

Beyond Borders of Poverty: Seasonal Migration and Livelihood Sustainability in Eastern India, Kalahandi.

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Abstract

Seasonal migration has long been a survival strategy for marginalized rural communities in India, particularly in regions marked by chronic poverty and agrarian distress, such as Kalahandi. This study critically interrogates migration not merely as a response to scarcity but as a complex livelihood strategy that reshapes social, economic, and cultural landscapes. Drawing on narratives from migrant households, the paper situates migration within broader debates on sustainable rural livelihoods, vulnerability, and resilience.

By weaving together intersectional perspectives on gender, caste, and Indigenous heritage, the paper challenges linear development discourses that frame migration solely as either failure or opportunity. Instead, it argues for a nuanced understanding of migration as both a coping mechanism and a contested pathway toward sustainability. The findings highlight the urgent need for policy frameworks that integrate mobility into rural development planning, while safeguarding cultural continuity and social justice. Ultimately, the study positions Kalahandi's migration narratives as representative of broader rural transformations in Eastern India, offering critical insights into how communities navigate the precarious balance between survival and sustainability amid structural poverty...

Keywords: Migration, Poverty, Kalahandi, Sustainability, Rural Development

1. INTRODUCTION

A significant aspect of human history has been migration in the quest for better lifestyles (Srivastava & Sasikumar, 2003). Both the distance and length of these movements can vary from short to long (Kosinski & Prothero, 1975; Massey, 1990; Stone, 1975). The current literature indicates that seasonal and temporary work migration is common in developing nations (Brauw, 2007; Deshingkar & Farrington, 2006; Hugo, 1982; Lam et al., 2007; Mberu, 2006; Yang, 1992). Poor people in India have long relied on seasonal and circular migration, also referred to as cyclical or oscillatory migration (see, for instance, Usha Rao's 1994 study of Palamur labor in Andhra Pradesh, de Haan's (2002) historical study of migration in Western Bihar, or Srivastava and Ali's 1981 study of laborers from Bundelkhand). It is widely acknowledged that migration does not occur only in times of catastrophe or distress but is a regular aspect of the poor's livelihood strategies (Mc Dowell & De Haan, 1997).

In India, migration is typically carried out by a single man; the migrant maintains strong ties to their home regions and invests their savings in the village rather than the city, while a portion of the family stays behind (De Haan, 1999). Typically, seasonal migrants only spend a few months of the year abroad from their home country. When an employee accepts a loan or salary advance from their company to pay for a significant expense, like a wedding, a religious ceremony, or a medical bill, bondage often begins. Alternatively, a labor broker that transports migrant workers to far-off locations may provide the advance (Premchander et al., 2014). Debt is more than just a financial problem. It occurs in the context of contemporary social ties and conventions (James & Rajak, 2014; Peebles, 2010).

One of the most important livelihood strategies used by the poorest people in rural India is temporary migration, which primarily takes the form of seasonal labor mobility (Bremner, 1978; Bremner, 1996; Deshingkar & Farrington, 2009a; Deshingkar & Start, 2003; Haberfeld et al., 1999; Mosse et al., 2005; Rao & Rana, 1997; Rogaly, 1998; Rogaly et al., 2001). For many of India's poorest people, seasonal migration is an unavoidable

aspect of their existence and means of subsistence. In India, seasonal migration is increasing significantly (Rogaly, 1998; Deshingkar & Start, 2003; Deshingkar et al., 2008; Keshari & Bhagat, 2012; Nayyar & Kim, 2018). In India, poorer eastern states are populated by migrants from more developed western and northern states (Rogaly, 1998; Deshingkar, 2006).

Drawing on a primary survey of 100 households in the poorest regions of India, this paper investigates the causes of seasonal migration in western Odisha (Kalahandi). It examines how it has served as a strategy for rural livelihoods.

Theories of migration

There is a vast body of literature on migration, with interpretations from different disciplinary perspectives. Earlier analyses of migration were rooted in economic theory (Todaro, 1976) and focused on the rational behaviour of individuals. More recently, economic theories have been broadened to accommodate transaction costs, imperfect information as well as imperfections in rural capital markets (Stark, 1980; Stark, 1991). These ‘new’ economics of labour migration also recognised the household as the unit of decision-making, shaped by the incentives and constraints it faces. The New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) framework of analysis (Taylor, 1991) addresses the multiplicity of factors underlying the decision to migrate and the potential effects of migration on both migrant origin and destination economies. Migration and remittances from it have both positive and negative effects on the welfare of rural households and communities, depending on the type of household/community. The impacts also change with time: in the beginning, migration may deprive the household and rural economy of labour but in the longer term, remittances may be invested back into improving productivity and creating assets and household incomes. The Marxist interpretation (Bremner, 1996; Olsen, 1996) focuses on how wider structures have perpetuated the exploitation of migrants by capitalists and intermediaries. Some authors have portrayed migrants as no more than bonded labourers – powerless, poor, and perpetually in debt. For example, Olsen and Ramana Murthy’s (2000) study of the legendary Palamur labourers from Mahabubnagar district in Andhra Pradesh sums up their plight as follows.

“For labourers from landless and small peasant households struggling to subsist, the maistries (contractors) are effectively the only creditors and monopsonistic buyers of their labour power, in the absence of alternative sources of credit and employment” (Olsen & Murthy, 2000).

Temporary and Seasonal Migration in India

Internal migration in India has historically been low (Davis, 1951), and migration statistics through the early 1990s indicate a further decline in mobility (Kundu & Gupta, 1996). However, National Sample Survey figures for 1992-93 and 1999-2000 suggest an increase in mobility over the last decade (Srivastava & Sasikumar, 2003). In addition, census data indicate that labour mobility (migration for employment) increased during the same period (Bhagat, 2010). Temporary and seasonal migration is an important form of labour mobility in countries experiencing a growing shift of the labour force from agriculture to industry and the tertiary sector.

Because migration necessitates access to resources such as financial, social, and human capital, it is frequently a strategy available only to individuals living in less severe poverty. However, research indicates that impoverished people tend to travel shorter distances and have fewer or less appealing opportunities. Research on migration also frequently ignores involuntary immobility, which occurs when people want to relocate but are unable to do so (Lenhardt, 2023).

Amartya Sen’s *Poverty and Famines* argues that famines are not just about food scarcity, but about people’s Entitlements- their ability to acquire food through production, trade, or work. He introduced the “entitlement approach,” showing that famines, such as the 1943 Bengal famine, often occur when economic changes reduce people’s access to food, even when food is available (Sen, 1981).

For nations in the Global South, poverty remains a significant problem. Despite a respectable pace of economic growth, adequate employment opportunities—a critical factor in reducing poverty are becoming increasingly elusive for such nations. Under the guise of neo-liberal economic policies, economic growth and employment growth are becoming increasingly distinct (Patel, 2024).

Further, Patel (2024) argues that economic growth is “jobless” or “job loss” rather than inclusive. “Active Labour Market Policies” (ALMPs), in the form of “Public Works Programmes” (PWP), have become a key strategy for reducing unemployment and poverty, despite their failure to reverse this trend. Second, migration from rural to urban areas is heavily dependent on this. However, in the battle against poverty, increasing agricultural productivity, a critical issue of the “agrarian transition,” as widely observed and documented worldwide, is being overlooked (Patel, 2024).

Seasonal Migrants in Odisha and Kalahandi

The state of Odisha, located on the Bay of Bengal in eastern India, has 32.59% of its population living in poverty, compared with the national average of 21.92%, according to NITI Aayog's 2018 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) India Index Baseline report. Bargarh, Balangir, Boudh, Deogarh, Jharsuguda, Kalahandi, Nuapada, Sambalpur, Sonepur, and Sundergarh are tribal-dominated, impoverished, hilly districts in western Odisha. Additionally, the eight Kalahandi-Balangir-Koraput (KBK) districts, which include the four western Odisha districts of Kalahandi, Nuapada, Bolangir, and Sonepur, are among the poorest areas of India. Because of their vulnerability to recurrent droughts, the impoverished frequently migrate during the non-agricultural season (Tripathy, 2021).

The landless and land poor in western Odisha, who are primarily members of Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Castes (OBCs), are compelled to migrate to Andhra Pradesh's brick kilns, Tamil Nadu's rice mills, Maharashtra's sugarcane fields, and Raipur's construction and other labor jobs due to their inability to make ends meet (Smita, 2008; Tripathy, 2012). Through local middlemen, labor contractors travel to western Odisha towns to recruit workers. The latter obtain fees from the former based on the quantity of workers organized for migration to brick kilns outside the state (Tripathy, 2021).

"In The Politics of Hunger in India: A Study of Democracy, Governance and Kalahandi's Poverty" (2000), Bob Currie explored why starvation and poverty persisted in Kalahandi despite India's democratic institutions. Democracy did not automatically prevent famine; local governance and accountability often failed. Publicity and elections did little to change structural poverty; hunger remained entrenched. He analysed how bureaucratic inertia, corruption, and policy gaps perpetuated deprivation. Currie's central argument is that democracy without responsive governance cannot eliminate hunger, and Kalahandi serves as a case study of this contradiction (Currie, 2000). P. Sainath (1996), in his landmark reportage *Everybody Loves a Good Drought* (1996), chronicled Kalahandi as one of India's poorest districts, exposing the absurdities of development schemes. He showed how development projects often harmed Adivasi communities, stripping them of land and livelihoods. Sainath's narrative style emphasized the human cost of poverty, portraying Kalahandi not just as statistics but as lived suffering. His work remains a classic of rural reportage, widely taught in universities, and continues to resonate as a critique of India's uneven development (Sainath, 1996).

Migration is a universal phenomenon. It occurs for various reasons. In Kalahandi, the lack of non-agricultural employment in villages is the primary driver of migration. MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) was launched in India with various objectives. However, migration in Kalahandi has declined in the Golamunda and Narla blocks, both in terms of the number of persons and the number of days. However, this decline cannot be attributed exclusively to MGNREGA (Suna & Suna, 2023).

Although Kalahandi remains one of Odisha's most migration-prone districts, the administration's surveillance remains inadequate. Just three of the district's ten registered labour contractors have renewed their licenses this year. When combined, the three have identified 2,000 migrant labourers. Covert, unlicensed middlemen hire the majority of labourers. The migration tracking system is inadequate. In contrast to the 45,000 workers counted during the COVID-19 pandemic, unofficial estimates place the number closer to 60,000 (Kar, 2025).

Kalahandi's seasonal exodus has resurfaced, with thousands of workers fleeing the area in search of jobs. After the festivals, a large number of workers who returned for Nuakhai and Dussehra have already departed for their jobs, with very few remaining for the harvest season. Migration has resumed after the first stage of cotton plucking and the harvest of the early variety of paddy. When the cotton and paddy harvests are finished, it will fully develop (TOI, 2025). To reduce distress migration, the state government designated the blocks of Golamunda, Bhawanipatna, Lanjigarh, Thuamul Rampur, and Madanpur Rampur as "migration-prone blocks" and authorized 300 days of labor under MGNREGS. Nevertheless, this clause is not used and is shortened to the customary 100-day period, which heightens concerns about migration from these regions. Villages such as Manjhari, Nakatikani, Udesrang, Bandita, Rengamapari, Dhamanpur, Khaliapali, Tapania, Nuagaon, Uchla, and Gandamer are experiencing significant migration within the Golamunda block alone. Approximately 20,000 individuals may have already relocated this season, mainly to Surat, Rajkot, Mumbai, Andhra Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh, according to the block chairperson, Bindu Mahananda. He stated, "People migrate because they get regular work and earn more, which is not available here" (Kar, 2025).

Objectives

This study's primary goal is to identify the causes of the seasonal migration from western Odisha. Its specific objectives are to investigate the causes of distressed migration and to examine how seasonal migration has served as a strategy for rural livelihoods.

4.1 Methodology

The present study is mainly based on primary data. Primary data were collected using a semi-structured questionnaire explicitly developed for this study. The study is conducted using a sample of 100 households from the Kalahandi district of Odisha. Of the 13 blocks in the district, the Junagarh block has been selected. Further, three villages from Junagarh block namely Chhoriagarh, Murlapadar, and Mahibhar, have been selected as the

sample block.

Table -1 Socio-Demographic profile of migrant households	
Background	characteristics
total	
total of 100 participants	
age in year	
15-25	30%
26-35	49%
36-45	15%
46-55	6%
Sex	
Male	78%
Female	22%
Caste	
SC	35%
ST	16%
OBC	49%
Education	
school attended	
yes	93%
no	7%
Level of education	
No attended school	7%
primary	35%
secondary	50%
Higher Secondary	8%
marital status	
Married	59%
Unmarried	41%
occupation at Origin	
agriculture	16%
daily labour	70%
Mason	14%
monthly family income	
>10k	86%
10k-20k	14%
<20k	0%
livestock	
No livestock	69%
Cow/Buffalo	12%
Goat/ Sheep	10%
hen	9%
House type	
Kachha	20%
Pucca	15%
Semi-Pucca	65%
Sanitation	
open	72%
Inside	28%
family	
Nuclear	88%
joint	12%

Result and discussion

5.1 Socio- Demographic Profile of Migrants Household

Table 1 shows that the largest share of migrants (49%) is in the age group 26-35, followed by 30% (15-25), 15% (36-45), and 6% (46-55). The majority of migrants (78%) are male, and 22% are female. With respect to social category, the highest 49 % of migrants belong to OBCs, followed by 35 % SCs, 16 % STs. However, the majority

of migrants have attended school: 50 % have completed secondary education, 35 % have completed primary education, 8 % have completed higher secondary education, and 7 % have not attended school. Among respondents, 59% are married, and 41% are unmarried. The majority of respondents at their place of origin are employed in various occupations; among them, 70% are daily labourers, 16 are in agriculture, and 14% are masons. The majority of respondents (69%) do not own livestock, followed by 12% who own cows or buffalo, 10% who own goats or sheep, and 9% who own hens. Furthermore, 65% of respondents reported having a semi-pucca house, followed by 20% kaccha and 15% pucca. Approximately 72% of respondents use open sanitation, and only 28% use indoor sanitation. The majority (88%) of respondents have a nuclear family, and 12% live in a joint family.

5.2 Mechanism of Seasonal Migration

Table 2 shows that the majority of respondents (approximately 63%) obtain information about the destination place where migrants work, followed by 22 % NGOs, 13 % other sources, and 2 % by the government. Source. Regarding sources of information, the majority of respondents reported that 29 % came from family and friends, followed by 28 % from mass media, 19 % from neighbours, 12 % from intermediaries, 7 % from family, and 5 % from their own prior experience. Further, the majority of respondents at their origin access various state government schemes, such as PMJDY (Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yozana), with 76% classified as beneficiaries and 24% as non-availing the scheme. All respondents (100%) reported possessing an Aadhaar card. A majority (54%) of respondents do not access the benefits of Mo Kudia, and approximately 46% do. In case of Pradhan Mantri Awas Yozana 56 % of respondents reported yes, and 44 % said no. However, under Biju Pakka Ghar yozna, 51% of respondents are beneficiaries and 49% are non-beneficiaries.

Table 2 Mechanism of Seasonal Migration and Access to the Government-Sponsored Schemes	
total 100 participants	
Means of getting the information about the destination	
Telephone	63%
Inform. Led by the Government. Sources	2%
NGOs	22%
others	13%
Sources of Information regarding the workplace	
Through friends/ Relatives	29%
Through family	7%
Through Mid-men	12%
Through Neighbour	19%
Own earlier Exp.	5%
Mass Media	28%
Sources you have access to	
PMJDY	
Yes	76%
No	24%
ADHAR CARD	
yes	100%
no	0%
MO KUDIA	
yes	46%
no	54%
PMAY	
yes	56%
no	44%
BPGY	
yes	51%
no	49%

5.3 Consequences on Migrants

Table 3 demonstrates that how community network and social capital formation provide assistance during difficult period at origin. Majority 77 % of respondents reported they get assistance from neighbour and 33 % don't get any assistance. In case of sickness 82 % reported they get assistance and 18 % stated they don't get any assistance. In case of agricultural and domestic work 73 % and 72 % reported they get assistance respectively and 27 % and 28 % reported they don't get any kind of assistance. During emergency 84 % respondents reported they get assistance and 16 % said they don't get any assistance. In respect to sharing food 51 % respondents said they get assistance and 49 % said they don't get assistance. In case of construction of house 64 % respondents said they get assistance 36 % said they don't get assistance. In case of ceremonies and other rituals they around 83 % respondents said they get assistance and 17 % don't get any assistance. However, 20 % of respondents are associated with SHG (Self-Help Group), and 80 % are not associated.

With respect to social capital formation at the workplace or destination, 96% of respondents stay at the construction site, 2% rent a house, and 2% live in a tent. During sickness, they get assistance from the contractor. During illness at work, 41% of respondents received assistance from contractors, followed by 37% from middlemen, 15% from family members, and 7 % from friends. However, with respect to financial assistance during the plight, 43% receive assistance from contractors, 35% from middlemen, 14% from family members, and 8% from friends.

Table -3 Consequences on Migrant: Social Capital-Origin/Destination		
total 100 participants		
Social Capital (Origin)		
Assistance from Neighbour.		
	yes	no
During financial plight	77%	33%
During Sickness	82%	18%
Agricultural work	73%	27%
Domestic Work	72%	28%
Emergency	84%	16%
sharing food	51%	49%
construction house	64%	36%
Ceremonies	83%	17%
SHG/NGO		
Engaged		20%
Not-Engaged		80%
Social Capital (Destination)		
Where do you stay		
Rent House		2%
Construction site		96%
Footpath		0%
Tent		2%
Sources of help during sickness.		
Contractor		41%
Middle Men		37%
Family Members		15%
Friends		7%
Source financial assistance during Plight		
Contractor		43%
Middle Men		35%
Family Members		14%
Friends		8%

5.4 Utilisation of Savings and Wellbeing

Table 4 suggests that 76% of respondents said that their income help to meet the basic necessities of life while 24 % said no. Around 55 % of respondents said it helps to clear debts, 45 % said no. Approximately 42 % of respondents stated that it helps to maintain the education of children, 58 % said no. Regarding health issue 94 %

of respondents said it help them to meet the expenses and 6 % said no. In case of house building and improving house 56 % of respondents said it helped them lot 44 % said it did not help in this way. In case of ceremony/ wedding 66% of respondents reported it helped them while 34 % said it didn't help. In case of purchasing land 86 % said it didn't help them and 14 % stated it helped them. In order to purchase jewellery 53 % said it didn't help, 47 % said it helped them. Around 32 % respondents stated that it helped them in investing in business and 68 % said it didn't help. However, in case of food security 100 % said they are satisfied at origin. In case of providing education to the children 79 % of respondents said it didn't help them, 21 % said it helped them. In case of renovation of house majority of respondents reported that they renovated their house along ago, followed by

Table 4: Utilization of Saving/ Wellbeing/ Improvement

Purpose	yes	no
Meeting Basis necessities	76%	24%
Clearing the debt	55%	45%
Education of Children	42%	58%
Expanses on health	94%	6%
House building/Improving house	56%	44%
Ceremonies/wedding	66%	34%
Purchase land	14%	86%
Purchase jewellery	47%	53%
Investment in business	32%	68%
Status of Food Security	100%	0%
Wellbeing/ Improve		
Able to provide higher edu. To Child	21%	79%
Renovate house		
last year		15%
Two years Back		6%
3 years back		11%
A long ago		68%
Leisure from work		
Never		5%
Rarely		41%
Sometimes		54%
How satisfied now a days		
Very dissatisfied		0%
Dissatisfied		1%
Unsure		39%
Satisfied		60%
Very Satisfied		0%
Things achieved in life		
Not at all		10%
Slightly		19%
somewhat		24%
moderate		46%

Table 5 Vulnerability and Risk / Reason for migration

Total 100 participant

Vulnerability and Risk**Social Status**

Poor	1%
fair	44%
good	51%
very good	4%

Harassment

Not at all	38%
Slightly	43%
somewhat	19%

Exploitation by Middle-Men

Not at all	39%
Slightly	43%
somewhat	16%
moderate	2%

Redress against the Mistreatment

Not at all	39%
Slightly	43%
somewhat	13%
moderate	5%

Vulnerabilities to illness

Never	4%
Rarely	38%
Occasionally	19%
Sometimes	39%

Lack of Social protection

Strongly disagree	1%
Disagree	18%
Neither disagree nor agree	38%
Agree	32%
Strongly agree	11%

Reason for Migration

	yes	no
Lack of enough non-agricultural job in village	57%	43%
low wage rate	71%	29%
Higher expected income outside	71%	29%
Environmental Degradation	67%	33%
Rural Poverty	79%	21%
Inequality	35%	65%
Lack of agricultural job in lean periods	63%	37%
Large size of household	56%	44%

15 % last year, 11 % three years ago and 15 % last year and 6 % two years back. In order to understand how much leisure they get at workplace majority of respondents 49 % said sometimes they get leisure followed by 41 % said rarely and 5% said never. Furthermore, 60 % said they are satisfied followed 39 % unsure and 1 % dissatisfied about their condition at present. In order to know the achievement in their life majority of respondents around 46 % said moderately they have achieved things, followed by 24 % somewhat, 19 % in a slight manner, 10 % not at all.

5.5 Reason of Migration, Vulnerability and Risk

Table 5 shows the condition, social status and the reason of migration in the selected study area. In respect of social status majority of respondents around 51 % said its good, followed by 44 % fair, 4 % very good and 1 % poor. However, majority of respondents 43% stated that they face harassment at workplace in a slight manner, followed by 38 % not at all and 19 % to some extent. Further, majority 43 % respondents said they are exploited by middle men in a slight manner, followed by 39 % not at all, 16 % somewhat 2 % in a moderate manner.

Additionally, in respect of redressal against the mistreatment majority 43% said slightly it is done, followed by 39 % not at all, 13 % somewhat, 5 % in a moderate manner.

Vulnerabilities to illness majority 39 % of respondents stated that sometimes they face it, followed by 38 % rarely, 19 % occasionally, 4 % never. In case of social protection 38 % of respondents were neither disagree nor agree, followed by 32 % agree, 18 % disagree, 11 % strongly agree, 1 % strongly disagree.

People migrate for various reasons and majority of respondents 79 % stated rural poverty is the major cause of migration, followed by 71 % low wage rate and higher expected income outside, 67 % environmental degradation, 63 % lack of agricultural job in lean periods, 57% lack of enough non-agricultural job in village, 56 % large size of household and 35 % inequality.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that seasonal migration in Kalahandi is not merely a short-term response to economic distress but a structurally embedded livelihood strategy shaped by rural poverty, agrarian stagnation, environmental vulnerability, and limited local employment opportunities. Drawing on primary data from migrant households, the findings reveal that migration is largely undertaken by young, working-age men from socially and economically marginalized communities, particularly OBCs, SCs, and STs. The dominance of daily wage labourers among migrants highlights the fragile and informal nature of rural employment in the region.

Seasonal migration contributes significantly to household survival by ensuring food security, meeting health expenditures, clearing debts, and supporting housing improvements. However, its contribution to long-term asset creation, education advancement, and productive investment remains limited. While remittances help households cope with immediate necessities, they rarely translate into sustained upward mobility, thereby reinforcing the cyclical nature of migration. The study also underscores the paradox of social capital: while strong community networks provide substantial support at the place of origin, migrants at destination sites remain highly dependent on contractors and intermediaries, exposing them to varying degrees of exploitation, harassment, and insecurity. Despite access to several government welfare schemes, gaps in implementation, particularly inadequate utilization of MGNREGS in designated migration-prone blocks, continue to fuel distress-driven mobility. The persistence of migration, therefore, reflects not individual failure but systemic shortcomings in rural development planning and social protection mechanisms.

Overall, the study argues for reframing seasonal migration as an integral component of rural livelihoods rather than an anomaly to be eliminated. Policy interventions must move beyond restrictive approaches and instead focus on creating dignified local employment, strengthening social security at destination sites, regulating labour intermediaries, and integrating mobility-sensitive planning into rural development frameworks. Only through such inclusive and rights-based strategies can migration evolve from a survival mechanism into a pathway toward sustainable rural livelihoods.

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