

Perceptions Of Poverty, Social Relations and Life Goals Among Debt-Migrants in India

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Introducing debt-migration

- Migration is an expensive undertaking, historically accessible only to the better off
- Now networks of agents offering loans and covering costs of migration in sectors ranging from construction, domestic work, industrial work and sex work.
- Debt-migration – migrant remains indebted for long periods of time, foregoing wages and other freedoms to repay the debt.
- ILO research on modern forms of slavery stresses that nearly all forced labour is for economic exploitation and labour market intermediaries such as recruitment agents are the main channel through which such exploitation occurs.
- Migrants own accounts of their experience and long term aspirations at odds with this narrative

Overview

- Discourse on migration and debt-migration in particular
- Study sites and methods
- Migrants' perceptions of poverty, social relations, changing identities and life goals
- Implications for policy and issues for further research

Discourses on debt-migration

- Research on unfree labour relations in India
 - Interlocking of credit, labour and output markets; semi-feudal societies (Bhaduri, Bharadwaj)
 - Persistence of unfree labour in modern forms of production (Brass)
- Migration as an extension of class/caste/patriarchy based systems of exploitation (Bremner 1983, Olsen and Ramanamurthy 2000)
- Neoclassical economic theory explains such arrangements as risk-averse behaviour by the poor
- Present analysis somewhere in between – recognising the role of structure but also the transformative role of agency in explaining the persistence of such migration

Policy positions on debt migration

- Policies are informed by theories of unfree labour and dependency and have sought to control migration. E.g. one of the objectives of the MGNREGA and watershed programmes is to reduce migration.
- I have long argued against this by highlighting the developmental potential of migration and called for policies that reduce the costs and risks of migration.
- Evidence of a shift at higher levels of policy e.g. Approach paper to 12th plan and Steering Committee on Urbanisation
- But there is no indication of a change in positions on debt-migration which is still seen as a form of modern day slavery
- Efforts are still focused on releasing workers from bondage and ending the system of market intermediaries
- Evident in the language of labour and migration laws as well as mission statements of national and international NGOs
- Construction work and Brick kiln work often targeted

Study sites and methods

- This research draws on studies that I undertook in the states of Bihar (mainly rural interviews) , Andhra Pradesh (both urban and rural) and Maharashtra (urban) at different points in time and under different projects. All of these projects were on migration and poverty
- Felt that comparing the same type of migration in different contexts, involving different groups of people would yield interesting findings.
- Sites were chosen purposively to maximise chances of covering migrants; interviews with those who were willing to participate
- Being a Marathi speaker brought up in Delhi and having lived for 12 years in Hyderabad gave me an advantage in understanding the meanings as expressed by migrants.

The context

	Towns in Bihar	Hyderabad	Pune
Debt-migration for Unskilled Construction Work	Backward castes and dalits from Bihar	Dalits from rural Andhra Pradesh and Backward castes from Odisha	Dalits, adivasis and Muslims from Maharashtra, Karnataka and Eastern states
Debt-migration for Brick Kiln work	Musahars and other dalits from Bihar, adivasis from Jharkhand	Adivasis and dalits from Odisha and rural Andhra Pradesh	Katkaris and other Adivasis, dalits and Muslims from rural Maharashtra and Karnataka
Development Context	Relatively under-developed mainly small and medium construction	Booming construction industry with large scale commercial and residential projects	Major industrial centre for international companies, the automotive industry and engineering industries
Governance context	Weak presence of NGOs, few interventions for migrants at destination	Presence of international NGOs working with brick kiln workers but relatively few working for construction workers	Strong presence of national and international NGOs working with both construction workers and brick kiln workers

Labour market characteristics

- Expected to find differences in working conditions but strikingly similar, in terms of overall situation, despite differences in context
- Seemed to be a more or less standard models for recruiting construction workers and brick kiln workers
- While wages for construction workers were somewhat higher in the more developed cities, wages for brick kiln workers were almost the same.
- Instead of improving conditions of employment due to the presence of civil society organisations, employers are sourcing workers from poorer and more isolated communities with few links to NGOs and unions
- There were small and less visible but important differences in the conditions between workers in both categories

Composition of the workforce

- Evidence of larger diversity of construction workers in Pune in terms of place of origin
- But mainly dalits and poorer backward castes and muslims – agents do not prefer to recruit adivasis for this kind of work as they are not seen to be capable of doing it.
- Brick kiln workers tend to be sourced more locally and Adivasis are heavily represented
- In general more men-only migration in Bihar than Maharashtra and AP – North Indian culture as well as restriction on women's work in Muslim families (as we will see this is changing)

Debt migration for construction work, a litany of broken laws

- Groups of workers recruited by agent mestri/thekeदार/sardar who belongs to the same area
- Several layers of intermediaries in between, each taking a cut of the money that the employer allocates to labour
- Agent pays a large advance - up to 25000 rupees (\$6-700) at the time of the recruitment and arranges transport, accommodation and food for the workers.
- Recruiting workers against an advance in this way is punishable under the Bonded Labour Act of 1976 – up to three years in prison and heavy fines
- But none of the agents appeared to be aware of this or concerned about being caught because of an extremely lax system of monitoring

Conditions of employment

- All the “facilities” provided to the workers are the cheapest possible
- Transport is often by truck or bus
- Long journeys extremely difficult for women with young children
- Accommodation– a few sheets of plastic and bits of wood, brick and metal to hold them together. Absence of proper sanitation.
- Meals twice a day, no limits on quantity but poor quality; meat twice a month strict limits on quantity
- None of the agents that we interviewed were registered under the Inter-state Migrant Workmen Act 1979 or the Building and Other Construction Workers Act 1996 where minimum standards for welfare such as creches and work time are set out.
- Accidents and disease such as malaria, diarrhea and gynecological infections are common
- Women complained of sexual harassment by agents and husbands

Night bus from Mahbubnagar



Dirty surrounds



Precarious!



Hazardous!



Characteristics of brick kiln migration

- Brick-kiln workers are recruited in units of 3-4 (usually husband, wife and children) by an agent who arranges their transport to the kiln
- Recruitment is against a large advance and workers agree to work for 7-9 months
- Breaking all the laws previously mentioned as well as Child Labour laws
- Accommodation and water are provided at the kiln and workers are given spending money each week to buy food from local markets or shops run by the kiln owner
- The owner or agent provides further smaller loans if needed
- The accounts are managed by a higher caste munshi who settles them at the end of the season – cheating common and worse as workers illiterate
- Many workers are still in debt at the end of the season and return to the same kiln or another kiln next year

Negotiations, strategies, choice

- Migrants spoke of freedom and dignity from traditional bondage arrangements that their forefathers suffered from
- While they recognise that agents and employers exploit them, they do not regard them as slave-drivers or themselves as slaves
- Madiga dalits in Andhra mentioned freedom from Jeetham or Vetti Chakri
- Groups of Bhil women migrating to Pune mentioned the release from ill treatment by forest guards and local moneylenders at home and their improved ability to educate their children. Thus while there was no immediate emancipation for them, they were securing a better future for their children.

Negotiations, strategies, choice

- Male construction workers spoke of being able to choose between agents who offered them a better deal in terms of higher advances, further loans when needed and better food.
- Spoke of being treated with respect – *izzat* ; did not tolerate verbal or physical abuse of any kind
- Female construction workers were clearly less empowered and not much change in patriarchal relationships of control over their bodies
- But even within those confines of structure they had more freedom to exercise agency in terms of participating in the workforce (esp for Muslim women), adopting different behaviour and language (including Hindi and some words of English), associating with a wider group of people leading to better employment opportunities.
- Young people migrated under such terms because of their aspirations to experience city life

Perceptions of social relations and long term life goals

- Spoke of freedom from borrowing for food and day to day needs from friends and relatives and traditional moneylenders
- They say they migrate with agents because work, food and accommodation are guaranteed which is more than they can manage without the agent– so risk aversion is certainly one reason
- They appreciate the “protection” provided by the agent in terms of access to further small loans if needed as well as taking their side in conflicts with the employer (in the case of construction workers)
- Prefer borrowing from agents rather than village landlords and traditional moneylenders who humiliate them

Brick kiln workers less room for negotiation but some

- Brick kiln workers predominantly poor adivasis, dalits and backward castes from nearby locations
- No difference whatsoever in working conditions and remuneration between states and very few indications that they had been able to negotiate better conditions
- Workers are aware that they are underpaid by agents and cheated by munshis
- Although some have called such migrants the new untouchables, migrants spoke of better treatment by than traditional patrons
- Musahar EBCs spoke of freedom from Haravahi

Migrant Perceptions (contd)

- The large advance was regarded as a huge benefit by almost everyone we spoke to - enabled them to spend large sums on weddings, healthcare, education and house improvement.
- Felt they would never be able to mobilise such sums of money through traditional routes
- Do continue to borrow and may remain in an indebted condition but they feel that this access to regular work is allowing them to improve their asset base and social standing through the purchase of assets, marriages

Perceptions (contd)

- Food security in terms of the ability to eat twice a day was mentioned as an important benefit by brick kiln workers
- As in the case of construction, such migration allows women to work among communities where there are cultural restrictions on women's work
- Although in continued debt – there was an ability to switch between agents and lenders
- Some reports of advances being used for house renovation and marriages but could not follow those up in rural areas.

Conclusion

- While old structures of inequality are being replaced by new structures of inequality there is clearly more room for workers to negotiate somewhat better conditions.
- Competition between agents to secure workers has provided spaces for more negotiation but on a tiny scale within structural constraints.
- Male construction workers are more able to exercise agency compared to females who are harrassed both by agents and their own men. Yet there were less visible ways in which they were also able to develop strategies for longer term emancipation and improvement of their own and their children's lives.

Conclusion

- Not romanticising such migration, not under any illusion about the extreme difficulties and dangers, not promoting borrowing beyond capacities to repay
- Highlighting the differences in the different meanings and experiences that were conveyed by migrants which seemed to be in contrast to the more polarised view.
- Rescuing workers from such arrangements or banning them will not work unless the poor have other realistic options to make a living and borrow when they want to
- Policies need to be put in place to reduce the risks of migration through support programmes at destination, through better implementation of labour laws, through accessible sources of credit and through more avenues for youth to access urban employment

- <http://www.irinnews.org/photo/Default.aspx?id=53>
- <http://www.demotix.com/news/242762/migrant-labour-workers-brick-kiln-india>