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Indu Agnihotri and Indrani Mazumdar  
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# **Dusty Trails and Unsettled Lives: Women's Labour Migration in Rural India**

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**In independent India**, women have always constituted an overwhelming majority in migration statistics routinely collected by Census and the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO). Explained away on the grounds of the prevalence of village exogamy, women's presence in migration statistics was considered of no other social or economic significance. Such a wholesale dismissal of labour migration by women was initially related to the official invisibility of women's economic activity in rural India and a gender-blind approach to the industrialising agenda. Since the 1980s, women's economic activities and contributions in the sphere of work and livelihood have, of course, attracted increased attention in the form of analysis, and targeted policy measures.

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*Acknowledgement:* This report is based on a field trip undertaken in May–June 2007 as a pilot investigation for a longer project focusing on gender and migration. The issues raised here should be read as preliminary field observations from a larger on-going project housed in CWDS.

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Less attention has been paid to the economic significance of women's migration patterns or to the study of the regimes of accumulation/surplus appropriation associated with the invisibility of women's labour.

The number and proportion of women migrating have of course been meticulously collated by macro-data systems (Census and NSSO surveys). However, the data so generated yields inadequate information regarding the features of women's labour migration and provides no insights into the links between women's social context, work relations and the social or class correlations being forged by migration. Nevertheless, a brief review of some of the broad trends—as they appear in the latest macro-data available—is a useful exercise for contextualising contemporary issues and experiences emerging from the field. According to the 2001 Census, 31 per cent (314.5 million) of India's population was reported as migrants (using the change in residence concept)—of which over 70 per cent (221 million) were women.<sup>1</sup> This represented a considerable increase over the 1991 Census, when 27 per cent of the population was considered to have migrated.<sup>2</sup> Over 65 million women/girls and 32.7 million men/boys migrated between 1991 and 2001, representing some 13 per cent and 6 per cent of the female and male populations respectively.<sup>3</sup> Only 3.5 per cent of all female migrants (2,247,820) reported work/employment or business as their reason for migration in comparison to 40.5 per cent of the males (13,256,137).<sup>4</sup> In terms of the gender composition of this category of migrants, women constituted 14.5 per cent of those migrating for work/employment or business. It is, of course, well known that census data does not adequately capture the short-term movements of the poor, particularly poor women looking for work and survival, but it does show that in comparison to earlier decades, the period between 1991 and 2001 witnessed an absolute and proportional increase in migration for work/employment (that is, labour migration in its most narrowly defined form) among both men and women, and an absolute and proportional decline in migration for business as well as for education—again for both men and women.<sup>5</sup> Looking at the 2001 Census data from the angle of how many migrants were actually workers, what is striking is that women constituted around 54 per cent of all

migrants (between 1991 and 2001) who were workers.<sup>6</sup> Obviously, the work/employment and business reasons cited for migration in the census provides a gross underestimation of the significance of labour in female migration.

Eighty-six per cent of the migrant women who were workers were in the rural to rural stream, 6 per cent in the urban to rural, 4 per cent in the rural to urban and 4 per cent in the urban to urban stream. In comparison, 35 per cent of the male migrants who were workers were in the rural to rural stream and 38 per cent in the urban to rural, 7 per cent in the rural to urban and 21 per cent in the urban to urban stream. Clearly, with 92 per cent of the migrant women workers concentrated in rural areas, any attempt to delve into the features and social relations developing around women's labour migration requires us to turn our face to rural India. This becomes all the more important since agriculture continues to dominate women's employment accounting for 73 per cent of the country's women workers in 2004–05 [as per the NSSO's 61st round (NSSO 2006)].

It bears underlining that employment trends across the decade beginning in 1993–94 (that is, during the period of the entrenchment of a neo-liberal policy regime) indicate great upheavals and convulsions taking place in agricultural employment. While the half decade between 1993–94 and 1999–2000 saw an absolute fall in the numbers employed in agriculture, this was accounted for solely by a reduction in the number of women in agriculture by some 2.3 million. This was followed by an upward trend between 2000 and 2004–05 when another 10.3 million more workers were crowded back into agriculture, with the number of women in agriculture expanding by some 15.5 million, increasing the share of women workers in agricultural employment from 39 per cent in 1999–2000 to 42 per cent in 2004–05.<sup>7</sup> This huge increase in the number of women in agriculture took place at a time when the overall number of agricultural labourers (both male and female) fell dramatically by around 9 million. In other words, at a time when women's labour was becoming more central, wage employment in agriculture was coming under acute stress. The greater mobilisation of unpaid labour by women in peasant agriculture has clearly emerged as an important feature, but what is also clear

is that developments in agriculture will remain a crucial determinant of trends, experiences and forms of labour involved in women's migration in the contemporary period. This being the women's location in the macro-picture, our field investigation was initiated in some of the terrains of rural migration.

In this article, we present some issues that emerged from our initial foray into some rural areas with a known history of large-scale labour migration. The notes presented in this paper are drawn essentially from our pilot investigations in Balangir district, western Orissa, in May–June 2007.

### **Notes from Kantabanji**

Kantabanji is a small town in Balangir with a notified area committee, but not a municipality. It is known for its station, from where thousands of migrant workers (including women and children) make an annual journey to brick fields located in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and the more developed coastal districts of Orissa. Out of a total population of 1.3 million in the district of Balangir, close to 1.2 million live in rural areas and tribals, dominated by Gonds and Binjhals, constitute 22 per cent of the population. A majority of the women workers in the district (63 per cent) are agricultural labourers, whereas among men, the highest proportion are cultivators (38 per cent). Kantabanji, with an insignificant population of just 20,090 (2001 Census) is the principal junction where migrant workers travelling by road from the rural areas connect with the trains that take them out of their region of origin.

Our main contact and guide in the area was Vishnu Sharma, a lawyer in his mid-40s, whose grandfather hailed from Haryana. Vishnu, however, was born and brought up in Kantabanji, studied there and now works there as a local person, not an outsider. Fluent in Hindi and Oriya, Vishnu has no emotional connection with Haryana, which, for him, is a somewhat alien social territory. Kantabanji remains his home to which he has great attachment. He is a proud owner of a tattered copy of the *Bolangir Gazetteer* from the early 20th century, which he has assiduously studied as a labour of love. His abiding concern has been the condition and

situation of migrant workers from his area. It is the spectacle of masses of humanity being packed into and debouched from trains at Kantabanji in the process of migrating and returning that remains an endless source of fascination for him and, over the years, both his profession as well as his personal interest has led to close connections with many of these migrant workers. According to his estimate, every year some 2,00,000 workers leave in trains from Kantabanji station, from late October to early December, mostly on their way to *bhattas* (brick kilns) in Andhra Pradesh, with some going on to Karnataka and some to Cuttack within Orissa. They return in May–June, just before the rainy season. Around half of the brick field migrants are women, since the green brick-making labour unit (*pathri*) consists of at least a pair of workers (*jodi*) a male-female couple, often with children. He gives graphic descriptions of the thousands of men, women and children carrying *potlas* (bundles) of their belongings, crowding and spilling over from the railway platform. He points out that their worst experiences are on the return journey, when the strongmen of the labour contractors are no longer around to either face their wrath or make arrangements for safe passage. As agents of the brick kiln owners, these same contractors display keen interest in shepherding the workers to the brick fields when they set out, but at the time of their return journey, they are conspicuous by their absence. Almost every year, some workers die on the journey in the overcrowded trains in sweltering heat. Every year, he writes a letter to the Railway minister describing the situation and asking for extra trains and bogeys for Kantabanji, so that these workers can travel home in more humane conditions, but to no avail.

According to him, the drought of 1965 was a turning point in the history of migration.<sup>8</sup> Vishnu had seen some of his own classmates die during that drought. It was due to the compulsions of drought relief that the restrictions governing the forests in the area were lifted and they were opened for woodcutting, and so on. It was from 1965 onwards that migration by men and women to Raipur (then in Madhya Pradesh) became a noticeable phenomenon,<sup>9</sup> expressed linguistically in the emergence of the term 'Raipurias'. This was also the period when there were instances of drum beating to collect 'harijans' for the Bhilai steel plant. Landless,

branded as criminals (*bartan chors*, or those who steal utensils during the drought) and carrying the stigma of untouchability in their home district of Balangir (as the district is currently named), the 'harijan log' (the term used by Gandhi for the untouchables, and which was used in this case by the local people) discovered that, in Raipur, caste was not such a stigma and work brought dignity. Many more started migrating and the lives of some of them changed. They were less afraid and had more social status. Nevertheless, in their home district, 'Raipuria' (for those who had been/gone to Raipur) was a form of abuse and those who stayed behind—choosing not to migrate—claimed status and prestige by saying 'we are not Raipurias'. But since it was not very far, the migratory route to Raipur became clearly marked out and with the passage of time, tribals and upper castes too started going out for work. According to Vishnu, migration put an end to the practice of local bonded labour (based on a debt-advance system) that was widespread in the villages of the area.

Speaking of the social background of Balangir, Vishnu referred to its being initially part of the princely state of Patna, merged on 1 January 1948.<sup>10</sup> He spoke of the oppressive power of the *goantia* (village headman), who under the princely regime, was officially responsible for collecting revenue, and looked after land records for each village. *Goantias* were drawn from different castes based on their capacity to collect the revenue (when Rajas fought elections, they did not go and ask for votes, the *goantias* did that for them by 'ordering people to vote'). *Goantias* were assisted by *jhankars*, who were like *chowkidars* (or policemen) and also did puja (like a village priest). The Rajas gave service providers, such as *bhandaris*, land for which they could collect revenue. Such land was referred to as *muafi zameen*. *Vetti* or forced labour used to be imposed. The state could demand labour for work on roads and to build houses for the Raja. Tribals owned and cultivated land. Some of the *goantias* were tribals, while some were also from backward, including untouchable, castes. The landless labourers were *sukhwasis*, who had homestead land. Though working long hours, under the Patna State Tenancy Act, 1944, unlike other tenants, they could not be evicted and were also exempted from *vetti*. They had freehold land but could not use the forests.<sup>11</sup>



The Zamindari Abolition Act, 1954, changed some of this. The Orissa State Tenancy Act—by which the state took over land revenue administration—and the Orissa Land Reform Act, 1961, provided a clearer definition of ceiling, tenancy rights, restrictions on alienation, transfer and partition of land. Under this Act, the tenant became the ‘absolute owner’. After the abolition of zamindari, the government took away some of the excess land and distributed it among the *sukhwasis*.

In general, landholdings remained small and there was virtually no irrigation. Every village had a *talab* (pond), a rain water reservoir for every 150 acres or so. Irrigation, which was earlier to the tune of 23 per cent, has been now reduced to only 5 per cent. Panchayats auction water bodies for fishing rights. Since 1960, there have been fairly regular panchayat elections and, whereas earlier the landed sections were dominant, now with reservations, others also contest and get elected. Vishnu’s fund of information accompanied us on our journeys to different villages to meet migrant workers, their families and neighbours.

These are some of the stories we heard:

### Aspects and Processes of Migration

Prakash, from village Banipali, Turaikela block, told us:

I went to Hyderabad. Actually, four of us went. My mother, sister, wife and five children went. My mother’s name is Lakshmi Kota.

How did I go the first time?

You see I had a loan of Rs. 15,000, which was due to the shop-keeper from whom we get provisions. First, there was money spent on the delivery. Then my wife fell down and hit a stone. That injury treatment cost us Rs. 7,000. I admitted her to Patnagarh Government Hospital in the eighth month of pregnancy. Now mother and child are safe. But we spent a lot of money on treatment and transport.

As for migrant work:

...*jaane ke* time [while going] ticket and food are provided for. The sardar is either Haneef Ali or Laxman Singh of the village.

Indian Journal of Gender Studies, 16:3 (2009): 375–399

We made 1,70,000 bricks at the rate of Rs. 100 per 1,000. This was in Dunikel in the Hyderabad region. So, we should have got Rs. 17,000. But, he gave us return tickets and, after accounting for the food, etc., the *malik* said we owed him Rs. 1,100. But he waived it!

All four working adults got Rs. 200–250 per week. This was six months' work. We went around Kartik, came back just last night.

Others too went from this village, from about 15–20 homes. Maybe around a 100 people went. *Gond, Majhi ghar se sab gaye the. Sab laut aaye* [all went for the same work and have returned]. They have been going earlier too.

### About those Left Behind

From the same village, Sunita Kota, a grandmother—born in 1950—told us:

I was not married when Indira Gandhi came here [1965]. She came when there was a drought and that's when I first saw a helicopter. The utensils started to make a noise, *jhanjhanane lage*, the cattle reacted and we all hid because we were scared. Wages in those days were 1kg for working twice a day, actually only 750 grams of rice.

What [all] work did I do?

I used to grind the grain. During the drought, [we ate what nobody eats] like *bhahuo* and *dumair phal*, we even collected cattle feed to eat. Mrs Gandhi gave us rice.

When there was drought, they opened up the forest. The lease was for the forest contractors, but we also started to cut. We got 75 paise to cut wood in the jungle.

I am from Bharuapali but am married here.

What do I know about migration?

In the 1996 cyclone, many people got caught in Hyderabad; 500 or more sat on top of a train and escaped. Many died. I myself have not gone. I have eight grandchildren, why should I go elsewhere? They go for work outside.

However, she subsequently told us that now she no longer finds it easy to get work to earn her livelihood in the village:

Till now, I found casual work. But now, I go outside the village. There are graphite mines in this area. We go everyday and come back in the evening. We walk 10 km. The women carry the mud/earth on their heads while the men dig up the earth. Below the earth surface, there is graphite which is lifted by machines.

The work is very hard, but it is available on a more regular basis. It is too hot and the hours are very long. The management gets work done in shifts. The workers come from other villages too. There are at least 1,000–1,200 people working in the mines.

### Of Female Headed Families and Labour Units

In another village, Dhusamunda, Tureikela block, Sarala Bardi told us:

I have some land, about 3 acres, but not water for irrigation. I got advance, from which I bought some clothes and paid off my debts. The rest got spent and now I have nothing to eat. I have given my land on *batai* [share cropping lease arrangement], for which I get one-third. Basically, I get a bag or two of paddy. No work is available here.

I came back just last night from somewhere in Hyderabad [they say Adra for Andhra]. I went to Bangiri. I tried for a loan but could not get it. I do not have a job card either.

I have gone twice before.

The sardar<sup>12</sup> here is Vijay from Khutlumunda.

He came to the house. He gave us fare plus Rs 100 for family for *khana peena* [eating] on the way while going. While coming, nothing was paid.

The last time too when she came back, she had no money.

Sarala's unit had five people, which included two children. They made 2,00,000 bricks. They too spent the advance in paying off loans, bought a cycle and paid Rs. 5,000 for redemption of land that was mortgaged.

She said:

Three women and one man from another family also went—this was Rukmini, a *tandi* [weaver] who is my *nand* [sister-in-law]. Rukmini is about 16 years of age. They have a *khaddi* [loom] in the village. Her father's house is in Bhabhog in Raipur. I also know some of the work related to weaving. We have no land; we are landless. Well, we had some but lost it, *maari gayi* (was robbed); now I go out for six months. The sardar gave me a ticket but did not give me food or money for the way. I got Rs. 11,000 as advance. There, I got weekly provision of food, the cost of which was approximately Rs. 9,500. It worked out to Rs 300 per week. Got fuel (*katkoot*), along with an electric bulb connection in the hut. Between the four of us, we made 2,50,000 bricks at Rs. 90 for 1,000 bricks.

### **A Long Journey with Nothing Left on Return**

In Chatuanka, a village in Turaikela block, we spoke to a woman migrant:

My name is Kanaki. Sandhya, Lokeshwari, and younger children—in all six people went, including two children. After Dussehra, we worked in the *bhatta* of Guneshwar. We took an advance of Rs. 4,000. The rate was 100 for 1,000 bricks. We made a total of 3,00,000 bricks doing *pathri* work. All we earned was spent there and we have come back with nothing. In fact, we were told that we owed Rs. 2,000 to the *malik*, but he said he is 'waiving' it and we need not pay anything now! For nine months, we were there, we exhausted Rs. 10,000 on food, and so on.

One girl fell sick, so we had to get her treated.

So the *malik* did some *laanjaan* [mischief] and said he owed us nothing. Gave us tickets, Rs. 50 per person for food on way back and Rs. 50 *choori pahanne ko* (to wear bangles)—which also we consumed for food. In the express train, it took us two days to get back.

In the same village, an old lady told us that she had made the trip earlier many years ago but has not gone recently, not for a long time now. She told us where they had been—Monindergarh for two years, Ganjam for three years, Raigarh for three years, Hyderabad for three to four years.

Here, although the migrant workers were from Chatuanka, the sardar was from another village, Kishanpur, Kunjo.

### **Young, Strong and in Power: A Primary Labour Contractor**

During a lunch break at a roadside eating joint, we met Binod Mahanand. Vishnu quietly informed us that he was a labour contractor and a sarpanch. The sarpanch told us:

This region [is populated] mostly [by] Gonds, Sauras, Adivasis and Dalits. There is not enough work. Nor enough to eat. People find work here for only three months—that is why they go out for six months. Now there is a decline in the numbers that go out of the district.

Why?

*Ab yahan kaam dham chal raha hai* [now here there is work such as NREGA].<sup>13</sup> In my panchayat in one village, there are 700 job cards. There are four villages under the panchayat. However, only Rs. 1,00,000 have been given so far at the BDO [Block Development Officer] level. We asked for more but they said go ahead with this and begin the work, when more money comes you will get it.

Later, he said, there were 100 applicants and the male-female ratio was roughly 50/50:

I am not from any party. I am 35 years old and, in fact, in this area, mostly young people have been elected, on a party basis. This seat is reserved. I come from the harijan community. The total population in these four villages is about 2,550 of which 703 are in my own village and roughly 273 in one, 435 and 530 in two others. Both my opponent and I are from the same caste, in fact we are related.

I now do *kheti bari* [cultivation]. But earlier, I too used to go to Hyderabad with my wife before my children were born. I too worked on the *bhatta*. The rate 15 years ago was Rs. 80. Now we have two–three acres of land, which gives one crop. There are four to five members in our family. We grow rice and cotton, and my wife too works in the field. My daughter is in Class X, and the boy is in Class V. The school here is till Class X; for plus two, they have to go to Turaikela. I myself have studied till Class IX but my wife has only passed Class II or III.

The main problem is [that] there is not enough work. That is why there is migration. The *maliks*<sup>14</sup> provide fuel, rail fare, medical care and provisions. It comes to about Rs. 100–120 per person. The seth and sardar look after the problems of migrant workers.

What do young people want to do? Many are in panchayats or are sarpanchs. What about women in panchayats? The *naik sarpanch* and *sabhya* (sabha representatives) are women. *Theek hai!* (Its alright!) They come to meetings, understand what is going on. Class II–IV *padhi hain* [they have studied till Class II or IV]. *Mil kar kaam panchayat mein acchha hai* (To work together in the panchayat is a good thing). Now more girls are studying till Class X at least.

In Hyderabad, school teachers also migrate. We have ashrams for children to stay back and study. KGBVs are special schools for girls and the one close by is in Titlagarh tehsil. The *sarkari* [government] trust runs the hostel for girls from migrant families. They have a building and 35 girls are there. Not for boys. But there is a boys' school in my village, which was started in September 2006. More ashrams will be opened. Already there are many for boys too, where government takes care of food, clothes, books and education, etc.

The MLA here is Haji Muhammad Ayub Khan, an Independent supported by BJD from Kantabanji. What can I say about the MLA?

As for caste... we have harijans but *chamar nahin hai* [there are no *chamars*]. *Ek ghasi hai* [there is one sweeper]; he flays leather and sells it in Kantabanji. There is only one such family.

There are more Doms here. Kyont, who do fishing, are few in number. The Scheduled Tribe [ST] community here is Gond. The rest are few in number. OBCs [Other Backward Castes] ... Patel, Mihir [weaver] Gaud. Half of them have land. In fact, OBCs have more land. STs have none and the Scheduled Castes [SCs] have very little. Earlier, untouchability was high.

Others would not go by even on the road that they walked on. Now caste and untouchability are practiced in the house by the elderly, not by the young...

There is no business here. Only *kuli-bhati* [coolie work/casual, manual labour]. The graphite mines are also closed now. So also the pharmaceutical company. Now there is nothing. There are two–three shops in the village. Basically, if you grow rice, you can manage through the year, or else panchayat work. There is nothing else...

### A Child held Hostage

At village Dhusamunda, Turaikala block in Kantabanji tehsil, we met the parents of a boy who was kept hostage by a brick kiln owner in Hyderabad when his parents returned. Kanu Paharia, the father, is a bamboo basket weaver (Paharias in the region are sometimes referred to as an atypical primitive tribe). He and his wife Bimala live in a somewhat isolated hamlet sharing homestead land with his sister whose *pucca* house, according to them, 'was built under the Indira Awaas Yojana scheme because she is a widow. She does *coolie majdoori* [labour]'. They have no land; *shunya* (zero) is what Bimala says. Kanu, perhaps 30 odd years of age, is obviously an ill man, slightly bent forward like an old man because of a problem with his back. He and his family made the trek to Hyderabad once three years ago. According to him, 'The work was too hard and because of the pain in my back I could not cope.' They had been given Rs. 5,000 as an advance, but 'the rate of payment was low—lower than other nearby *bhattas* [kilns]. The process of repayment was too slow'. His obviously malnourished wife Bimala, (now with a newborn in her arms) said that 'we wanted to move to another *bhatta* but could not because of the advance'. Since their advance had not been fully paid back, the *malik* detained

their son when they returned after three months. Kanu had given up on the son, but Bimala agonised about this and finally approached Vishnu, our lawyer informant for help. Vishnu filed a case and retrieved the child. But they are afraid that the *malik* will come by some time and 'harass them for the money'. The family appears very lonely. Bimala's brother is in Hyderabad, but she says he is a drunkard. Gautam, the 8-year-old son, remembers very little of what happened. He now goes to school where a mid-day meal is provided. His parents' earnings from making and selling baskets or peeling and selling mahua is just Rs. 15 over two days. But their village has a bore well and hand pump, a signpost of the development of the region.

### A Tragic Death Onsite

We met Sanjoy's family in Chatuanka, on the outskirts of Kantabanji town.

The entire family (the mother, father, son, daughter-in-law and granddaughter) had gone to a brick field in Cuttack. The daughter in law is a *bhai ki ladki* (daughter of a brother). The sardar (contractor) was Janak Suna. He too went to Cuttack. According to the father, there were more than 300 people in the chimney *bhatta*; 32–35 were in *pathri* work, and most of them were Oriya.

The workers doing the firing (for baking the bricks) were also from Orissa. The sardar acts for about 30–40 families. They had gone to Cuttack after Dussehra. The advance taken was Rs. 10,000 for four people—Sanjoy, his wife Kamla (40-years-old or so), son Surendra Boa (24-years-old), daughter-in-law Ranjita and the grandchild.

In February–March, the son developed high fever. Sanjoy said, 'We requested the chief to take him to a doctor, but he just gave some tablets and later called in a quack. He took him to a proper doctor only when he became critical.' The son was admitted to the Cuttack Medical College and there a scan and tests were done. But it was too late, and he died. 'Then we just came back. Sardar does nothing for us in such times,' Sanjoy added.

The son's wife is only about 20 years old. This was the first time that she had gone to Cuttack after her marriage, although she used



to go to Hyderabad with her parents. 'We went like that two or three times,' she said. The rate in Hyderabad used to be Rs. 100 for 1,000 bricks and in Cuttack it was Rs. 130 for 1,000 bricks.

Sanjoy, the father of the boy who died, said:

How many bricks did we make? *Hisaab nahin kiya* [we did not count]. Our advance would be adjusted against the work we did by that time. *Na hamaara baaki na uska baaki* [we owed him nothing and he owed us nothing]. The *malik* paid for wood, etc. for the cremation. This was the first time the boy had gone for this kind of work. Earlier, he used to do *coolie-majoori*.

Now what do I do? I have a grandchild to feed, and my daughter-in-law and us. We have no means to live even.... *gareeb ke age nahin, peeche nahin. Budhapa alag hai. Kaha ke guhaar karoon?* [For the poor, there's none in front and none behind. Old age is another matter. Who can one appeal to?] I had only one son who could have earned something and fed us. No, there was no *halla* there when my son died. They were all from other villages; we had only met them there. At the site, nobody said anything.

If we had some government support, we could survive. Our neighbours helped us and we are living in their house, since ours is in bad shape. They are not even charging us rent. The neighbours helped at the time of the funeral also, gave rice, etc. for the *dashkriya* (cremation).

I have no money, no food, no support, no son also now. I ask myself: why do I live? I too should die.

This is an SC Dom family. 'Others there were from the same district but [were of] different castes. What work did they do earlier? Daily wage labour. In the town, construction, etc. The earnings used to be Rs. 50–55 for males and Rs. 30–35 for females per day. I used to do the mixing, she used to carry bricks. *Agar door hota tha to raat ko vahin rukte the. Kabhi kabhi 1 hafta, kaam complete hone tak vahin rukna padta tha* [if we found casual work too far away, we used to stay there itself, sometimes for a whole week till the job was done].

### More on the Hazards Faced

Mambhoy from Kuibahal used to travel for brick work. Today, he sits in a wheelchair donated to him by the government. We met him and his wife, Bonita. Sampad Mahapatra, a journalist, helped him get an operation done to enable him to survive with some dignity. He keeps Sampad's NDTV card in safe custody because this contact has brought him a ray of hope—perhaps that is why he showed it to us.

Mambhoy had gone to Hyderabad three years ago:

At that time, I was well and I had just got married. Suddenly, while we were there, my sister had a problem—mental, he says. She was 18 years old then. I had gone to the bazaar. In my absence, she was taken [by someone] and fed something, after which she went 'off', mentally. This is what she said to us, '*bhaat khila diya*' [I was fed rice]. Thereafter, she used to go to the house where they 'fed' her and abuse them. They were also labour from this village. Since she could not work, I returned to leave her [at home]. When we were on the train, five people pushed me. 'Why are you taking her away,' they asked? They threw me off the train and took my sister away. I was senseless for some time. That is how I was injured. The police picked me up and informed the seth who admitted me to Illoor station hospital, where I was treated. My wife was still in Hyderabad and my brother was also there. The *malik* paid for some of the treatment. Since then, no one from my family goes to Hyderabad. My wife finds some work here, *kuli bhuti*—land labour, construction, *roz to kaam nahin milta hai, job card mein bhi kaam nahin mila hai* [we don't find work everyday, no work has been given to us even on the NREGA job card]. My child died. He was born premature—seven months. My brother has a wife but they too do not have a child. My poor mother also looks for some odd jobs to do.

What happened to the sister?

We do not know.

In his village, there are 200 households and some 200–300 people go out for work. There is work in the fields after rain, so if there is

no rain there is no work. So men-women/families go together, he says. They go to Hyderabad and also to Kumari Newar, Raipur. People have been going there for at least 20 years, he recalls. '*Seth log* [businessmen] come with advances which are used to pay off loans. They are usually Patels or Reddys. [There was] one Saha also. The contractor also takes people for government work. But he does not pay for weeks,' he adds.

The village is populated by SCs, STs and OBCs.

These people have job cards, one per household. But these are in the names of men. The women get it only if there are no men. Even when women ask, they do not get cards. Only one old woman has got it.

The sarpanch, who we met later, of course, told us a different story.

### **At Intersection Point: the Kantabanji Railway Station**

Since we were in Kantabanji in the last week of May, we met some workers from the returning streams at the station.

In the afternoon, when a train came in, some 300 workers could be seen detraining at Kantabanji. Dusty and exhausted, they marched out of the station as if in procession, even as a group of petty women hawkers from Maharashtra stood around the station trying to sell some toys to them. Some private tempos and their drivers stood outside the station, ready to be hired to ferry them back to their villages. As groups of workers huddled together, with a keen eye on their petty possessions, one or the other from several *pathri* units or a cluster of units began haggling and bargaining over tempo charges. Other groups of workers with their *potlas* left on foot.

The people we met told us that it had taken them three days to get back. They were from different villages. But many had come from the same *bhatta* in Hyderabad, located at Krishnareddypet, Nampalli station.

Their wage rates: 'We got Rs. 90 for 1,000 bricks. We were there for six months.'

*Kuchh bacha* (Did you save anything?), we ask.

One unit said:

We took Rs. 14,000 as advance. We were four adults, the cost of living there came to Rs. 10,500. We made 3,25,000 bricks. We have been going [there] for ten years now. I am Lokesh, my sister Amba, another sister, Namita; my *chachi* [paternal aunt] also went with us with one son and two daughters.

Two couples (the wives were sisters, Shanti and Suchitra) told us that the four of them have been going to Hyderabad for 10–12 years.

What did you buy? We asked them

Saris, said one, the other said, jeans. We like the work but don't like it either... it is very heavy work. We do not get good sleep after such work. Sometimes we get to sleep only after 2–3 pm,—*tab tak kaam karate hain* [the work goes on till then]. The sardar went with us. [We got] Rs. 100 for *khana peena* [food and drink]. *Kuchh bacha... nahin* [nothing was left]

They tell us that *pathri* labour is Oriya but firing is done by the Marathas in the *bhatta* at Krishnareddypet.

At the station again later at night, we talked to a *tohi* (group) of about 60 of which nearly half, if not more, were women. They were returning from 'Hyderabad' (actually Ghatkesari station in Medak district). They had been there for eight months. A sardar took them and paid them at the rate of Rs. 90 for making 1,000 bricks. He was nowhere around them now. About 10 families had gone from one village. Bhupen, son of Lakhi Bagati, in whose group were his brother and sister-in-law, said he was a matriculate. Many others too in this group had studied till that level. He said:

We have no land, only a place to stay. [We] have been going for 10 years now. [We] earlier did *chaas* [cultivation] at home on homestead land.

I have heard of NREGA; in fact, some of us got cards but no work was made available. We have a new sarpanch. I know about it. *Bade log ko card milta hai* [big people get cards]... It is

not as if we want to 'go out' for work. We got Rs. 500 for six days work for four people. *Jitni takat thi, kaam kiya* [We worked to the limits of our strength/capacity]. Three hours to make 1,000 bricks. In one day, it came to Rs. 1,500 for four people, [that meant] nearly Rs. 135 per day for four of us.

*Jitni takleef se ja aa rahe hain, hamin jaante hain* [only we know what difficulties compelled us to go]. More than 1,00,000 people go. My father who is from the milkman community, he also went. All the money is gone, the advance is also gone. We have no money in hand. No, he [the sardar] gave no money for food on the way. It has taken us four days to return. He gave us tickets. The train was too crowded. Now we have to spend our own money to reach home. The vehicle fellow crowds us in but charges Rs. 1,350 to ferry 50 people in two vehicles up to the village.

In another group at the station, we met a different category of workers—loaders—who said they got only Rs. 25 to carry 1,000 bricks. One of them said, 'I took an advance of Rs. 4,000. I do not know *hisaab* [to count]. Came away without money.' This group was composed of Gond tribals. Their sardar was from a village near Belapara Rajakharia.

Another said that the family unit had loaded 6,00,000 bricks. 'If there was a big factory here, we would not go,' he added.

### **Some New Developments and Contradictions in the Contractor Raj: A Licensed Contractor Speaks<sup>15</sup>**

Mansur Khan is a second-generation resident of Kantabanji. His father came from Muzaffarnagar as a contractor for 'ice bogeys'. The railway canteen was owned by Muslims. They then opened a meat shop and bought 18 acres of land. His brother has been an elected Legislative Assembly member from Kantabanji, whose official occupational profile is 'cultivator'.

Mansur Khan estimates that Rs 200 crores comes into Balangir due to migration: 'Till about 10–15 years ago, anti-socials did not allow people to go'. In fact, he says, 'Agents help workers but workers make mistakes and tell the police. Earlier the police used to take Rs. 100.'

People go from Kalahandi-Nayagada. All migrants go from Kantabanji. Chhatisgarh workers, [people from] Sonpur also go from here and 5,000 families from Balangir; 30,000 railway tickets are issued per month.

Unlike Vishnu, Khan's concerns are with the 'rush from Dussehra to Deepavali' and primarily with the extortionate demands of the police. 'Earlier, the police took Rs. 150. Now they charge Rs 500 for each group of migrants,' he said. According to him, 'Maliks give Rs. 950 per person. The licence fee for 20 persons is Rs. 250 and it is Rs. 450 for 50 persons.'

On regulation procedures, he comments critically that he had deposited the licence fee for 250 people, but was asked for the village names of the workers, which he could not provide. So for 7–8 years, 'workers went without a licence. For three years, I sent only 100 people with licence', he says. His version of why a criminal case of kidnapping was registered against him was that 52 of the workers recruited and paid for by him ran away. He and his partners 'found them' and effected 'recovery', following which, he was charged with kidnapping.

His perspective is: 'We cannot enter into direct agreement with women because we can't take responsibility because there can be risks for women. The agreement has to be with the male *mukhia* [head].'

New tensions are developing between recruitment and wage payment systems. According to him, the weekly payment is fixed at Rs. 150. Workers are asking for more. The 'seth says he will give Rs. 200 but will then stop advances. Two days earlier, some workers had gone to Bangalore for Rs. 220,' he adds.

Mansur Khan's elder brother is an engineer in the US, one brother's daughters have completed doctorates, one of whom is working in Delhi. He has bought land in Balangir district and planted *arhar* (lentils) and cotton. His wife is from a *kisan* (peasant) family.

## Some Issues and Questions

This report is part of a more long-term attempt to address issues of women and migration. It is work at its most initial stages, and

does not lay any claim to have even reached the more developed stages of study at the conceptual or empirical level. Instead, it attempts to open the field of what may be termed as some of the differing levels of entry points into empirical description. No element of the story has been developed. This is not unintentional. It is our contention that studies on women's labour or women's migration have been plagued with over-generalisations on the basis of either very limited levels of field enquiry/experience or by narrow perspectives on labour that fail to appreciate the enormous and continuing importance of the agrarian base of Indian society, such a base itself being of continental proportions and diversity. The nature of the changes that have been brought about through interactions with several phases of capitalist development, and the manner in which women's mobility and labour are imbricated in the process, are subjects that require a sweep and scale of investigation that perhaps no one is yet prepared for.

Nevertheless, our limited enquiries in the field throw up many issues with regard to the current construction boom and the importance of this in the dynamics of economic growth and the unevenness of the spread of this growth in both sectoral as well as regional terms. Piece rates for a collective labouring unit or a team rather than for an individual, although not a new system, has a different context in the contemporary period. In an era when women workers have acquired greater voice as women demanding equality, how women's work in such collective labouring units is to be measured and what their share of wages should be are new questions before the trade union movement. These questions have acquired greater urgency with the spread of more primitive forms of labour and accumulation that find fertile ground in the expanding reserve armies of labour in some segments of the economy while the more developed and more capital-intensive segments are showing rapidly shrinking capacities to absorb labour.

Is it only patriarchal prejudice that drives the sardar to say that he will not negotiate with women? Is the *jodi* unit in *pathri* work a modern-day transposition of an earlier mode of household production or is it a mode of extracting unpaid work wherein the labour of the woman is written into the contract, her wage entitlement remaining unstated despite visibility of her labour? And how,

for that matter, is the '*jodi*' constructed? Of course, the marital unit forms the standard, but what of the units that are formed by ensuring that a sister-in-law, unmarried daughter, mother, even an old widowed mother-in-law are enlisted to ensure that the unit can function? The basis of wage negotiation is linked to the unit of work as envisaged in the organisation of the work process. That is the key to the extraction of surplus in this sector where informality is virtually defined by the removal of women from the contractor-worker negotiating process. It remains to be seen how women operate in indirect negotiations through assertions within the family or even directly with employers on site.

Our field enquiries inevitably lead to the complex issue of the form, nature and relationship signified in the debt bondage syndrome. Looking at the nature of the transaction, one may be tempted to term it as part of a set of feudal relations. However, if one observes the sequence of the transaction and how it transpires at different stages in this form of organisation of production, other questions arise. The larger social context of capitalist production relations within which debt and distress occur shifts, the terms of reference underlying wage negotiation towards advance-based recruitment, and how it takes place raises larger issues of social relations and the function and purpose of seemingly transitional/transient forms of labour patterns emerging within the economy. The multi-tiered contractor system emerges with and remains integrated into the nature of this production and the organisation of the enterprise as well as the relations of production. It is not incidental, and does not appear to be a passing phase in the development of capitalism even though its precise modalities may be changing along with the legislative efforts to rein in these forms.

One of the aspects that needs further investigation is the extent to which the experiences of women constantly or periodically on the move has an added element of increased volatility and vulnerability of the marginalised groups in society. What have been the social implications as far as the women are concerned? What is the impact of these processes/experiences on the lives of women and their families as well as the communities they live in? Those familiar with rural India can see that those involved in this circular movement of population comprise the labouring groups and are



largely drawn from the marginalised and the most depressed sections amongst the caste hierarchy, as well as the tribals.

Further, what consequences does the frequent, long-term absence of the youth and working population of a region have on its social dynamics? A visit to some of the villages shows that, for a large part of the year, the resident population comprises the old, aged, disabled or at times small children, though in the *bhatta* even small children have work to do. We were proudly introduced to a girl barely 11 years old, who helps with brick work, cooks, cleans and washes for the whole family unit. Can the Ashram schemes and the Kasturba Balika Vidyalayas (referred to by the contractor sarpanch) or residential schools for girl drop-outs up to middle level—no matter how good the initiative—address these issues?

## Notes

1. Census of India 2001, Data Highlights—Migration Tables (D1, D1 (Appendix), D2 and D3 Tables).
2. These figures of course represent population mobility rather than labour mobility.
3. Statement 9, Census of India 2001.
4. Statement 15, Census of India 2001.
5. Of course, the increase in female migration for work/employment—from 1,650,716 in the nine years preceding 1991 to 2,062,978 in the nine years preceding 2001 (and from 3.0 per cent to 3.2 per cent among all female migrants)—pales before the increase in male migration for work/employment which, across the same periods, rose from 8,286,330 to 12,309,216 and from 30.4 per cent to 37.6 per cent among all male migrants. Marriage, despite remaining the overwhelmingly dominant reason for women's migration, dipped marginally in terms of its significance between 1991 and 2001. It may, however, be noted that there would be links between marriage and labour migration, as no doubt in many cases a marriage signifies the transfer of female labour power from the natal to the husband's home. Females constituted close to 42 per cent of those who migrated for associational reasons other than marriage between 1991 to 2001, among whom too there would be links with post-migration employment. Both these aspects add weight to the argument that the economic significance of women's migration statistics ought not to be invisibilised or dismissed as has hitherto been the case.
6. As per Statement 27 in Census of India 2001, Migration Data: Data Highlights-II, more than 18 per cent of migrant women (11,795,814, that is, around five

- times the figure based on work/employment or business reasons for migration) were main workers, another 16 per cent were marginal workers (10, 321,158), bringing the work participation rate (WPR) among migrant women to 34 per cent which is considerably higher than the census figure for female WPR of 25.7 per cent. According to the same 2001 Census count, women workers constituted 32 per cent of all workers (migrant and non-migrant).
7. See Government of India, National Sample Survey Organisation, Report No. 409 (1993–94), Report No. 458 (1999–2000) and Report No. 515 (2004–05). Figures have been adjusted with Census 2001.
  8. There have been discussions and writings on the region.
  9. A woman we met in one of the villages recalled that Indira Gandhi visited the area that year to survey the conditions first hand. It was the first time that she had seen a helicopter.
  10. The last ruler of the erstwhile feudatory Patna state, Rajendra Narain Singh Deo, who signed the accession to the Indian Union, became a chief minister of Orissa (1967–1971). Vishnu informed us that the area Member of Parliament (MP) is usually from the same family including the present MP, Sangeeta Devi of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP).
  11. Sukhwasis, harijans, agricultural labourers, and also artisans, basket weavers, among others, were also some of the earliest migrants.
  12. Sardar refers to categories of intermediaries operating at different levels who emerged as labour recruitment contractors/suppliers during colonial rule in India for a commission/fee. Much has been written about them in the context of tea plantations in north-eastern India.
  13. NREGA or the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act was adopted by the Indian Parliament in 2005. The Act enshrines a right to 100 days of work / employment as per the statutory minimum wage to one member per household in rural India. Alternatively, in case of failure to provide work, there is entitlement to an unemployment allowance. In the first phase, it envisaged provision of work on site in 200 districts, extended to 300 districts and finally to all the rural areas.
  14. *Malik* literally means owner. It refers to the proprietor for whom the work is being done.
  15. Licence here refers to the licence to be obtained by a contractor transporting labour from one state to another as per the Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979.

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