

On the Move: An Ethnographic Account of Rural Migrants’ Journey from Village to City

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A large number of the rural poor, majority of them males, migrate from the Kosi region in north-east Bihar to various places across India. Increasingly they are migrating to cities and towns where they join the ranks of the urban poor. The migration process is facilitated largely by a network of agents/mates and, to a lesser extent, migrants’ own social networks. The entire process seems to be a journey from one context of vulnerability and marginalisation to another. In this ‘mobile’ multi-sited ethnographic study, it is proposed to study the complex processes of vulnerability, marginalisation and injustice experienced by the migrants in the source areas. It is also proposed to study the well-knit machination of the labour recruitment agents. The primary narrative will be drawn from researchers’ own participation during journeys of the migrants from the Kosi region to the city and then following the migrants’ labouring life at the destination. Thus, the study will try to address the spatial bias, as pointed by Anand Yang, in the existing migration studies which lack a systematic view of migration that recognises the interactional nature of migration. ‘They often undertake intensive examination of one locality thus putting sharp focus on either the sending or receiving community’ (Yang 1979).

It is proposed to focus on a cluster of flood-affected villages in Saharsa district from where large number of ‘lower’ caste, village poor migrate to Delhi through labour contractor/agent/mate. We also propose to study a group of labourers who migrate to Delhi without the medium of any labour contractor. The study will have four parts – a) understanding the context of the source areas of the migrating labour; b) a study of the train journey that links the village to the city of Delhi; c) the living and working spaces of the migrants in Delhi; and d) the functioning of the system of labour contractor/agent/mate from the source area to the destination.

Migration is an old phenomenon in Bihar. The colonial administration used it as a strategy of famine control in the late nineteenth century, ‘a policy partially based, as the ‘Dufferin Report’ detailing the condition of the Bengal peasantry later noted, on the results of the Irish Potato

Famine of the 1840s' (Hill, 1991). This seems to be true for the entire northern part of the state, then under Bengal Presidency. de Haan (2002) based on his study of migration in Chapra district (in the Gangetic plains in the north-west of Bihar) holds that the out-migration was common at the beginning of the twentieth century and, contrary to common view, it precedes urbanisation. Some of the reasons cited by scholars (Yang 1979, Hill 1991, de Haan 2002, Das 1992) for high out-migration from both north east districts (Kosi region included) and north-west districts (mainly Saran) are decline of weaving and cloth manufacturing, decline in cash crops and sugar production and later decline in opium and indigo plantation, high levels of landlessness and small holdings, low agricultural wages and lack of work round the year, very high population density, stifling feudal exploitation and social stagnation. Ironically peasants' use of 'seasonal' migration as survival strategy have been analysed as 'optimising peasants', as reflecting the rationality of peasant decision-making – an active search for a rewarding life (Yang 1979, Ralph E. Beals and Carmen F. Menezes 1970 cited in Yang 1979).

Kosi region experienced additional affliction of frequent ravages caused by the shifting course of the river Kosi until it was tamed by constructing embankments at various stages in the twentieth century. However, the area has remained perennially flood-prone causing enormous human misery on a regular basis. Under the active migration policy of the British administration, east and north east India was the destination for most of the migrating poor – in the agricultural fields of Bengal districts, the upcoming city of Calcutta and in the forests and plantation fields of Assam. However, the British policy succeeded only causing large-scale seasonal migration. Efforts at permanent migration did not find enthusiastic response from the sending areas. The relationship between environment, early expansion of capitalist activities and migration was particularly complex during the colonial period, involving many processes that often led to conflict and dispute (Hill 1991). Though the scope of the present paper does not allow further discussing this relationship in the past, it is important to establish that migration is not a new phenomenon for the poor of the Kosi region. People are not averse to mobility, rather have developed 'the habit of migrating' (Hill 1991). It is also important to recognise that the nature of migration in present times is inseparably linked to capitalist development in the country, thus causing great changes in the nature and direction of migration of the labouring poor from Kosi region.

One important change most clearly discernible is in the direction of out-migration – from the eastern states to relatively richer northern and western states. Those in the rural to rural

migration circuit, agriculturally advanced areas in Punjab, Haryana and Western UP are the preferred destination. A considerable and increasingly growing number of migrants are headed to urban areas – ranging from small and middle cities to metros like Delhi and Mumbai. The need of continuous labour supply for capitalist growth has guided the development of transportation links, most importantly the train links. Trains originating from small towns in the north-eastern part of Bihar bound to Delhi, Jammu, Punjab and Gujarat towns and Mumbai are too common now. The workers migrate either through the agency of labour contractors or at times form work gangs for better bargaining with the employers at the destination. Better transport links have enhanced the volume of migration and provided much needed elasticity of labour supply to far flung places.

Another important change is the emergence of a system of labour contractor/mate which ensures supply of labour from the Kosi region to time-bound capital intensive projects in the cities. There have been very few studies on the labour contractors and perhaps none in the context of Bihar. The mate is an interesting character coming from a heterogeneous background, sometimes even from the migrant sections – ‘lower’ caste and low class. They are the intermediaries between the labour and the employer. But this relationship is much more complex. The mate is the exploiter as he earns commission on labour supply but is also exploited as he hardly comes out of his own poverty and also lives in the constant fear of desertion by the labour and losing his grip over the supply chain. Sometimes he suffers losses when cheated by a powerful but non-committed employer. He needs initial capital to pay advance to the labourers, the most alluring factor for them. The labourer feels assured that the contract system would guarantee a basic arrangement for his stay and safety. The mate accompanies the labour, but himself mostly remains a non-worker. He ensures that the labour is docile, hardworking and disciplined. But, in absence of a unionised labour gang, he acts as the patron of the interests of the labour on occasions when the basic agreements on labour conditions are not met. His command over loyalty of the labourers ensures that he holds the bargaining power and uses this power in both ways. While he makes efforts to circulate the labour under his command to different projects so as to maximise his earnings, the same also works to the advantage of the willing labourers. The study proposes to investigate the dynamics of the labour supply through such contract system and the nature of the relationship between the mate/contractor and the labourer, on one hand and the mate/contractor and the employer on the other.

In view of the growing use of the social network theory, the paper proposes to examine as to what extent migrant workers succeed in locally constructing and mobilizing the support of their own social networks and to what extent they depend on the network of labour contractors/mates. What are those social networks, how much do they actually operate, and to which group of the migrants such active networks belong? Or, are they just hyped? What are the socio-spatial strategies for creating and preserving access to labour market in Delhi by the migrants who do not migrate through the contractor route? How do the two groups of labourers fair in terms of dealing with urban vulnerabilities and injustice?

The train journey of the migrants is a journey through spaces and times, criss-crossing states and regions on the one hand and railway's administrative divisions on the other. The temporality of the journey entails their struggle to discipline and control their own bodies – sleep, fatigue, nature's call, food and water, fear, boredom, and memories. The cramped general bogies of the train is often a site of both solidarity and fights between migrating groups, and their struggle against often hostile 'others' – on- as well as off-duty police, shopkeepers, hawkers, ticket checkers, sometimes even military jawans and local goons? How do they deal with mockery, insult (people speaking harshly to them) and violence that often accompanies them during their journeys? In nutshell, the paper would narrate how the migrant labourers mobilise their ability to negotiate various socio-spatial-temporal challenges – the hierarchies of caste, class and much maligned 'Bihari' tag – during the time spent on wheels? While the scope of the field work will allow covering only the onward journey from the village to the city, oral narratives of the migrants would be collected to document the experiences of their return journey.

It is important to examine why migration has continued as circular for over 100 years contrary to the modernisation theories that expected it to be a transitory phenomenon. Usually, migration is by single men, part of the family stays behind in the area of origin, and the migrants continue to maintain close links with their areas of origin and, if possible, invest their savings in the village rather than in the town [de Haan 2002]. This holds true even when the work provides opportunity of a permanent nature. The investigation can explain the relationship between the rural and urban as experienced and perceived by the migrant and the impact of migration for claiming social justice at both the places and 'transitory' rights during their stay and work in the city. It will also explain the relationship between capitalist growth, migration and poverty and the workers struggles against both the hostile capitalist cities and the rural still largely influenced by 'petty feudalism' (Das 1997). More often than not, dominant urban discourse influences

migrant's everyday life in the city spaces and contributes in keeping their life insecure, vulnerable and peripheral. This will be examined through migrant's encounter with state and society at destination. Amidst these insecurities and marginalities, the strategies to deal with situation of 'rightlessness' and engagement with the processes of claim-making will be explored.

The paper will be tentatively divided into seven sections. Section one will present some general socio-economic, demographic and geographic profile of Kosi and Bihar. Section two will describe the socio-economic profile of the migrant group to be followed up to the city in the backdrop of local socio-economic and political dynamics of the source area. In section three, the researchers will narrate their observations during the journey. In the next section, we will explain the system of labour mate/contractor and his relationship with the migrant labour and at times with the employers. In section five, we will follow the daily lives of the migrant in the city. And before concluding in section seven, we will discuss social hierarchies, violence and the state in the experiences of the migrating labour to the city.

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