

Challenges of Migrants and Families Left Behind

Insights from Thuamul Rampur, India





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Low wages in the agricultural sector and irregular work push people to migrate

Context

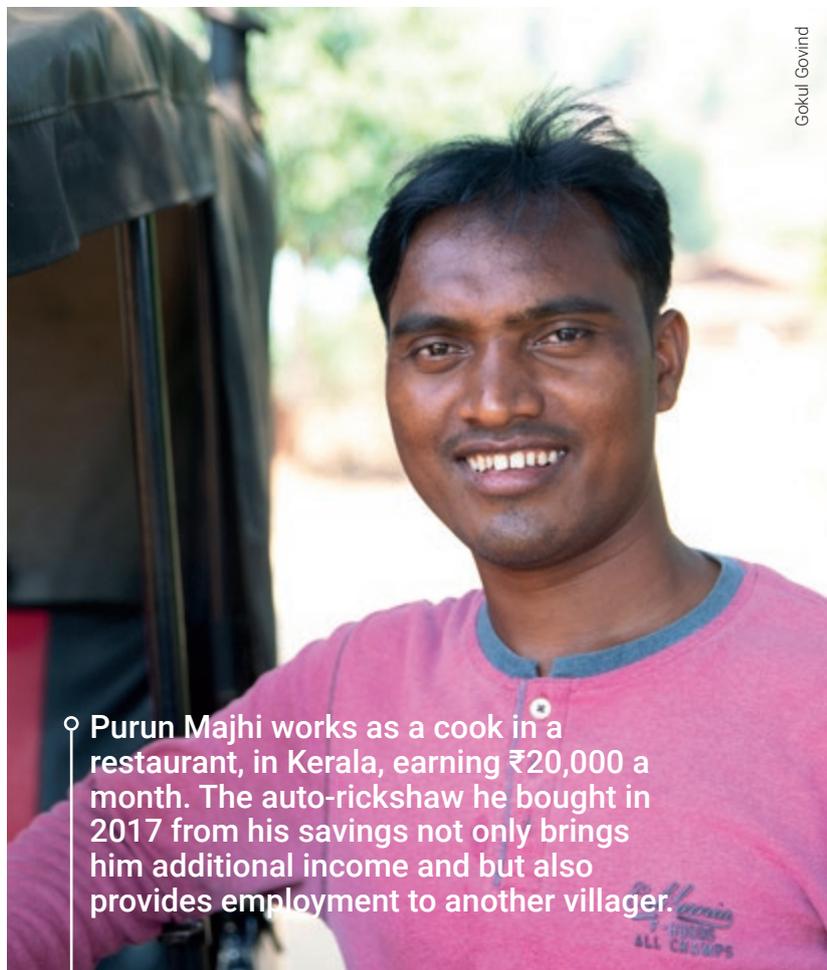
Migration has been a key survival strategy for millions of rural poor from the Indian state Odisha, with a poverty ratio of 32.6 per cent in 2011. The districts of Kalahandi, Balangir and Koraput, commonly referred to as the KBK districts, among the most backward districts of the country, contribute significantly to the labour migration from the state. Thuamul Rampur, with the largest proportion of Scheduled Tribes and the lowest level of literacy among the Community Development Blocks in Kalahandi district, has been witnessing large-scale, long-distance labour migration of young men, particularly to the southern Indian states. As part of understanding and addressing the livelihood challenges, Gram Vikas in partnership with the Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development (CMID) conducted a qualitative research during May 2019 to understand the challenges of the labour migrants from Thuamul Rampur and their families left behind. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted separately with migrant men who were visiting their families, left-behind wives of migrants, left-behind mothers, and the village elders including the Panchayats representatives, from Adri, Gopinathpur and Maligaon Gram Panchayats of Thuamul Rampur. Key informant interviews were also taken up with the migrants who were on short visits to their families, other youth, resourceful villagers, staff of Gram Vikas who worked in the villages and other key stakeholders. The study did not cover family migration. This report synthesises the key findings from the research.

Impact of Migration

Qualitative insights reveal that migration has significantly impacted the villages of Thuamul Rampur. A modest estimate suggests that the block receives approximately ₹300 to ₹400 million annually as wages from migration. Several migrants have bought auto-rickshaws that ply as parallel transport facilities between the villages. This not only has resolved to certain extent the bottlenecks in local transportation of villages that do not have public transport systems, but also has provided employment to the villagers. Motorcycles bought by a large number of migrant households from remote villages also have substantially improved commuting facilities. Remittances have helped households hire labour for work in the farms, which was otherwise impossible. It has also helped many migrant households build better houses, pay off debts, invest in small businesses and secure financial resources for marriages. The dowry paid also has gone up as a result of migration. The households with migrants are more likely to get credit from local financiers compared to households without migrants.

Destinations

Kerala state has emerged as the prime destination of men and the migration is largely driven by social networks. Ernakulam and Thrissur districts are major destinations within Kerala. Guruvayoor, Chalakudy and Thrissur Town in Thrissur district and Angamaly and Kochi in Ernakulam district are the destinations where migrants from Thuamul Rampur were clustered. Other destinations included Bengaluru in Karnataka, Chennai in Tamil Nadu, Hyderabad and Secunderabad in Telangana, Mumbai in Maharashtra, and Goa. Most migrants were men who predominantly worked in the hotels and restaurants in Kerala whereas female migrants, although a few, mostly went to work in the garment industry in Bengaluru. According to the migrants, work in the hospitality sector does not involve heavy physical labour and timings are flexible. Seasonal migration was predominantly to Tamil Nadu and Telangana.



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Purun Majhi works as a cook in a restaurant, in Kerala, earning ₹20,000 a month. The auto-rickshaw he bought in 2017 from his savings not only brings him additional income and but also provides employment to another villager.



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High wage rates, sustained availability of employment, better work environment and the availability of accommodation made Kerala the most prominent destination. An unskilled worker who would get ₹100 to ₹120 in Thuamul Rampur would get ₹600 in Kerala. The skilled workers, particularly those who can cook Kerala paratha, tandoor items and Chinese dishes get good wages, according to the migrants. Very low wages and irregular work in the villages were the two key reasons that pushed people out. Availability of friends/relatives/villagers at the destination helped potential migrants in the migration decision making and also securing jobs on arrival. Distant places were chosen by the youth as they were more comfortable in taking up odd jobs like cleaning toilets at such places. The community leaders cited the peaceful work environment also as a reason for youngsters moving to Kerala.

Challenges and Solutions

During the FGDs, the groups were asked to identify, list and rank according to priority, the three most important challenges they faced related to the migration and potential solutions were sought from them to resolve these challenges.

Migrants

The male migrants reported non-payment and irregular payment of wages, inability to identify a suitable employer who does not exploit them and lack of access to quality healthcare as three most important challenges they faced at the destination. The migrants suggested having an agency/interface at the destination that can help them secure appropriate jobs, identify genuine employers and access social security benefits including medical insurance, to overcome their challenges.

Wives Left Behind

The wives left behind found inability to access health services in the absence of their husbands, as the most important challenge they faced. They felt shy and scared to travel alone. The women also cited their inability to read and write as a reason for dependence on others. The women from nuclear families disclosed that they live in constant fear of thieves or drunk men breaking into the house, in the night. The women also shared that they found it difficult to manage the children alone as the kids did not obey mothers and missed school often. Fear of their husbands getting into extramarital affairs was also a concern of the wives left behind. Formation of Self Help Groups (SHGs) of women was proposed as a solution to resolve most of their challenges. According to them, it would help them save better, manage financial emergencies, escort each other in availing health services and collectively address the security issues in the village. They also felt that resolving the phone connectivity bottlenecks would help them to be in constant touch with their husbands, reducing the chances of extramarital affairs.

Mothers Left Behind

The mothers also endorsed that migration of their children has reduced access to healthcare for the family members. They mentioned that fetching firewood from distant forest places has



Migration of men has reduced access to healthcare for the family members. ○

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○ Fetching firewood has become a burden on mothers and other women as the men migrate

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become a burden on them as their sons used to do this before they had migrated. Diminished labour support in agriculture was ranked as the third most important challenge faced by mothers. As a solution, the mothers wanted their migrant children to save as much money as possible and return at the earliest to invest the same in self-employment back in Thuamul Rampur.

Village Elders

The village elders cited that given their profile, the youth who migrate are forced to take up jobs which are often 'less dignified' and risky. Lack of phone connectivity in the villages was another hurdle they highlighted which cut off the migrants from their native villages and contacting in the case of emergency was very difficult. The lavish lifestyle of the youth was another concern the village elders had. According to them, instead of productive investments that would have sustained impact, the men spend their earnings in buying motorcycles and for alcohol consumption. The village elders pointed out that quality education/training and access to higher studies will help the youngsters from the villages to obtain better opportunities and better jobs. According to them, having a phone or other communication facility at the Panchayat will help resolve the challenges in contacting the migrants in case of emergency. They also were of the opinion that the migrants should be regular in remittances and the families should save it.

Response to Select Challenges Identified by Gram Vikas

Based on the programme experience in the block and a pilot study, Gram Vikas had already identified three key challenges faced by a majority of the migrant households. The FGDs also probed the recommendations of the key stakeholders to Gram Vikas in resolving the absence of phone connectivity, hurdles in receiving remittances and inability to avail social security benefits both at the source as well as the destination.

Addressing Connectivity Bottlenecks

Most villages of Thuamul Rampur are cut off from the telecommunication network of all service providers. In the absence of mobile or landline connectivity, it is a struggle for the migrant workers and their families to communicate to each other. A villager who would like to speak to a migrant member of the family has to travel several kilometres to reach a point where mobile phone network is available, popularly known as 'hello points'. Since during the day the migrants are busy at their work, the family members have to reach 'hello points' at odd hours to have a peaceful conversation. This is extremely difficult for the wives of migrants, their children, mothers and aged parents. Video calls where people can see each other is almost impossible except at the block headquarters and a couple of other villages. Emergency communication is also difficult.



○ Narendra Naik used to work as a cook in a restaurant in Kerala till 2015. Coming back, he bought a light transport vehicle from his savings and drives on his own connecting the villages. Naik does not need to be away from home anymore.

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Receiving Remittances

Receiving remittances from the migrants has been a struggle for the families of migrant workers of Thuamul Rampur. Many a time, the migrants do not remit the money regularly and send it only to address the financial emergencies at home. Some villages in Thuamul Rampur are over 40km away from the nearest branch of State Bank of India (SBI) in Rampur, the block headquarters, which is the main bank branch available in the block other than the Business Correspondents (BCs) of a local bank who charge 'exorbitantly', according to them. The only ATM available is also at the block headquarters. Drawing even a small amount of money requires travel to the block headquarters and in many villages, they have to walk kilometres to reach a road where transport is available. There are only two buses which pass through the Panchayats where the qualitative research took place. Each bus makes one trip daily, in the morning towards the block headquarters and returning in the evening. Anyone who would like to draw money from the ATM or the SBI branch has to leave early in the morning and can only return in the evening. Since SBI has only one branch, there are long queues and many times due to cash deficit at the ATM or bank, people have to visit more than once. This makes receiving remittances a major hurdle, particularly for women and older persons. Those who wish to draw the money have to let go at least a day's work and wages to travel to the block headquarters. They also have to bear the transportation costs in addition to the bank charges. There are other issues as well such as problems in linking accounts to Aadhaar and inability of the recipient to read and write or use the ATM. The participants in the FGD were requested to provide suggestions to improve receiving remittances.

While the migrants mentioned that they do not face major problems in remitting from the destination, they highlighted that for the family, receiving remittances has been a major struggle. According to many, the BCs of the local bank charge even up to ₹100 per ₹1000 received. In order to resolve this issue, the migrants expressed their desire to have a Common Service Centre in every Panchayat so that it is easy for the families to withdraw money. The women also highlighted that travelling 30 to 40 km to the block headquarters to receive the money has been exhausting and it takes their whole day and sometimes more than one such visits are needed. The women also revealed that they do not prefer the BCs of the local bank as they charge much higher compared to SBI. They highlighted the need to set up an ATM

In order to address the connectivity bottlenecks, with the support of Oracle and the Charities Aid Foundation, Gram Vikas has been piloting the *Smart Community Interface*, a wireless network that facilitates intra-village connectivity in select villages. The *Smart Community Interface* also provides opportunity for the migrants and the families left behind to send and receive audio and video messages through smartphones. This is made possible by manually transferring the encrypted messages from the village server to the wider mobile network by an entrepreneur who charges for the service and commutes between the village and the point where mobile connectivity is available. Although this does not facilitate two-way live communication, it substantially improves connectivity.

The FGDs probed the participants for suggestions on addressing this specific issue. The migrants unanimously suggested installing the *Smart Community Interface* device at the villages as it can substantially improve their communication with family members. The wives of migrants expressed their wish to have a video calling facility in each village. They also wanted to learn how to use smartphones. According to them, it enables the family members to see the migrant, his living and working arrangements and that he is healthy and safe. The mothers also endorsed this. The village elders suggested establishing telecommunication facilities in every village that can help two-way communication between the migrants and the family members left behind.



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◦ Rama Majhi works in a fuel station in Kerala, earning ₹12,000 per month. His wife runs the small grocery shop they set up in the village a year ago from their savings.

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or other mechanism to help them withdraw money from within the Panchayat area. They added that such facility should not be charging exorbitantly for receiving the money. The mothers also responded in this line. The community leaders highlighted that travelling to the block headquarters to receive the money is a real struggle as from all over the block people come and there is a huge rush. They observed that this has been particularly difficult for the older persons and pregnant women. They recommended to have a money transfer facility at each Panchayat.

Exploring Better and Safe Opportunities at the Destination

The migrant workers find it difficult to secure suitable jobs and identify employers who do not exploit them. Irregular payment of wages has been their major problem. Pragmatic solutions which would help improve migrants' choice of jobs at the destination were sought from the stakeholders during the FGDs. The migrants highlighted the need for skill enhancement so that they get better jobs and wages. Securing formal job contracts and obtaining an

experience certificate from last employer were other demands. According to them, having a certificate would help them secure better jobs suitable to their skill sets and experience. A resource to guide them at the destination to secure jobs without exploitation, was another need. The wives wanted their husbands to take up less risky jobs, at a workplace where they remain healthy and get nutritious food. The mothers emphasised that the children in the village should get quality education so that they have better livelihood opportunities. The village elders wanted the migrants to avoid taking up illicit jobs that fetched easy money and focus instead on improving the quality of life of the families.

Availing Social Security Measures

There are several social security measures offered to migrant workers and their families both at the source and the destination states. Kerala, the major destination of the migrant workers, provides several benefits such as accidental and health insurance, allowances during temporary disability, maternity benefit, educational support to children and pension when the migrants



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return. However, the uptake of services is minimal due to poor awareness among the migrant workers, lack of demand creation initiatives and limited interventions by Civil Society Organisations. In the FGDs, suggestions were sought from the participants to improve the coverage and utilisation of social security schemes both at the source as well as at the destinations.

The migrant workers admitted that they do not have much idea about the social security schemes available and sought help in obtaining information about such schemes. The migrants also mentioned that, since they hardly get time to visit the offices to apply for such schemes, having a facilitator at the destination can help enhance their utilisation. The wives of migrant workers pointed out the need for health schemes that help their husbands avail medical facilities at low cost. Both the wives and mothers revealed that they are unaware of any such social security schemes and commented that the Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) or Anganwadi Worker can inform and help them avail the benefits from such schemes. The village elders wanted Gram Vikas to liaison between the Government of Odisha and the destination states to ensure safe migration from the villages.



Conclusions

Like many other places in western Odisha, migration has been a significant catalyst of economic growth in Thuamul Rampur, the tribal heartland of Kalahandi. While safe migration could substantially improve the quality of life of the rural poor and transform the local economy, at present, the migrants as well as the left-behind families experience significant challenges that arise out of the migration. In the absence of quality education and training, the migrants end up taking low-skilled, low-value jobs at distant places. Lack of safe migration programmes both at the source and the destination result in poor information about, access to, and utilisation of the social security measures by the migrant workers. In the absence of interventions at the destination, workers are exploited and remain socially excluded. The migration of men from the poor rural households appears to have reduced the access to quality health services for the left-behind families. Lack of convenient telecommunication and banking facilities result in wastage of time, resources and disrupt communication between migrants and their families. Enhancing the left-behind women's agency through formation and strengthening of women's collectives will have a direct impact on the quality of life of the whole family. Addressing the connectivity barriers, evolving innovative and low-cost solutions for receiving the remittances and formulating comprehensive and evidence-informed programmes to facilitate safe and orderly migration of the youth, leveraging source-destination collaborations can substantially bring down the hurdles faced by the migrants and the left-behind family members.



End Notes

- 1 Government of India, 2018, SDG India Index Baseline Report 2018, NITI Aayog and the United Nations. Available at https://niti.gov.in/writereaddata/files/SDX_Index_India_21.12.2018.pdf
- 2 Aajeevika Bureau, 2014, Studies, Stories and a Canvas: Seasonal Labour Migration and Migrant Workers from Odisha, Aajeevika Bureau. Available at <http://www.aajeevika.org/assets/pdfs/Odisha%20State%20Migration%20Profile%20Report.pdf>
- 3 Government of India, 2011, District Census Handbook: Kalahandi, Directorate of Census Operations, Odisha. Available at http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/dchb/DCHB_A/21/2126_PART_A_DCHB_KALAHANDI.pdf
- 4 Gram Vikas, 2018, Pilot Study on Migration (Unpublished), Gram Vikas, Bhubaneswar.
- 5 Common Service Centre is a village level information and service provision entity under the National E-Governance Plan of the Government of India.

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Established in 1979, Gram Vikas is a rural development organisation with operations in Odisha and Jharkhand. Gram Vikas has been engaged in addressing issues related to livelihoods, health, water and sanitation, education and rights and entitlements of the rural communities in Thumal Rampur since 1984. The Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development is an independent non-profit devoted to migration and inclusive development advocating for and promoting social inclusion of migrants in India. This research was conducted with partial financial assistance from the *Smart Community Interface* project implemented by Gram Vikas with Oracle and Charities Aid Foundation India. For more information and supporting villagers of Thumal Rampur, please contact liby@gramvikas.org



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