

Livelihood Crisis and Distress Seasonal Migration in Beed District of Maharashtra

ABDUL JALEEL C P, APARAJITA CHATTOPADHAY

After sowing the rabi crops, villages in Maharashtra are faced with severe seasonal unemployment. To tide over the lean season, thousands of small and marginal peasant households migrate to other districts of the state, and even outside, in search of livelihood opportunities in sugar factories and brick kilns. Seasonal migration compensates for the lack of employment opportunities during the dry season and reduces seasonal income variability of the poor households in Beed district.

Seasonal migration is often perceived as a response to poverty and environmental change. It has long been a part of livelihood strategy (as an alternative route for income through wage labour) of the people of rural areas (Rogaly 1998; Haberfeld et al 1999; Rao 1994; Rogaly et al 2001; de Haan 2002). The ability of seasonal migration to reduce vulnerability and increase livelihood security of the poor is widely recognised (Black et al 2011; Scheffran et al 2012; Tacoli 2009). Studies have found that people belonging to remote rural areas, the chronically poor, landless, and those with low educational attainments are more likely to migrate seasonally/temporarily (Breman 1978, 1985, 1994, 1996; Deshinkar and Farrington 2009; Keshri and Bhagat 2012).

Seasonal migration is widespread in rural Maharashtra where agriculture is entirely rain-fed (Breman 1978; Teerink 1995). After sowing the rabi crops, the villagers have no work and face the prospect of a lengthy period of unemployment. In order to tide over the lean season, thousands of small and marginal peasant households migrate in search of work opportunities in sugar factories, brick kilns, and stone quarries. Their destinations may be other districts of the state, or even beyond state boundaries. Such seasonal migration is undertaken largely in anticipation of adverse effects on livelihood and to prevent or minimise the damage they can cause. This article, which is based on our fieldwork in Beed district, attempts to draw connections between seasonal migration and the rural crisis.

We conducted a cross-sectional survey of seasonal migrant households in Beed district between September and

November 2014. We did a full household listing in 14 randomly selected villages of the district to identify the households of seasonal migrants. Then we used the simple random sampling method to select 350 (targeting 25 samples from each village) of the households. A seasonal migrant household is defined as a household having, at least, one member who stayed away from the village for the purpose of employment for at least one month and not more than six months during the dry season (November to May).

An interview schedule for obtaining social, economic, and migration details was administered to the selected households. The interviewers sought verbal consent from all the participants before conducting the interviews. In this way, information was collected from 340 seasonal migrant households. We also collected qualitative data through in-depth interviews with 20 seasonal migrants. This article provides an insight into the lives of the seasonal migrant households in the rural areas of Beed district. Typically, these households have few resources to mitigate the contingencies that they must face in their day-to-day lives.

Context of Seasonal Migration

Beed district is in the Aurangabad division of Maharashtra. It has often drawn media attention for drought and farmer distress. With a semi-arid topography, below average rainfall, and limited irrigation infrastructure, the predominantly rural district subsists through rain-fed agriculture and wage employment. The climate is marked by the alternation of a wet and dry season with annual rainfall confined to three to four months from June to August/September with a peak in July. During our fieldwork, people reported a late onset of the rainy season, and more worryingly, its shortened duration. There are more and longer dry spells, as well as an increase in extreme weather events. For many households, at the end of the rainy season, there are hardly any possibilities for earning a living. Households deal

Abdul Jaleel C P (cpjaleel@gmail.com) is with the Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kerala. Aparajita Chattopadhyay (aparajita@iips.net) is with the International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai.

with the situation of severe unemployment, through a bundle of short-term coping and long-term adaptation strategies, such as the sale of assets (especially livestock), reduction in food consumption, diversification of crops (shifting to cotton and sugar cane, and abandoning the traditional crops), borrowing money, and taking up seasonal migration.

We conducted a full household listing in 14 villages in the district and identified the households of seasonal migrants. From this list, we derived the level of seasonal migration in each of the selected villages. During the dry season of 2013, of the total households in the 14 villages selected for the study, 16% were found migrated. Among the selected villages, the magnitude of seasonal migration ranged from 4% to 90%.

Table 1 shows the demographic dynamics of seasonal migration within the selected households. In almost all (99%) instances of seasonal migration, whole families migrate. A total of 1,881 persons were covered by the survey. Average household size was 5.5 persons per household and the average number of seasonal migrants per household was 3.6. The demographics of the population that stayed back (did not migrate) can also be seen in Table 1. Of the 1,881 persons (from 340 households) in the sample, 54% were males and the remaining were females. Thirty-two percent were children (0–14 years), 61.4% were in the working group (15–59 years), and 6.5% were elderly (60 or above years). Out of every 100 persons, 65 migrated during the dry season of 2013. Out of every 100 working-age persons, 80 (78 out of 100 males and 82 out of 100 females) had migrated out. Therefore, seasonal migration is a significant event for these households. Of every 100 who migrated

during the dry season of 2013, 20 were children (12 from 0–5 years and eight from 6–14 years), 75 were working-age population, and five were elderly. Likewise, of every 100 who stayed back 55 were children, 35 were from the working-age group and 10 were elderly.

Table 2 shows the socio-economic characteristics of the seasonal migrant households selected for the study. The sample households consisted of 84% Hindus, 13% Buddhists and 3% Muslims. The majority (84%) of them belonged to either the Scheduled Tribe/Nomadic Tribe (ST/NT) or Scheduled Caste (SC) groups. Seventy-two percent of the households had electricity, 24% had access to improved sources of drinking water and 14% had improved sanitation facilities. Only 4% had access to clean cooking fuel. As per the District Level Household and Facility Survey-4 (2012–13), the corresponding figures are 96.5% (of the

Table 2: Socio-economic Characteristics of Sampled Seasonal Migrant Households

Household Characteristics	n (%)
Religion of the head of household	
Hindu	286 (84.1)
Buddhist	44 (12.9)
Muslim	10 (3.0)
Caste/Tribe of the head of household	
Scheduled Tribe/Nomadic Tribe	172 (50.7)
Scheduled Caste	113 (33.3)
OBC and others	54 (16.0)
Ration card	
No ration card	85 (25.1)
Below poverty line card/other entitlement ration card	177 (52.2)
Above poverty line card	77 (22.7)
Principal economic engagement in village	
Cultivation	132 (38.7)
Wage labour	188 (55.3)
Others	20 (6.0)
Household food security status	
Food secure	27 (8.3)
Food insecure without hunger	201 (59.0)
Food insecure with hunger	112 (32.7)
	340 (100)

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Seasonal Migrant Population (Movers), and the Population Who Remained at Home (Non-movers) within Seasonal Migrant Households

	Population from Selected Seasonal Migrant Households								
	Seasonal Migrants			People Who Remained at Home			Total Population		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Age group (%)									
0–14	22	17.5	19.9	55.1	54.6	54.9	33.8	30.1	32.1
15–59	72	79.3	75.4	36.4	33.3	35.1	59.2	63.9	61.4
60 and above	6	3.2	4.7	8.5	12.0	10.0	7.0	6.0	6.5
Sex composition (%)	53.5	46.5	100	55.6	44.4	100	54.2	45.8	100
Migrants/non-migrants (%)	64.2	66.2	65.1	35.8	33.8	34.9	100	100	100
Persons (n)	653	572	1,225	365	291	656	1,020	861	1,881

households with electricity), 90.3% (with access to improved source of drinking water), 17.8% (with access to improved sanitation facilities), and 8.7% (having access to clean fuel) for the rural areas of Beed district. The differences in access to basic amenities between rural households in general and the households of seasonal migrants in the district are possible indicators of the relative economic backwardness of seasonal migrant households.

Seasonal migration is, typically, a strategy for avoiding loss of income during the dry season. It is a common coping mechanism of the landless (58%) and households with marginal landholdings (11%). In the villages, wage work is the key means of livelihood (as is the case with 55% of the surveyed households). Our study found that 39% of the households were engaged in subsistence agriculture, predominantly using traditional farming methods. Only 6% derived the major portion of their income from small trade or other economic activities. Household food security is at stake, particularly during the lean season. Our data show that only 8% of the seasonal migrant households had food security, 59% were food insecure without hunger, and 33% were food insecure with moderate or severe levels of hunger. Socially disadvantaged communities (Dalits and tribes) who are also economically poor (in terms of landholding and dependency on wage work for livelihood) are disproportionately higher among the seasonal migrants from the district.

The government's response to protect the livelihoods of these people is almost non-existent. During the 2012–13 season, only one-fifth of the selected households had received employment under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). When asked about the MGNREGA and its functioning in the village, a male seasonal migrant replied: "Two years ago, I got 10 days of work. I received my wages after several months. What is the point of doing such jobs? Payment needs to be made immediately or at least soon after the work. Otherwise, how can we survive?" A woman stated: "We have no

hope and now we don't wait to be given jobs." Such statements indicate the lack of regularity and assurance of wages from the scheme. From the discussions with the *gramsevaks* and the sarpanch, it appears that there is no will among the local self-governments as well as the state bureaucracy to realise the potential of the MGNREGA in enhancing the livelihood resource base in rural areas. Many of the seasonal migrant households were aware only about the scheme and not its details, such as the right to work, unemployment allowance, etc.

Pattern and Causes

Seasonal migration flows from the study area reveal a dominant pattern of seasonal rural-rural migration. During the dry season of 2013, people from 90% of the sampled households left their villages in October and 87% returned to their villages in April. Thus, the duration of migration was six months. The migration is reckoned to be seasonal because the migrants return home once the pre-monsoon showers hit and agricultural activity gains momentum. The main destinations for the migrants of Beed district are Karnataka (58%) and other districts within Maharashtra (42%), particularly the agriculturally developed districts in western Maharashtra. The migrants are mainly engaged in cutting of sugar cane (98%) and brick-making (2%). The migration history of households in terms of the number of seasonal migration during last five years (2009 to 2013) shows that 75% had migrated in all the five dry seasons. This is an indication that seasonal migration is an annual routine act for most of the households.

Seasonal migration is a dry season event chiefly because of the changes in the village economy. To understand the causes of seasonal migration, several questions were asked to migrant households about their economic circumstances and employment opportunities in the village. Nine out of 10 seasonal migrant households reported that they were forced to choose the migration option. The main reasons for migration were "seasonal unemployment" (76%), "less

wages in village" (20%), "need of a large amount of money to meet emergency expenditure" (4%). Sixty percent of the households reported having outstanding debts/loans (mostly informal). Hence, we may infer that by and large, seasonal migration is integral to the struggle for survival of the rural poor. The reasons reported by the majority of the households are driven by a situation where they are unable to earn sufficiently in their villages to meet even basic needs. Thus, it is economic hardship that drives people out of the village to offer their labour for a wage. The situation is a pointer at the fragile nature of the livelihood opportunities available to the population in the district. Thus, it can be said that seasonal migration is largely distress-driven.

Seasonal migration from Beed district is based on advances paid to the migrants, or repayment of debt through manual labour. The arrangement is called the Koita system wherein a work unit comprising a husband, wife and one child or two children is given work on a piece-rate basis. The role of labour contractor (*mukadam*) is vital in channelising seasonal migration. Labour recruitment takes place almost entirely through the mukadam. When asked

about the recruitment process, a seasonal migrant replied:

The mukadam comes to the village and informs us about employment opportunities. He sets the wages and pays an advance. A work unit (Koita) is paid ₹25,000 in advance for working for six months. This advance helps to keep us alive when we are jobless in villages.

Eighty-three percent of the surveyed households had received advance payments from a labour contractor for working in the dry season of 2015.

Economic Aspects

Seasonal migrants are offered work and onsite residence. Work at the destination entails long working hours, averaging about 12 hours daily. They are paid a part of their wages during the employment period on a weekly basis. The remaining amount is settled at the end of the season. This binds the worker to their employer. The carry-over of advances from one season to the next ensures the availability of workers for the next season. After five to six months of work in the dry season of 2014, only 54% of the migrant households could repay the advance amounts taken from the labour and have a surplus. The remaining could not even repay the advance amount

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they had taken. This binds the worker to the labour contractor, a relationship that is strengthened through loans/debt. It denies the employee various freedoms, including the freedom to negotiate the terms and conditions of their contract. The average duration of such “relationships” was found to be 6.6 years. This is an indication of the vicious cycle of debt in which they are trapped.

The share of income from seasonal migration in the annual wage income of a work unit (Koita) is found to be 80%, confirming the necessity of seasonal migration for ensuring a livelihood for the households. After repayment of the advance amount taken from the labour contractor, only 54% of the seasonal migrant households had a surplus left. Households that had a surplus (savings) were asked what they did with the money. Forty-one percent of such households reported that they had spent this amount on food and other expenses needed for daily living. There is not much disposable income, and thus, the amount earned from seasonal work is used to meet essential needs and the paying off of debts. This finding is also an indicator of the dependence on seasonal migration for survival.

Social Cost of Seasonal Migration

Besides its economic benefits for the migrants, seasonal migration has significant negative consequences, such as poor living conditions in the destination locations, loss of school days for the children, experience of fear and insecurity by the women migrants, and adverse impacts on health. At the destination-areas, most of the migrants (97%) live in temporary shelters near their workplace; 98% reported that there is no provision for toilets. Forty-nine percent of the respondents reported that they do not have access to safe drinking water. When asked about life at the destination areas, a seasonal migrant woman replied:

All this [the living conditions] comes after food; there is no meaning in having a good place to stay without anything to eat. We have been living this life for years and are now habituated to these conditions.

Seasonal migration takes a severe toll on the education of the children of the

migrants as they are never at one location throughout the academic year. Most households of seasonal migrants keep their schoolgoing children in villages so that they would not miss school. But many children were staying alone when their parents migrated. In the Koita system, children are an essential (though informal) part of a work unit. They are made to do hard labour that jeopardises their lives, safety, and physical development.

There were 604 children (0–14 years) in the sample population of which 360 (60%) remained in villages during the dry season of 2013. It is found that three out of 10 children aged 6–14 years (schoolgoing age) had migrated; and six out of 10 children of schoolgoing age were working at the destination. These children usually help their parents in their work and look after their younger siblings. Many children begin doing small chores at the worksites and are eventually absorbed into the labour force. A first-time woman migrant woman with two children (aged six and eight years), who was interviewed at the destination, stated: “It was so painful when I left my children ... I miss them so much.” Another woman also spoke along the same lines, “My two children are at home; one is in Class 5 and another is in Class 6, they are alone there.” When asked about her work, a 14-year-old girl who was working with her parents for a sugar factory in Ahmednagar district replied, “My sister and I help my mother in her work because the volume of work matters to us. If we work more, we are paid more.” While talking to a schoolteacher on the reason why many children in the villages were out of school, she replied: “Many migrants take their young children to their workplaces so that they can look after their siblings while the parents are working. These children miss school and eventually, many leave school early to become labourers.”

In the overall population, among the children of schoolgoing age, 14% had never been to schools, or had dropped out. Of the 277 children of schoolgoing age, 113 (40.8%) were found to be studying in a grade that was lower than what was appropriate for their age. “My daughter is in the eighth standard. After we

go back, she will resume her studies.” Such responses were common. Of the 95 children who were aged 16 to 19 years, only 18% had completed Class 10. Thus, there is sufficient evidence to show that the migrant community will remain deprived of educational opportunities and be stuck in a vicious cycle of economic backwardness. Although the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 guarantees education to all children up to the age of 14 years, the children of seasonal migrants remain largely excluded.

Another negative aspect of seasonal migration is the fear and insecurity of women migrants in the destination areas. The decision on women’s migration is usually taken by other members of the household, mostly the husbands or fathers/fathers-in-law (94%). A woman seasonal migrant said, “It is all decided by my husband. He runs the house. He takes money from the mukadam and spends it for us. When he asks me to move, I follow him. It has been the way of our life.” When asked about her prior knowledge of the destination and the nature of work there, a first-time seasonal migrant woman working for a sugar factory in Ahmednagar said, “I was not aware of the place I was going to, nor about the work I would be doing and the wages I would be getting. I have not travelled so far from my home. We move our workplaces every day. Today we are working here. Tomorrow it will be someplace else. We go wherever we are told to by the mukadam.” Most of the women workers (87%) reported that they feel safer in their home villages than the places they were working in. A high proportion of them (45%) said that they were afraid of their workplaces. When asked about life at the workplace, a seasonal migrant woman responded, “Like everybody else, we are also more comfortable in our village. But what can we do? We have to live.” It is found that women migrant workers are forced to live in vulnerable circumstances.

Exposure to dust and grime, lack of minimum basic facilities, and the drudgery of their work cause severe health risks among the seasonal migrants. They face unique health challenges due to

their work environment, poverty status, inadequate housing, limited availability of clean water and sanitary facilities, inadequate access to healthcare, and lack of insurance. Table 3 shows the current health status (any medically diagnosed non-communicable diseases [NCDs]) of women who migrated during the dry season of 2013.

Table 3: Current Health Status of Seasonal Migrant Women

	n (%)
Seasonal migrant women diagnosed with any non-communicable diseases	124 (36.5)
Distribution of non-communicable diseases*	
Back pain	79(44.4)
Joint pain	63(35.4)
Blood pressure	8(4.5)
Depression	7(3.9)
Stroke	6(3.4)
Lung disease	5(2.8)
Cholesterol	4(2.2)
Cataract	4(2.2)
Heart disease	2(1.2)
Total	340 (100)

* Denominator is 178 (the total reported NCDs by 124 women).

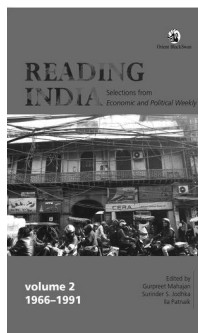
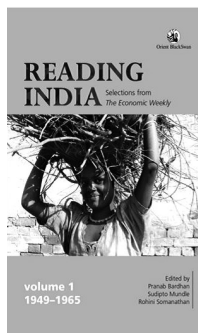
The women were asked whether they were diagnosed with any NCDs during

the past 12 months. Out of 340 women, 124 have reported that they were diagnosed with any one of the listed NCDs. This means that 36.5% of the sampled women had at least one NCD, totalling 178 NCDs in 124 women. It is seen that 67% of this group of 124 women were diagnosed with one NCD, while 33% were diagnosed with having multiple NCDs. Eighty percent of the ailments were back and joint pains which may be due to the physical nature of their work. When there are high levels of exposure to the risk factors, especially in combination (for example, repetitive lifting of heavy objects in awkward postures), there is a greater risk of being affected by musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs). Given the working conditions of the women, it is reasonably certain that 80% of the seasonal migrant women are suffering from MSDs. During their last migration, 192 of the 340 women (56.5%) reported that they suffered at least one illness/injury. The most frequently suffered illnesses/injuries were “back pain/joint pain” (40.2%), “fever and cold”

(20.3%), “cuts/injury” (18.6%) and “diarrhoea” (9%). Their working conditions and the demands placed on their bodies make the women vulnerable to injuries and illness. Their poor economic status makes it difficult for them to access timely and appropriate medical care. Considering these facts, there must be targeted initiatives to bring this vulnerable section of the population under health insurance coverage.

Conclusions

Due to lack of water, frequent crop failure, and low returns from cultivation, agriculture in Maharashtra is in a distressed condition. The situation is worse in the backward districts, which have poor irrigation facilities. The peculiar geographical location of Beed district makes life even more difficult for the people who are dependent on agriculture or wage income for their livelihoods. Cultivation is a gamble with the monsoon. To adapt, the relatively well-off farmers are turning towards cultivating sugar cane and cotton, which fetch



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better returns. Sugar cane has a guaranteed local market as the sugar cooperatives in the state buy sugar cane directly from the farmers at a remunerative price that is fixed by the state government. This is not the case with other crops.

The expansion of cultivation of the water-intensive sugar cane has had adverse consequences for the marginal farmers because of the rapid depletion of groundwater. Cultivation of traditional crops has suffered. Households that are heavily dependent on wage employment and subsistence agriculture do not have the resources to adopt expensive long-term mitigating strategies. They have no option other than to resort to low-cost short-term actions like seasonal migration. It is found that, as a family arrangement, adult members often decide to migrate to absorb the shock of seasonal income variability. It is a repeated annual livelihood strategy for the majority of the socially and economically disadvantaged households in the study area. This is an advance/debt-based circulation for hard manual labour, such as sugar cane cutting and transportation and by brick kilns for brick manufacturing to better-endowed areas within the state and outside the state.

Seasonal labour migration is an increasingly important aspect of rural livelihoods in Beed. For these households, migration is clearly a coping strategy used in the face of acute unemployment and consequent income variability. It is more an ex ante risk management approach taken by households anticipating a failure in household income streams, and who act before the event happens in order to cushion an income variation and its subsequent consequences such as poverty and food insecurity. The people living in a hand-to-mouth economy, such as landless labourers and small and marginal farmers, who have no stocks to sustain them in the event of a drought, adopt many coping strategies, of which seasonal migration is a prominent one. Hence, such migration can no longer be viewed merely as an adjunct to an essentially agrarian way of life, but has to be seen as integral to the coping, survival, and livelihood strategies of farming families. The findings discussed in this

study show that the forces leading to migration are as much to do with the social relations of dependency and indebtedness which subsistence failure entails, as with ecological decline.

The precariousness of the condition of seasonal migrant workers is a reminder of their vulnerability. It causes much discomfort, and the conditions at worksites are difficult. Among the difficulties, many talked about the lack of shelter. The vulnerable living conditions put a greater burden on the women and children among the seasonal migrants. The extra hardships and insecurity that fall on women are important aspects of seasonal migration. A high prevalence of NCDs, especially of back and joint pains (MSDs) is found among seasonal migrant women. The most critical social cost borne by seasonal migrants is in their inability to send their children to schools. Many eligible children in the study population were found to be out of school because they are compelled to travel with their parents. As a consequence, they are deprived of educational opportunities, thus perpetuating the vicious cycle of lack of education and poor livelihood opportunities. Yet, paradoxically, the earnings from seasonal migration can be the only means of an income that is available to the poor households. The social experience and consequences of migration are far from uniform, but shaped by class and gender. For a minority of households, migration offers positive opportunities for saving, investment, and meeting contingencies. For the poorer majority, migration is a defensive coping strategy covering existing debts and extreme economic vulnerability. Seasonal migration from Beed district, in the short term, helps people to only ensure their survival; however, in the long term they are at a disadvantage. One may thus conclude that seasonal migration from the villages of Beed is a compromise where the households knowingly bear the social cost for ensuring that the immediate material needs are taken care of.

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