation of the recruiters and intermediaries. While other group of scholars from the Colonization and Modernization school argues labour migration to be an economic diversification strategy for improving the livelihood of the migrants and their family. The present paper follows the anticolonial strand of thought and attempts to explore the process of distress seasonal labour migration from Odisha (place of origin) to southern states (place of destination). The study is undertaken in the migration pockets of Kalahandi, Balangir and Koraput (KBK) districts in Odisha. Extensive labour migration from this region has been a consequence of land alienation and resource deprivation in the origin. The changing power relationship in the origin has opened up new forms of domination and subjugation for the agricultural labourers by trapping them into cycles of indebtedness by the recruiters and intermediaries every season.

**Keywords:** anti-colonial, coercion, indebtedness, indentured labourer

## INTRODUCTION

The pre-colonial Indian villages were depicted as little republics, economically self-sufficient and politically autonomous (Redfield, 1967). Later various studies argued that village community doesn't conform to the principle of homogeneity and manifests various forms of inequalities in the distribution and allocation of resources, power and prestige (Roy, 2012). Indian villages underwent complex social and economic changes with the advent of British rule, the peasant

landholders became tenants and then landless agricultural labourers (Kumar, 1965). Colonization led to large scale labour migration of the native population and establishment of a new settlement through invasion of the British (Morris, 1900). The scarcity of resources and dispossession of land and forests to the new settlers led to the mobility of the natives to other places for work and employment.

Historically migration has been closely associated with military conquests, agricultural colonization, expeditions of

merchant traders, slave trade and indentured labour (Rao, 1986). Ravenstein (1889) stressed the role of distance, technology and communication in influencing the volume and direction of migration. He poses that oppressive laws, weather variability, incompatible social surrounding and even compulsion due to population growth produce the currents of migration. But the inherent desire among the individual men to better themselves in material respects act as a major factor of migration. Todaro (1976) follows the same line of contention and speaks of rural-urban income differential as cause of rural-urban migration. Stouffer (1940) proposed that rather than distance, it is the intervening opportunities between the origin and destination as a determining factor of migration. Lee (1969) argued that the nature and magnitude of intervening obstacles between the origin and destination as the factor for migration.

Anthropologists stressed on the role of non-economic factors in inducing migration. Factors like disputes, witchcraft, need for social prestige and initiation rites for manhood were also affecting migration (Winter, 1955; Skinner, 1965; Schapera, 1947; Mayer, 1961). These non-economic factors affecting the decision for migration is termed as 'the last straw' by Gulliver (1955), for him the real cause of migration is economic. Mitchell (1959) counters Gulliver (1955) by adopting the Durkheimian (1897) distinction between the rate and incidence of the phenomenon. He says that the rate of migration is influenced by the economic factors and the incidence is affected by the non-economic factors. Besides the economic and non-economic factors, the individual psyche and social circumstances play a major role in migration. The decision of migration whether voluntary or involuntary plays a significant role on the life and livelihood of the migrants. It depends on whether a man decides to migrate on the basis of the pros and cons of migration before going or he is forced to migrate by indirect economic

coercion or direct physical pressure (Badgaiyan, 1986).

The changing political economy of the area is very much influential in determining the decision of migration (Rao, 1986). The two great transformations during the British rule was imposition of capitalism and the development of modern state under colonialism (Scott, 1976). During the colonial rule, the land tenancy acts, changes in the cultivation and cropping pattern, and the institutional and infrastructural arrangements of the British government led to the commoditization of land and labour (Mohanty, 2011). In the pre-colonial era, there were service providing communities, but they were small in numbers. The number of agricultural labourers increased in the colonial period with the adoption of cruel instruments like land tenancy act and money lending (Patel, 1952). The land alienation of the peasants through indebtedness and exploitative tenancy practices continued throughout the British India (Dhanagare, 1983). The landowners and agricultural labourers represented two poles of the social stratification in rural areas; the dependent relationship between them was initiated where bondage of the agricultural labourers was accepted for exchange of the cash or loan from the land owners (Breman, 1993). There has been a paradoxical relationship between the mobility of labourers and their lack of freedom (Breman, 1986).

The economic and non-economic factors has been affecting the migration pattern and flow, but the process of migration has resulted in ushering changes in the power relationships, there has been emergence of new intermediary class, who act as brokers to negotiate the supply and demand of labour. The present paper thus attempts to explore and understand the factors related to loss of land in the origin and the reasons which followed the seasonal mobility of the peasants from the origin. Through local narratives and case studies, the paper tries to understand the changing

power relationships in the origin as the result of the occupational transformation.

### Conceptual Framework

Adopting a neo-Marxist strand of thought, the present paper tries to understand the changing power relations as the result of distress seasonal migration. Exploitation of labour is intrinsic in all forms of servitude including slavery and indentured wage labour (Laycock, 1999). In slavery the labour is under direct coercion whereas in the wage labour the coercion is indirect (Patterson, 1982). Forms of unfree labour has been variedly classified (Bush, 2000). Exploitation distinguishes unfree and free labour, under capitalism the labour is doubly free, free from the ownership of the means of production and compelled to work

for others and free to sell his labour to anyone who wishes to buy it. While in unfree labour the labour is not free to choose the employers, it existed as the form of pre-capitalist form of labour (Lerch, 2011). But the unfree labour exists in a new form in the present time as the indentured labour. Their bondage is based on exclusive economic contract for a definite time period unlike the patron –client relations of the past. The contract is organized by a labour contractor who acts as per the order of the owner or employer; the ties are temporary and not hereditary (Bremen, 2007). The forms of exploitation thus vary from mild to harsh, mild in case of the temporary migrant workers and harsh in case of the permanent workers (Guerin, 2016).

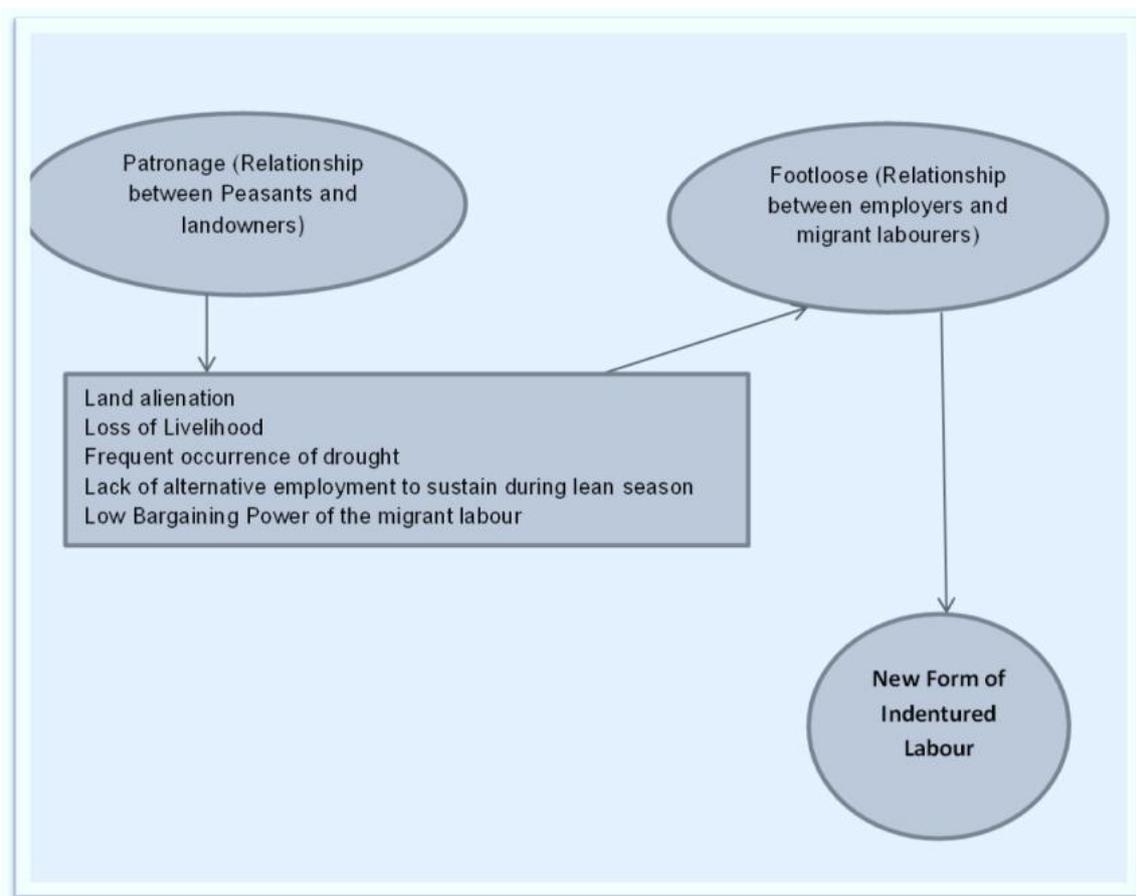


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

### METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in KBK (Kalahandi, Balangir and Koraput) region of Odisha. Out of the eight districts, three

districts: Balangir, Kalahandi and Nuapada were selected as the universe of the study on the basis three criteria: 1. high interstate seasonal outmigration (Balangir: 490

licences, 44075 migrant labourers, Nuapada:186, 10905 and Kalahandi: 66, 3809), 2. rain shadow area with dry climatic conditions(Out of 139 blocks of 21 districts in Odisha as drought affected where farmers have sustained crop loss of 33 percent and above during the Kharif season in 2015, all blocks of selected districts are severely affected by drought), 3.high incidence of poverty (More than 60 percent of the

households in these districts are below poverty line (BPL).In Nuapada the percentage of BPL households exceed 80 percent (BPL survey, 1997). On the basis of the facts provided by the District Labour Office (DLO), District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) and other national and international agencies six villages from the districts were selected as the study area (table1).

**Table 1: Selection of Study Villages**

Districts	Block	Gram Panchayat	Villages
Balangir	Belpada	Sarmuhan	Sarmhan, Kharkhara
Kalahandi	Golamunda	Chaparia	Chaparia, Tingirpadar
Nuapada	Sinapali	Bharuamunda	Bharuamunda, Chacharabata

Source: Field Study.

A quick household survey was conducted in the selected villages to identify the migrant households. And on the basis of the survey households migrating to the brick kilns were selected as the respondents. In total 300, migrant households were selected as the respondents. Data was collected by using semi-structured interview schedule, case study and focus group discussion (FGD).

### **Changes in the traditional source of living in the Village**

The study villages were selected on the basis of some common features. First, the villages were located at close proximity to each other, though located in different districts. Secondly; the study villages shared a common cultural space. Mostly the villages had predominant tribal population comprising of Sabaras, Kondh and Gond. Thirdly the study villages have been affected by land alienation, natural disasters, indebtedness and pauperization of the peasants leading to migration of a large number of labourers for seasonal employment in informal sectors. Finally and most important commonality among the

study villages is that the process of migrant labour recruitment is similar in the villages.

The situation of employment and livelihood was different prior to two to three decades in the village. Land was the main source of living. The dense forest was cleared by the tribals through slash and burn cultivation (podu chasa). The tribals turned into settled peasants and depended on cultivation for their livelihood. Apart from cultivation, the rich forest resources also provided subsidiary employment to the natives. The land alienation, intrusion of non-tribals into the tribal areas and outmigration of tribals were reported as an impact of colonialism in the villages (Badgariyan, 1986). The declining percentage of cultivators and increasing percentage of agricultural wage labourers has led to development of a new form of dependent relationship between the land owners and labourers. The owner of land started hiring agricultural landless labourers instead of cultivating land themselves, because of the lack of cultivation skill in them. According to the 2011 census, 38 percent of the workers were engaged as agricultural labourers.

**Table 2: Caste wise occupation of the Migrant Household during Non-Migration Season**

Main Occupation of the Migrant Households	Other Castes	SC	ST	Total
Cultivators	81	13	23	117
Daily Wage Earner (Agricultural Labourers)	18	37	115	170
Other Occupation	7	2	4	13
Total	106	52	142	300

Source: Field Study

In the above table, the occupation of the households during non-migration season is represented. It is evident from the figures that majority of the scheduled tribes worked as agricultural labourers. And majority of the cultivators were from other castes. Indebtedness has been an immediate consequence of the colonialism. The tribals and lower castes worked as agricultural labourers in the fields of the land owning castes, in exchange of the loans taken from the land owners. The other castes comprising of the Meher, Gauda, Yadav and Paika community have large land holding size and they hire the tribals and scheduled castes as wage labourer to work in their field. The mechanization of agriculture also led to large scale unemployment of the poor peasants in the villages. The man power was required only for sowing and cutting the crops, while for harvesting the machines were used. The dependence on rainfall also made the agriculture limited to one season. This situation forced the peasants to find alternative employment in some informal economy. Though the tobacco (bidi) making industry is still functional in the villages, but the wages are not sufficient to meet the basic requirement.

Under such forced and distressed conditions, the poor agricultural wage labourers started to get attracted by the new demand of the state and market creating a new kind of dependency and subjugation. The informal and manufacturing sector started seeking cheap labour for their seasonal industries. Brick kiln is one such seasonal establishment which recruits large number of labourers from these villages. Such form of labour mobility started illegally without registration and documentation. It continued as a practice for years and is still continuing.

#### **Recruitment of Indentured Labour in Informal Economy**

The changing occupational structure in the villages, changes the structure of power relationship in the villages, the landowners are replaced by the local contractors (Sardar) and Owner (Seth) and

the peasants are replaced by the migrant labourers (Dadan Shramik). But in both cases the use of coercion whether direct or indirect was present. In the new form of domination, the relationship between the lord and the slaves is more complex and severe as the structure has a presence of an intermediaries or middlemen (sardar). The labour recruitment for the brick kilns is based on hierarchical governance structure. This hierarchical structure provides more detailed supervision for the labourers and it also allows the utilization of internal incentive and control machinery (Williamson, 1980). Misalucha (2011) uses the concept of hegemony and hierarchy for understanding the international relations. From Gramscian perspective, hegemony is a structure of dominance which has been legitimized, while in hierarchy legitimacy is not consolidated, providing space for continuum. The more is the level of bindingness, the higher is the level of hierarchy (Weber, 2000).

The present study also reports the presence of hierarchical structure in the work and employment. The hierarchical structure is composed of four layers: the owners of the Brick kilns (Seth) at the apex, the Contractors (Sardar) at the second level, the Supervisors (Thikedars) at the third level and the Labourers (Dadan) at the bottom of the tier. The owners of the brick kilns distribute the advance amount in the origin through the contractors. The exchange of labour and capital take place in the origin, the migrant labourers have to leave their villages after harvesting of crops. They are led by the contractors from the origin and are received by different contractors in the destination. They hardly have direct communication with the *Seth*, they are kept under strict and disciplinary conditions in the work place with surveillance on their freedom of movement outside the kiln. They have to work in the kilns till the advance amount is repaid. The supervisor monitors the work done by the migrant labourers; keep track of the production process in the brick kilns. Breaking the bondage is

difficult for the labourers because of the hierarchical structure of work.

**Table 3: Recruiters to the Brick Kilns**

Recruiter to the Brick Kilns	Migrants
Kiln Owner	40(13)
Broker/ Contractor	260(87)
Total	300(100)

Source: Field Study.

The recruitment of the labourers to the brick kilns starts in the origin. The recruiters are the brokers/ contractors or the kiln owner themselves (Table-3). In most cases the recruiters are the brokers and contractors from the same village or state. This shows that the seasonal brick kiln migrants are mostly recruited by the brokers or contractors. These brokers are the jobbers who basically share the same origin with the migrant labourers but acts as per the order of the owner of the establishment; they distribute the cash advance among the migrant households (Bremar, 1996).

**Table 4: Status of Relationship with the Contractors**

How do you about know the contractor?	Migrant Households
Through a friend or relative	39
Through neighbours	59
Know him personally	117
Just as an intermediary	83
Others	2
Total	300

Source: Field Study.

The brokers belonging to the same socio cultural milieu is a necessary precondition for arranging a trust worthy workforce for the employer. The element of trust plays a vital role in the recruitment process. The labourers generally take advances from the known contractors with expectation that they will be treated well in the destination (Table-4). And the reason why the brokers look for labourers from the native region is that they have known them for years and have trust they wouldn't cheat (Bremar, 1996). The jobber is the one whom the pauperized peasants could approach for credit for their survival and livelihood (ibid). But the jobbers also create a form of dependency and lead to the underdevelopment of the origin by transferring the productive workforce to other places every season.

### **Working conditions at the Destination: A New Form of Slavery**

The migrant labourers, who take debt from the brokers, know that they are expected to provide labour power and accept the obligation to do whenever it is demanded by the employer (Bremar, 1996). The debts are transmitted to the next generations if remain unpaid, the workers are not released from the work place if the advance is not repaid. They are not paid a remuneration or wages, they have no idea how much they will receive at the end of the season from the owners. The working and living conditions in the kilns is precarious and hazardous. The workers usually live with their family in the kilns and face health hazards like tuberculosis, typhoid and skin and eye diseases due to the constant interaction with substances like arsenic, burnt plastic and dust.

The contract for work is negotiated between the head of the household and the broker, and the amount of advance received, determines the number of migrants irrespective of sex and age from a household. The migrants from the region are considered to be good brick moulders so majority of them migrate as brick moulders and some also migrate as brick carriers. There is a division of labour among the migrant workers in the kilns. They belong to different geographical regions and work for different production functions in the establishment with different wages. The brick kilns include: Manager (Munshi), Brick Moulders, Fire Men, Brick Loaders, Trolley men, Lorry Drivers. The manager, brick moulders and brick loaders are from KBK region, while the firemen are from Bihar, Maharashtra and Jharkhand, the trolley men are from the local and regional areas and the lorry drivers are from Maharashtra and Gujarat. The brick moulders and carriers are placed at the lower rung of the work hierarchy according to wages. 75 percent of the brick moulders are from Balangir, followed by Nuapada and Kalahandi. And the brick carriers are from Nuapada and Kalahandi (Table 5).

Districts	Main task in the brick kiln		Total
	Brick Moulders	Brick Carriers	
Balangir	174(75)	0	174(58)
Nuapada	38(17)	47(67)	85(28)
Kalahandi	18(8)	23(33)	41(14)
Total	230(100)	70(100)	300(100)

Source: Field Study. The figures in the bracket represent the percentage.

The migrant workers are paid a weekly wage (batara) of 150/- for meeting the food and basic expenses of the households in the kilns. For the brick moulders the wages are higher, they are paid 600/- for making 1000 bricks and the brick carriers are paid 70/- for carrying 1000 bricks. Thus the wages in the kilns are paid as piece meal wages. The workers also face physical exploitation and verbal abuse for incompetency in accomplishing work. Such cases are rarely reported in the labour offices. The lack of social security and welfare measures in the kilns for the migrant workers make their stay in the kiln more vulnerable. The brick kilns are generally located away from the residential area in the forest and remote areas, so the accessibility to the hospitals, schools and labour offices becomes difficult for the workers. The workers don't get medical camps in the kiln, if the situation is too severe, they are recommended to the Primary Health centers (PHC) located nearby. The children of the migrants stay in the kilns and help their parents to carry out the production activity and thus sometimes work as child labour. Most of the migrants are unaware of the Inter-state Migrant Workmen Act and the registration process which makes it difficult for them to break the bondage.

## CONCLUSION

The existence of debt and the complex process of recruitment in the brick kilns give space for exploitation and pauperization. There is an element of direct and indirect coercion in the process of recruitment. Trust and reciprocity is the base of the process. The recruiters and labourers mutual relationship and similar existence makes them dependent on each

other. The landlessness and resource scarcity in the origin forces the people to accept the new form of slavery. The people can't escape from the slavery once they have taken the advance. The modernization theorists always regard migration as a livelihood diversification strategy. Short term migration which started as a mere survival strategy turned into a livelihood diversification strategy for some with the course of time. When economic value was attached to the migration process, it became a livelihood and income diversification strategy. Remittances earned from migration have the potential to minimize the natural shocks of climatic change and personal shocks of chronic illness (Ellis, 1998). The proponents of the New Economics of Migration (NEM) also puts premium on the risk aversion and minimization strategy of the household income. Thus the government programs, private insurance markets and migration are the ways to overcome and deal with the market failures in the source (Stark, 1991). Circular mobility has improved the living conditions in Remote Rural Areas (RRA), the families spending on food, health care, education and social functions have increased and their creditworthiness has improved (Deshingkar, 2010). If migration is understood as a diversification strategy, it should improve the livelihood at the origin by exchange of skills and capital. But in the study of migration, it was observed that the migration was a process which perpetuated underdevelopment in the origin.

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