

Opinion » Op-Ed

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Brutalised migrants of western Odisha

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COMMON SIGHT: Children are preferred in the brickmaking industry because they are short and need not bend down like adults.
Photo: T. Vijaya Kumar

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The chopping off of the palms of two migrant workers is a wake-up call

The gruesome incident of the chopping off of the palms of two [migrant labourers](#) of Kalahandi district of western Odisha by the labour contractor mafia in December 2013 should serve as a wake-up call. The incident highlights the ruthless extent to which the mafia can go to meet its ends and brings home the fact that more than 60 years after Independence, the poorest in our country still remain woefully unprotected.

The incident took place after the workers, who had taken an advance from a labour contractor to work in the brick kilns of Hyderabad, got into a dispute with him regarding the payment and place of work. When the dispute could not be resolved, two of them had to pay this terrible price. Gruesome as it is in itself, the incident is but the proverbial tip of the iceberg of a sordid modern day version of human trafficking and the slave trade, exploiting the most vulnerable and robbing them of their dignity. Yes, the police have arrested some of those responsible and the administration has further taken action to stop migrants from going out. Unless more fundamental steps are taken, the impact of such punitive action is more than likely to be undone by the migrants themselves, who see no choice but to hit the migration trail.

Distress-induced

The Kalahandi-Bolangir-Koraput (KBK) region of western Odisha has long been known for all the wrong reasons — starvation deaths, drought, famines, poverty and distress, and, over the past six years or so, Maoism. With unproductive landholdings and very few means of sustenance, the rural poor are plunged into crisis every year. Their only option is to migrate to other States in search of work. Among the most favoured destinations for them are the brick kilns firing the construction boom in cities such as Hyderabad. A well-entrenched chain of labour contractors and middlemen, starting from dons based in Andhra Pradesh and going down to touts located in the interior villages of the KBK districts, organise the trafficking of labour from these villages to the cities. Every year, after the 60-day paddy crop is harvested around the beginning of September, comes the festival of *nuakhai*, meaning “eating new rice,” an old tradition of western Odisha. Poor families take an advance from the labour contractors at this time. Soon after, men, women and children start migrating in large numbers to pay off this advance by offering their labour to the contractors. A documentary produced by the National Consortium of Civil Society Organisations on MGNREGA movingly depicts

the lives, journeys and choices of these families. They live on brick kiln sites in makeshift shanties, braving the harsh weather with no protection. With no toilets and no sources of drinking water, these sites are hotbeds of misery and disease. Sexual exploitation of women is rampant. On the journey, travelling with their belongings and children in overcrowded trains, people lose life and limb. Attempts to escape from the work site can meet with instant and ruthless reprisal as the two migrants found out. Children are preferred in the brickmaking industry because they are short, so while filling brickmaking frames with mud, they need not bend down like adults. Also, when freshly made bricks are piled up, there is no space for an adult to walk and overturn the bricks for drying. Children can walk on top of the bricks and overturn them without causing damage. So, the labour is contracted according to the traditional *pathariya* system, where *pathariya* is a work unit comprising a man, a woman and one or two children. And, in the process, every law of the land is violated to keep India shining.

A study carried out in Nuapada district of western Odisha, at the request of the district authorities some years ago, concluded that the out-migration is distress-induced. That this needed to be established may look ridiculous at first sight. But the significance of this conclusion cannot be underlined enough, for sadly, in government circles, an unwritten code prohibits acceptance of the distress nature of this migration. The logic is deadly simple — if this migration is accepted as distress-induced, the responsibility rests with the administration to stop it. The study further estimated that more than half the rural population in the district is migrant, with more than one-third of these migrants being women and about 13 per cent being children. This human trafficking fetches the touts, middlemen and mafia dons huge profits, with the turnover of the migration industry of western Odisha estimated to be more than Rs.500 crore per annum. An industry of this size cannot exist, let alone thrive, without the patronage of the powerful. And it is widely known in the area that political vested interests, cutting across party lines, are firmly behind this organised racket. No wonder then, that the study on Nuapada was dead before arrival! A look at the way migrant labour is forced to live at migration sites, however, should permanently put to rest any notion that these people will prefer to migrate if they actually have a choice. The point is that they migrate because they do not have a choice. And the tragedy is that being prisoners of circumstance, they too have started believing that this is indeed a choice they are making.

Toward sustainable livelihoods

But the work of several civil society organisations acting in close connect with these migrant families in Nuapada and Bolangir districts shows that given an alternative these people will never go back to “Hyderabad,” a synonym in their eyes of what can go terribly wrong with their lives. Such work also holds out the promise of the change that can be made to happen if the administration decides to muster the requisite will. These organisations have mobilised the rural poor to form MGNREGA wage-seeker committees. These committees try to ensure that MGNREGA plans are made according to priorities that the village community decides, that work is opened on time and wage payments are not delayed. Working closely with selected *gram panchayats*, these organisations have helped to create assets for sustainable livelihoods of the poor. The results, though on a small scale, are there for all to see. Farm ponds made at a modest cost of Rs.30,000 or so, have provided protective irrigation to the paddy crop and stopped distress migration for several hundred families, in some cases, reversing a trend which has been going on for two or three generations. Enterprising farmers have topped up this public investment with private investment and use the water remaining in the farm ponds after the harvest of the paddy crop for fish-farming and growing vegetables in their backyards. In some cases, community water harvesting structures have helped to give protective irrigation to several hundred acres of paddy fields downstream. Assured employment and timely wages have given workers the confidence that they can break the stranglehold of the contractors. The documentary referred to earlier, and screened in Bolangir and Nuapada districts in several village and panchayat meetings, helped to sensitise the administration and panchayat leaders to the fragile existence of these migrants. Officers with fire in their belly resolved to work hand-in-hand with civil society to leverage MGNREGA so as to stem this migration. In May 2013, the Odisha Panchayati Raj Department, after meetings with these migrant families, announced that the job guarantee would be extended to 150 days per family in the districts of Bolangir and Nuapada. Micro-plans for 150 villages were made with the support of civil society. But, tragically, the officers who had shown the courage to take on the mafia were soon transferred, giving credence to the belief that “big brother” is still all powerful.

But as these examples show, a lot can be done, with the requisite political and administrative will and imaginative partnerships with civil society. The State government needs to ensure that there are dedicated human resources to execute well-made MGNREGA and rural livelihood plans. A provision for this has been made through the Cluster Facilitation Teams provided for under MGNREGA 2.0. Without this capacity in place, extending the job guarantee beyond 100 days is unlikely to go very far. It further needs to work in mission mode for ensuring outcomes, for if

employment opportunities or wage payments are delayed, the migrants will go back to the migration route. In its efforts, the government should partner with civil society to achieve better quality of outcomes. All this requires that the distress nature of this migration is first accepted. And that, in line with the recent Supreme Court ruling, officers are provided a minimum security of tenure so that the best of them may be chosen for the task of reconstructing rural Odisha.

(Pramathesh Ambasta is convener, National Consortium of Civil Society Organisations on MGNREGA.)

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