

Published: September 16, 2014 01:11 IST | Updated: September 16, 2014 01:11 IST

## Bringing migrants back home

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Some migrant destinations are the underbelly of India's economic growth and hold a mirror to any notion that this migration is 'aspirational' in nature. Picture shows workers in Bhubaneswar, Odisha. Photo: Ashoke Chakrabarty

The Hindu

***The Odisha government has made the right announcements to improve the plight of migrant workers, but a lot more needs to be done***

In December 2013, a labourer [chopped off the palms of two migrant workers](#) from western Odisha. He had paid them an advance for working in the brick kilns of Hyderabad and did not take kindly to their arguing with him about the payment and place of work. In January 2014, the Supreme Court took *suo motu* cognisance of media reports on the incident and pulled up the State government for failing to protect the rights of the migrant workers. A few weeks ago, the court made it clear that it would like a plan to be put in place for the protection of the rights of these workers, following which, a few days back, the State government announced that it would increase the number of work days available under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) from 100 days to 150 days a year in the Bolangir and Nuapada districts of western Odisha. It also announced the activation of a toll-free number for migrant labourers. When in distress, they can call this number and the State government will provide immediate assistance.

**[Read: Brutalised migrants of western Odisha](#)**

### Modern day slave trade

The Supreme Court's concern resonates profoundly with the distress cries of migrants which have fallen on deaf ears for decades, from this poverty-stricken belt. The region, traditionally associated with malnourishment, hunger deaths, drought and famine, has also in the recent past gained limelight for being an active belt of left-wing extremism. The migrants of western Odisha are forced to leave their homes because of endemic poverty and lack of opportunities. Around the time of harvest of the paddy crop every year comes the festival of *nuakhai*, meaning eating new rice, around the beginning of September. At this time, poor families take an advance from labour contractors and then migrate to pay it through their labour.

Migration takes place under the *pathariya* system, wherein a work unit comprising a husband, wife and one or two children migrate together. A labour-contractor mafia, with political patronage cutting across party lines, organises this modern day version of slave trade and human trafficking from western Odisha to the brick kilns of Andhra Pradesh and other similar sites. Accidents while travelling on crowded trains are common. Several people have been maimed for life. Some others have died. Children are preferred in brick-making because of their height; they do not

have to bend down while filling brick-frames with mud as adults do. Living conditions at these sites are insanitary and terrible. Women are sexually exploited. Social protection laws are violated with impunity. In short, such migrant destinations are the underbelly of our economic growth and hold a mirror to any notion that this migration is “aspirational” in nature.

### [Read: Woes of migrant labour](#)

#### **An opportunity for change**

The Supreme Court’s intervention is an opportunity to bring about a change in this appalling situation. But this has to begin with recognition by the government of the distress nature of this phenomenon. At present, there seems to be a tacit understanding in government circles not to accept that this migration is distress-induced. Only when the distress nature of this migration is accepted will the situation turn around.

How? Most of these migrant families own land and are what the Government of India’s Rural Labour Enquiry calls “landed labourers,” i.e, small and marginal farmers who are forced to migrate despite owning land. Their unproductive land holdings are in need of minimal public investment to give them food and livelihood security. Leveraging MGNREGA, such lands can be treated through appropriate measures and an irrigation source provided. Targeted interventions to augment livelihood opportunities for the landless can also be imaginatively woven into this tapestry. Through such means, the poor can be made active participants in the growth process rather than passive recipient of doles. Changes to their incomes and livelihoods can become sustainable, while lifting them out of their poverty. Over time, their dependence on employment guarantee will reduce too. In short, they will not need to migrate in order to survive.

Indeed, some of these steps have already been successfully initiated by the State government in partnership with civil society. Let us look at some examples. The village of Kathdungri in Muribahal block, Bolangir district, has 153 households of which, in 2011, 43 were distress migrants. Civil society and administration, working together, ensured MGNREGA works were planned and opened and wages were paid on time.

### [Read: Protecting India’s migrants](#)

No one migrates from Kathdungri now. Water harvesting structures have recharged wells and enabled farmers to cultivate their hitherto uncultivable land, thus increasing their incomes. A *mahabandha* (large earthen dam) constructed in village Bhutungpada of Belpada block in 2012-13 was able to provide employment for more than half the year. Migration from the village has stopped. The dam will provide irrigation to 100 acres in the coming season.

This approach is in alignment with the National Democratic Alliance government’s emphasis on linking MGNREGA with agricultural productivity. It provides employment in the construction phase and, by lifting beneficiaries sustainably out of poverty, also contributes to a growth which is inclusive.

Such examples need to be built upon through a concerted effort. A mission for the prevention of distress migration should be set up which should be monitored at the level of the Chief Minister. The mission should ensure deployment of dedicated human resources at the gram panchayat level for planning and execution of MGNREGA and livelihood projects in line with the approach of the MGNREGA 2.0 guidelines. Each migrant household should be tracked and targeted and household level livelihoods plans should be made and executed so that employment is made available before the migrant season starts. Through forging a vast stakeholder alliance of workers, panchayats, government and civil society, it should be possible to bring these people back home. In the process, wounds will be healed and confidence in governance restored.

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Keywords: [Migrant workers](#), [slave trade](#), [migrant labour in Odisha](#), [MGNREGA](#)

Printable version | Sep 16, 2014 8:29:46 AM | <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/bringing-migrants-back-home/article6413424.ece>

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