



## Plight of left behind women of seasonal labour migrant households: A case study of Nuapada district of Odisha

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### Abstract

This article echoes the plight of left behind women of seasonal migrant households, a less explored area in migration research study. This is mainly a qualitative study where we found how these women single handedly manage the household chores along with the elderly persons and their children in the absence of their spouse. Severe drought, failure of agriculture, destruction of forest and traditional livelihood, huge unemployment, rampant poverty and debt compels more and more labourers to migrate temporarily to the torturous brick kilns and construction sites of other states in hope of high remittance every year with increasing numbers leaving their spouses behind while the left behind women embrace the precarious life and shoulder all the responsibility in lack of all basic facilities enduring all the hardship, stress, trauma, helplessness, loneliness to manage the house in absence of the male members. Here the study area Nuapada district is one of the poorest district of India situated in the Western parts of Odisha is a key supplier of migrant labourers and infamous for drought poverty, malnutrition, unemployment and starvation death. But such a sensitive issue is yet to be addressed and included in the policy making.

**Keywords:** Left behind, women, seasonal, labour migration, distress

### Introduction

There is a large number of people migrating seasonally and temporarily in search of employment which varies from one month up to six months in a year. The estimates of seasonal and temporary migration is highly distorting and vary from about 15 million to 100 million in different studies of International Labour Union. Every year after the harvesting season, a large number of unskilled manual labourers in millions from Western and Southern parts of Odisha set out on their journey to the torturous brick kilns, construction sites of the neighbouring states like Andhra Pradesh, Telengana, Chhatisgarh, Tamilnadu for a period of 6 to 7 months on a temporary basis and this act is repeated every year. This type of seasonal migration has various adverse effects and lacks sufficient official records. The worst Sufferers of such kind of migration are women and children whether they migrate to the work site with the male members or are left behind.

Numerous studies by Keshri and Bhagat (2012)<sup>[19]</sup>, (2013)<sup>[17, 18]</sup> and Keshri (2013)<sup>[17, 18]</sup> shows southern and Western part of Odisha is one of the hotspots for seasonal or temporary migration of India where the rate of seasonal migration is more than 35 per 1000 person in the age group of 15 to 64 which is 7 times larger than long term migration and our study area Nuapada district which is a key supplier of seasonal labour migrants falls in this category. Nuapada district, one of poorest d65istrict of Odisha as well as India is dominated by huge ST population and characterized by frequent drought, huge unemployment, rampant poverty, widespread underdevelopment leads to distress compels people to adapt migration as a livelihood strategy. (Chambers *et al.*, 1981; Gill, 1992; Bernstein, 1996; Myers 2002.; Breman, 2007; Deshingkar *et al.*, 2008; Harriss-White and Garikipati, 2008; Bardsley and Hugo, 2010 ;Lerche 2010; Shah, 2010; Srivastava, 2011; Gray and Mueller 2012; Mishra and Bose, 2013; Keshri and Bhagat 2012, 2013; and Mishra 2016)<sup>[2, 3, 5, 6, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, 21, 23, 24, 25, 28, 29]</sup> in their

study justified that push factor related with the environmental problems, deteriorating natural resources, changing climate, failing agriculture, population pressures, malnutrition, landlessness, unemployment, rapid urbanization, pandemic diseases and government shortcomings constrains people to embrace migration as a livelihood strategy. Here poor people are more vulnerable who falls in the vicious trap of debt, bondage and poverty and finding no way out are forced to choose seasonal migration as livelihood strategy. According to Ali and Sharma, 2014<sup>[1]</sup> there are about 0.58 million numbers of seasonal migration from western Odisha and the average number of migrants is 1.7 per family in this region whereas Wandschneider and Mishra, 2003<sup>[30]</sup> in their study discovered nearly 60000 labourers migrated during 2001 drought from Bolangir district alone.

Archana K. Roy in her book "Distress Migration and Left behind Women" (2011)<sup>[27]</sup> has extensively reflected the predicament of Left behind women. She has beautifully described their struggle that how these women spend their days with helplessness, mental trauma, loneliness, despair, extra work burden in lack of basic amenities and without any help. Mishra, 2016<sup>[23]</sup> opined when women, migrate with their spouse are exposed to a number of difficulties apart from extra working hours and sexual violence, but when they stay back, they take extra work burden to manage the households. During our survey we met many women who found the situation tough to handle for long spell without any help.

### Data and Method

Due to lack of official data and documents on seasonal labour migration and especially on the conditions of left behind women as there is a small number of studies have been done, we mainly relied on household survey and historical narratives provided on focused group discussions for analysis. So various researchers (de Haan and Rogaly,

2002; Kothari, 2002; Deshingkar and Start, 2003; Deshingkar and Farrington, 2009; Datta, 2016; Bhagat 2018) [4, 8, 9, 10, 11, 20] pointed out that The data collection agencies like the Census, <sup>3</sup>NSSO, statistical office have clearly underrated migration as official statics especially the seasonal labour migration leading the migrant workers to be prominently invisible in official records. So some researchers (McLeman and Smit 2006; Katz, 2013; Dahlstorm, 2014; Panda, 2018) [7, 16, 22, 26] relied on qualitative methods like narrative approach, storytelling, focused group discussion which provide better understandings of social structure of facts such as poverty and decision making, migration through analysis .

In order to select the area for primary survey first we analyzed the labour migration data obtained from district labour office, Nuapada to find out the worst affected villages of the blocks showing the highest rate of seasonal labour migration. Then in these areas respondents i-e left behind women were chosen by purposive sampling as here mainly labourers migrate with their spouse and children and most of the houses were found locked. Again the number of left behind women is very less in comparison to migrating

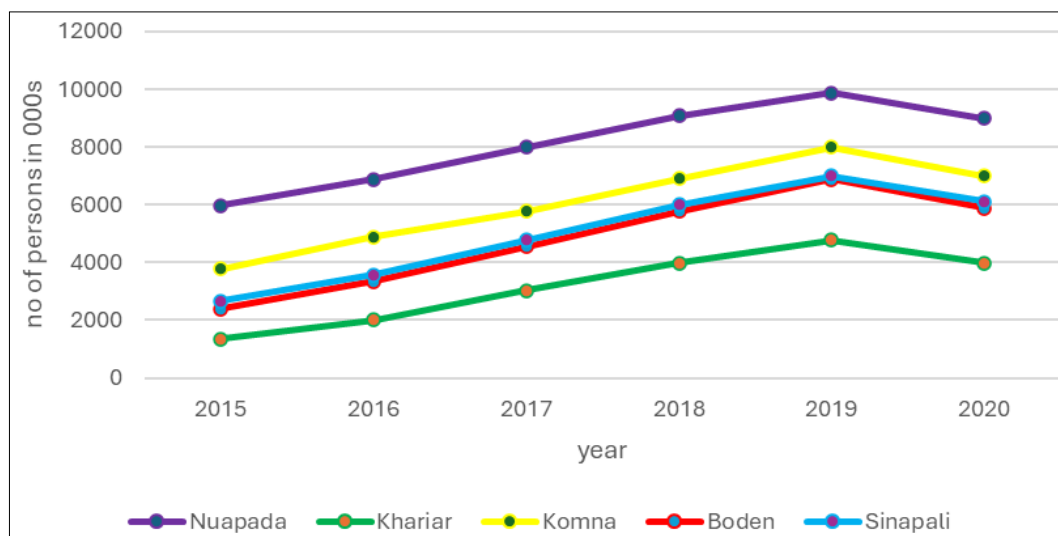
women and many of them feared to communicate with us in detail due to labour contractors and middlemen. Here we selected Semelpali and Larkhana in Komana block and Bhaleswar and Parkod in Nuapada block for primary survey and collected 120 samples with in depth interviews through questionnaire method and interpreted some narratives given by village head, labour contractors, NGO workers, and members from migrant family. We conducted this survey during March 2020 when most of the labourers had migrated. In this study we have used descriptive statistics i-e methods like rate, percentage, line diagram etc. to present the result and we have also presented individual case studies that we encountered during our survey.

**Finding and Discussions**

From the data obtained from district labour office Nuapada we found that Nuapada block followed by Komana are the worst affected blocks showing highest no of seasonal migration. Again by analyzing village wise date we found Bhaleswar and Parkod village in Nuapada block and Larkhana and Semelpali in Komana block has the highest no of labour migrants.

**Table No 1:** Source- District Labour Office, Nuapada

Blocks	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	total
Nuapada	5969	6879	8002	9076	9875	8993	48794
Khariar	1347	2001	3023	3986	4779	3994	19130
Komna	3776	4888	5779	6897	7987	6989	36316
Boden	2402	3338	4547	5773	6883	5887	28830
Sinapali	2677	3568	4784	5991	7003	6106	30129
Nuapada district	16171	20674	26135	31723	36527	31969	163199



**Fig 1:** Nuapada district Block wise seasonal labour Migration 2015-2020

During our survey we found that no of left behind women are less in comparison to migrating women and they are just left behind as they had small children to rear or elderly persons to be looked after in their home or other personal reasons. We found that most of the migrant households are poor and belong to the scheduled and backward castes as rightly said by Keshri and Bhagat, 2012 [19], 2013 [17, 18] that poor people with inferior socioeconomic status such as illiterate, landless, marginal workers, people from backward communities like SC and ST are more susceptible towards seasonal migration. Here we learnt that out of 120 samples

65.83%, 30% and 4.1% belong to ST, SC and OBC category respectively. Out of the 120 samples 4.1% are the age of below 20 years whereas 2.5% are the age of above 70 years while 20.83%, 31.66%, 27.5%, 7.5%, 5.83% are from the age group of 20-30, 30-40, 40-50, 50-60, and 60-70 years respectively. From the 120 samples 102 women i-e 85% are married whereas 13 i-e 10.83% are widow and 5 i-e 4.16% are unmarried. The 5 unmarried women were below the age of 20 and they were left behind by their families to take care of their younger siblings. Most of the widowed women are old men i-e out of 13, 10 were above 60 years who lost their

husbands mainly due to old age. From the 102 persons (husbands of married women) 5(4.90%) persons were not involved in any economic activities as they were physically handicapped or physically ill, 4 persons (3.92%) were vegetable venders whereas the rest were either daily/agricultural labourers or Kendu leaves collectors. Maximum of these are marginal workers and belonged to BPL category i-e upto 96.07% whose annual income was less than 5000 rupees where a few were main workers and belonged to APL category (3.92%) whose annual income was more than 5000 rupees. Most of the women complained that their husbands got registered under the MGNREGS scheme i-e 87.25% but they either did not get work or got only a few days of work in most cases less than 20 days instead of 150 days so that they were compelled to migrate in search of employment. Out of the 102 persons 10.78 % are illiterates while 54.90%, 30.39% and 3.92% had the qualification of primary level, upper primary level and secondary level respectively. Most of the family are landless (43.33%) or have very small land holding i-e less than 10

dismil (40.83%) while few (15.83%) have more than 10 dismil land holding.

We also came across the fact the families had taken debt that around 47.5% families from money lenders, 35% families from labour contractors and 17.5% from relatives. This debt trap plays a crucial role in such type of migration. These notorious money lenders lend money with high interest rate and labour contractors lure these poor people showing huge sum of money at a time. So these people later feel it difficult to repay the money to the money lender and finding no way out they agree with the labour contractors to migrate to the brick kilns taking money from them and get exploited. Mishra, 2016 [23] narrates the preexisting poor background, inadequate access to alternative livelihoods and food and employment uncertainty during the lean period surfaces as major determinants of seasonal migration, but the significant cause of distress that pushes the labourers to migrate is the loans lent by labour contractors and their agents.

**Table 2:** Background of left behind women (Nuapada District)

Background of women	No and% of total sample	Background of women	No and% of total sample
Age structure		Husband's occupation	
Less than 20 years	5(4.16%)	No work	5(4.90%)
20-30	25(20.83%)	daily labourer	41(40.19%)
30-40	38(31.66%)	Kendu leaves collection	19(18.62%)
40-50	33(27.5%)	Agricultural labourer	33(32.35%)
50-60	9(7.5%)	Vegetable vender	4(3.92%)
60-70	7(5.83%)	Type of Worker	
More than 70 years	3(2.5%)	Main	4(3.92%)
Caste		Marginal	98(96.07)
ST	79(65.83%)	Husband's Income	
SC	36(30%)	No income	5(4.90%)
OBC	5(4.16%)	Less than 5000	89(87.25%)
Marital Status		More than 5000	8(7.84%)
Married	102(85%)	Family Land Holding size	
Unmarried	5(4.16%)	Landless	52(43.33%)
Widow	13(10.83%)	Less than 10 dismil	49(40.83%)
Husband's Education		More than 10 dismil	19(15.83%)
Illiterate	11(10.78%)	Poverty Level	
Primary	56(54.90%)	BPL	116(96.66%)
Upper Primary	31(30.39%)	APL	4(3.33%)
Secondary	4(3.92%)	Debt taken	
Regd. under MGNREGS		Money lender	57(47.5%)
Yes	89(87.25%)	Labour contractor	42(35%)
NO	13(12.74%)	Relatives	21(17.5%)

Source: Computed from the field survey data

During our survey we found that out of the 120 women taken as samples 52.5% women were illiterate, 32.5%, 13.33% and 1.66% women have the educational attainment of primary level, upper primary level and secondary level respectively. Out of 120 women 72(60%) used to stay at home, whereas 10%, 25.83%, 2.5% and 1.66% women work as daily labourers, kendu leaves collectors, mid-day meal cooks and maid servants respectively and among the 48 working women 30(62.5%) earned less than 5000 rupees annually while around 30(37.5%) women more than 5000 rupees annually. But in the absence of male members other family members became dependent on them so in this way 13(10.83%) women had less than 3 dependents, 98(81.66%) had 3 to 5 dependents and 9 (7.5%) had more than 5 dependents on them. Here dependents were mainly small children and old in laws. Some women were involved with

SHGs(self help groups) i-e out of 120 only 18 women(15%) women were associated with them and got little financial help but the rest 102 women(85%) were living in despair . It shows the dismal performance of Govt. schemes like MISSION SHAKTI. Only 15% women had bank account so their husbands used to send them money in their bank account whereas most of the person used to bring money during their return and a few send money through relatives or middle men. Out of 102 persons (husbands of left behind women) 17.52%, 68.04%, 14.43% used migrate for less than 3 months, 3 to 6 months and more than 6 months respectively. Here they used to communicate with their spouse through their own phone (64.16%women had their own phone) or through their relative or neighbour's phone (20% women) while 15.83% women had no phone.

**Table 3: Economic Status of Left behind Women (Nuapada District)**

Background of women	No and % of total sample	Background of women	No and % of total sample
Women's education		Association with SHG	
Illiterate	63(52.5%)	Yes	18(15%)
Primary	39(32.5%)	No	102(85%)
Upper Primary	16(13.33%)	Spouse's migration period	
Secondary	2(1.66%)	Less than 3 months	17(17.52)
Women's Occupation		3 to 6 months	66(68.04%)
House wife	72(60%)	More than 6 months	14(14.43%)
Daily labourer	12(10%)	How husbands send money	
Kendu leaves Collection	31(25.83%)	Through bank account	18(18.55%)
Mid-day meal cook	2(1.66%)	On return	66(68.04%)
Maid servant	3(2.5%)	Through middle men	13(13.40%)
Women's income		Bank Account	
Less than 5000	30(62.5%)	Yes	18(15%)
More than 5000	18(37.5)	No	102(85%)
No of dependents		Phone connectivity	
Less than 3	13(10.83)	No phone	19(15.83%)
3 to 5	98(81.66)	Mobile	77(64.16%)
More than 5	9(7.5%)	Via others phone	24(20%)

Source: Computed from the field survey data

During our survey we came across the facts that how the preexisting poor condition coupled with noncompliance of various Govt. schemes and their ignorance for such facilities available for which they were entitled only worsened their lives. Maximum of the houses (89.16% of the total sampled household) were kutchha houses whereas only 10.83% houses were pucca house showing the failure of PMGAY. For drinking water these households mostly depended on public tube well i-e 71.66% households and on public well i-e 19.16% households while only 9.16% houses had the tap water connection through NRDWP scheme showing its dismal coverage.

In this study we found out of the 120 migrant households 24.16%, 30%, 15% houses had essential facilities like electricity, toilet facility and LPG connection respectively while others still reside in darkness, practice open defecation and used traditional cooking fuel. This reality hits hard and shows the utter failure of Govt. flagship

schemes like SOUBHAGYA, UJJWALA, SWACHHA BHARAT etc. in this area. During our survey we found total 89.16% houses of 120 households had ration card which enabled them to have essential groceries like rice, wheat, dal etc. and kerosene in very nominal price while the rest of the 13 families lived in acute poverty and starvation. Out of 120 women 66.33% and 44.16% women had voter identity card and adhar card respectively. It arises the issue of nonexistence for the non-cardholders and deprive them from their rights to avail Govt. facilities. Among the 120 sampled women 43(35.83%) got registered under the MGNREGS scheme and had job cards but these card holders complained that either they did not get work or got to work only for few days like 10-15 days instead of 150 days and got delayed payment for working days. The MGNREGA scheme became a sheer disappointment in curbing the seasonal migration and uplifting the living condition of poors in this area.

**Table 4: Housing Condition and Facilities Available for Left behind Women**

Migrant Household	No and% of total sample	Migrant Household	No and% of total sample
housing condition		Facilities Available	
kutchha	107(89.16%)	(b)Electricity	29(24.16%)
Pucca	13(10.83%)	(c)Toilet	36(30%)
Facilities Available		(d)LPG connection	18(15%)
(a)Drinking Water		(e)Ration card	107(89.16%)
Tube well	86(71.66%)	(f) Voter ID Card	76(63.33%)
Well	23(19.16%)	(g) Adhar Card	53(44.16%)
Tap	11(9.16%)	(h) Job Card	43(35.83%)

Source: Computed from the field survey data

**Impact of Seasonal Migration on Left behind Women**

The already existing poor economic condition and least educational qualification coupled with inaccessibility to basic facilities and extra workload in absence of husband aggravates their predicaments which takes a great toll on

their lives especially on their health and mental state. During our survey when we enquired about the health issues that these women had suffered in last two years on a frequent basis we got a peculiar pattern facts.

**Table 5: Health conditions of Left behind Women**

Health Issues of Women (frequently suffered in last 2 years)	No and% of total sample	Health Issues of Women (frequently suffered in last 2 years)	No and% of total sample
Muscle/Joint Pain	86(71.66%)	Diarrhea	41(34.16%)
Headache	58(48.33%)	Menstrual Issue	79(78.21%)
Dizziness	47(39.16%)	Miscarriage	11(26.82%)
Tiredness	83(69.16%)	Still Born	8(19.51%)
Fever	33(27.5%)	STD	19(25.67%)

Source: Computed from the field survey data

Out of 120 women maximum of them i-e 86(71.66%), 83(69.16%), 58(48.33%), 47(39.16%) complained that they suffered from muscle or joint pain, tiredness, headache, dizziness respectively in their day to day life which was due to malnutrition, poor diet, overwork, weak health condition. Out of 120 women 41(34.16%) women and 33(27.5%) women reported that they suffered from diarrhea and fever on a frequent basis in last two years which indicates their low immune system. In our study we encountered some shocking facts about the reproductive health of these women whose discussion is generally considered as taboo in the dogmatic society. Out of the 120 women here 19 women already had their menopause. So out of 101 women 79 i-e 78.21% women reported they had menstrual issues mostly like irregular periods, scanty bleeding, bad odour, itching during menstruation where the first two issues indicate towards anemia and poor health condition, poor diet whereas the next two issues indicates towards poor sanitation facilities, ignorance of menstrual hygiene other traditional unhygienic practices during their monthly cycle. Such kind of reproductive health issues if remains ignored for a long time can lead to severe repercussion in their later life. During the last two years in total 41 women were pregnant, out of which 11(26.82%) women suffered from miscarriage naturally and 8(19.51%) women delivered stillborn babies which indicates the dire absence of proper healthcare facilities, lack of proper diet, nutrition, physical exertion, over work, lack of rest for the women. Another serious issue of sexually transmitted disease (STD) came into light during our study. Here out of 120 women 74 women reported to be sexually active with their spouse whereas out of 74, 19(25.67%) women complained about pain, itching, soreness, burning sensation, white discharge with bad odour in their genitals after copulating with their spouse when they returned which indicates a possibility of STD infection which may lead to serious consequences in reproductive health and dangerous diseases like HIV.AIDS. The seasonal migration of the spouse not only affect the economic and health condition of the left behind women but also it takes a toll on their emotional and mental state which is largely ignored in most of the studies.

**Table No 6:** Mental and Emotional State of Left behind Women

Mental and Emotional State of Left Behind Women	
Mental Stress	Loss of Interest
Feeling Dejected	Feeling of Incompetence
Sadness	Fear for Spouse
Helplessness	Scared for Debt
Loneliness	Feeling of Uncertainty

Source: Interpreted from the field survey data

Being an intangible thing, it will be absurd to quantify the emotional state of the women and we can't determine the exact mental condition of a person, but we can assume the possible factors and nearly interpret it. So here we are presenting our analysis of the emotional and mental condition of these left behind women from their narratives. The acute poverty with limited resources available and with no financial support they fulfil all the responsibilities of the house in the absence of their spouses which makes them extremely tensed and stressed mentally. The perpetual poverty, vicious debt trap increases their anxiety and sadness. The everlasting uncertainty of their husband's job and the darkness looming over the future of their children

makes these women sad and leads to their loss of interest and feeling of uncertainty in everything. The feeling of incompetence annoys these women and they feel dejected when they compare themselves with the women of other well off families of the village. In the absence of their father, the children became unruly and violent which becomes very difficult to manage them on the part of these women. Sometimes they see the sufferings of their elderly in-laws before their eyes due to poverty and lack of access to proper healthcare facilities sometimes it also becomes difficult for them to arrange food for two times for the whole family. These left behind women manage these difficult situations singlehandedly and cannot share their mental agony with one which leads them to feel lonely and helpless at times in the absence of their spouses. Sometimes the money lenders and labour contractors who lend money as debt abuse them, misbehave with them and manhandle them if the installments of debt is not repaid them timely. This type of situations scare them along with their fear for their husband's wellbeing and life due to the hazardous nature of their work and dangerous circumstances prevailing at their worksites. Occasionally their spouses got involved in illicit extramarital affairs at their worksites and neglects the family. Such type of situations worsen these women's lives and leaves them at sea.

Case study -1 a woman named Chaubanu Purua aged 45 from the Semelpali village of Komna block narrated that her husband got injured while working in a construction site of Tamilnadu and due to lack of medical attention he eventually became physically paralyzed. Now her eldest son aged 23 migrates to the brick kilns while she singlehandedly manages her bedridden husband along with her four younger children and she explains how it becomes difficult for her to manage the food expense of the family.

Case study-2 a woman named Dhirendri Dala aged 33 of Bhaleswar village of Nuapada block told us her husband got involved in extra marital affairs at the worksite and started neglecting her and did not send money in time. So the money lender abused her and as she had nothing to eat due to acute hunger she along with her four children started eating poisonous dried mango kernels and some mushroom from the forest which led to severe reaction and her two children died because of this.

**Conclusion**

During our survey we encountered with many such stories. The things which can make these women's situation better are by empowering them economically through various SHGS and the most important thing is keeping official records of labour migrant households and ensuring of them getting benefitted from various govt. schemes meant for them. Another important thing is to provide them manual work employment through various Govt. schemes like MGNREGA which can reduce the seasonal migration from these areas as well as can uplift the economic condition of these families up to some extent.

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