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Contents

1. Right to Education Act and Status of the Scheduled Tribe Education 1
----- *Prof. Bhattu Ramesh*
2. History and Development of Distance Education- A Study 13
----- *Prof. Gopu Sudhakar & Dr. C. Srinivasa Raju*
3. Status of Women in Unorganized Sector- A Study of Maid Servants 38
----- *Dr. T. V. Sujatha Kumari & Dr. B. Radha Devi*
4. Political Participation of Scheduled Caste Women in Telengana State- A Study 67
----- *Dr. A. Hari Prasad (Retd.) & N. Kavitha*
5. Administration of the NITI Aayog 92
----- *Dr. K. Rajender Reddy*
6. Kasturba Gandhi Girijana Balika Vidhyalaya Scheme (KGGBVS)- A Case Study 97
----- *Dr. Devath Suresh*
7. Role of Citizen's Charter in Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation 121
----- *Dr. P. V. Ramana Rao*
8. Status of Urban Health in India 134
----- *Dr. Chatla Ravinder*
9. Status of Youth in India 150
----- *Dr. Madhu A.*

10. Mobile Cell Phones and Cyber Crimes in India	158
----- <i>R. Shobha Rani</i>	
11. Status of Dalit Rural Women in India	167
----- <i>Ajmeera Amrutha</i>	
12. Migration From Rural Areas and Chronic Poverty	174
----- <i>B. Vijaya</i>	



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MIGRATION FROM RURAL AREAS AND CHRONIC POVERTY



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Abstract: *The present paper explores the relationship between migration, remoteness and chronic poverty in India. It addresses one of the key challenges for India, where growing levels of inequality and uneven growth have resulted in large sections of the population being excluded or adversely incorporated. Many of these people belong to remote rural areas and are chronically poor. They routinely migrate for work to smooth consumption, repay debts and invest in health and agriculture. Yet policy is poorly informed about migration and its relationship with chronic poverty. Furthermore, official datasets, which are the basis for policy formulation, do not capture circular and seasonal migration, both of which involve many more people than permanent migration do.1 The dominant view at the policy level is that migration, whether seasonal or permanent, is an impoverishing process which worsens urban poverty and destroys families. As a result of this simplistic perception, migrants have to travel, live and work in a policy environment that aims to control migration and is reluctant to treat migrants as full citizens at their work destinations. Unless something is done urgently to address the needs of the millions of poor migrants, India's prospects for reaching the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) will be severely compromised.*

Introduction

Much has been written about the characteristics, incidence and measurement of chronic poverty in terms of its severity and multi-dimensionality. The definition developed by the Chronic Poverty Research Centre (CPRC) (Hulme et al., 2001) emphasizes the durational aspects of poverty, i.e. poverty that persists for at least five

years, often passing from one generation to the next within a family. The chronically poor are a heterogeneous group and include those who are not able to support themselves as well as those who are economically active and remain poor. The definition of the chronically poor thus includes what others have termed as the extreme poor, destitute, ultra poor, the poorest or the poorest of the poor, while adding a time dimension.

Earlier studies on chronic poverty in India based on panel data from the village studies conducted by the International Crops Research Institute for Semi-arid Tropics (ICRISAT) in dryland areas (Gaiha, 1989; Gaiha and Imai, 2003) as well as studies based on two-period panel data (Bhide and Mehta, 2006; NCAER, 1986) used an income definition of chronic poverty rather than multiple deprivation. A recent study by Radhakrishna et al. (2007) adds nutrition to the analysis to define a household as chronically poor if its income is below the poverty line and if its children are malnourished for a prolonged period of time.

Rural Areas and Chronic Poverty

The chronically poor often live in RRAs, where physical isolation usually goes together with social exclusion. RRAs are spatial poverty traps that include areas rich in natural resources, such as forests, as well as low productivity areas, such as drought-prone and hilly zones. Although different types of RRAs suffer from different combinations of problems, they do share the common feature of being on the margins of political priorities and therefore merit attention as a separate geographical category. RRAs suffer from a range of governance, market and resource endowment failures that make them spatial poverty traps.

There is a rich literature on the chronic poverty and RRAs. Bird et al. (2002) summarize a number of country studies and datasets that show that the chronically poor are concentrated in RRAs. RRAs typically suffer from mutually reinforcing log jams of disadvantage (de Haan and Lipton, 1998), which constrain the development of both farm and non-farm employment opportunities. Poor agriculture, corruption, interlocked markets for labour, credit and commodities and poor service delivery characterize RRAs. Almost all social, political and economic transactions are controlled by the local elite and are weighed against the poor. Very often, the only option left for people living in RRAs is to find work outside the village.

Rural Areas and Chronic Poverty in India

An estimated 130 million Indians live in chronic poverty (CPRC India and Braunholtz, 2007). India and China account for almost a half (49-51%) of chronic poverty worldwide and just over a half (55%) of extreme poverty. India accounts for a higher share of global chronic poverty than China because of the higher probability of staying poor in India (McKay and Baulch, 2004).

Well-known pockets of chronic poverty in India are the central 'poverty square', comprising the contiguous forested area cutting across eastern Maharashtra, eastern Gujarat southern MP, northern AP, Orissa and Jharkhand. Large parts of the BIMARU3 states are also chronically poor and there are large pockets of chronic poverty within prosperous states such as Tamil Nadu. Shah (2007) notes that, contrary to common perceptions, incidence of chronic poverty in dry land areas is lower than in higher-potential forested areas. There, transient poverty is more common. The reasons could be that people living in and around forests have limited access to natural resources which are heavily protected by the government. However, she warns that many of these areas are also heading towards chronic poverty as water tables drop and out-migration becomes difficult with worsening urban poverty.

Chronically Poor People in India

Scheduled castes (SCs) and scheduled tribes (STs) have been identified as chronically poor in Indian studies recently. Kumar (2003) suggests in a paper on poverty and politics that caste, tribe and class merge into each other in the domain of absolute as well as chronic poverty in India. He argues that, although there are numerous cases of caste-class and class-caste convergence, there is marginal difference in the caste status of the absolutely poor classes and there is very limited evidence of economic prosperity among the depressed castes and tribes, particularly in the rural domain of the Indian economy.

Analyzing data from the National Family Health Surveys (NFHSs) and National Sample Surveys (NSSs), Radhakrishna et al. (2007) estimate that SC households constitute the core chronic poverty group in India because they constitute one-third of the rural chronically poor and one-fourth of the urban chronically poor; the relative size of this social group among the chronically poor is proportionally larger than its share among all households. Incidence of chronic poverty among STs using this method was unexpectedly lower than for SCs (14.0% [16.2%] in rural [urban] areas), owing to higher incidence of malnutrition among SCs. They further calculate that incidence of chronic poverty in rural regions is most prevalent among agricultural labourers (19%) and in urban areas among casual labourers (24%).

However, it is known that STs fare worst on a number of human development and economic development indicators, and are disproportionately represented among the poor. There are also other castes within the broad category of backward castes (BCs), such as those classified as extremely backward castes (EBCs) by the Bihar government. These have been poor for generations and together accounted for more than 250 million people in 2001 (167 million SCs, 86 million STs and other minorities). Official statistics show that SCs and STs are more deprived than other social groups. At the all-India level, poverty among STs was about two times higher than among

non-SC/STs, the poverty gap ratio being 2.10 and 1.7 times higher among SCs compared with non-SC/ST groups. But there were variations across states. The disparity between SCs and non-SC/ST groups was particularly high in Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan, with poverty disparity ratios of 5.31, 3.98 and 3.72, respectively. Thus, poverty among SCs was about five times higher in Punjab, about four times higher in Haryana and about two and half times higher in Rajasthan than for non-SC/ST population (Thorat and Mahamallik, 2005). In certain locations, Muslims are also among the most socially and economically disadvantaged, as in Bihar (ADRI, 2006); poor Muslims could also be included among the chronically poor in India. Many RRAs are home to STs and SCs. It would therefore be safe to assume that many STs, SCs and poor minorities fall into the category of the chronically poor.

Chronic Poverty and Migration

Traditional view on Poverty and Migration

The reasons underlying high mobility among the poor and the impacts on poverty have been the subjects of intense debate. A highly influential school of thought on migration and poverty in India stems from the work of Jan Breman, who traced the fate of poor migrant workers caught in the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist modes of production. In his work on migrant sugarcane cutters from Maharashtra coming in to Gujarat (Breman, 1994), he describes long working hours in harsh conditions for low wages and the two fold exploitation that they were subjected to by recruiting agents and farmers. The exploitation of migrant workers by market intermediaries and their consequent inability to break out of poverty has been noted by many structuralist researchers (Olsen and Ramanamurthy, 2000; Reddy, 1990). They draw attention to the contracting, living and working arrangements of migrants as similar to bonded labour or trafficking (paying of advances, paying these advances back through work, confined movement, lack of personal freedom, often illegal work, and violation of labour laws and risk of accidents, illness and sexual exploitation). This body of work has contributed important insights into the nature of exploitation in migrant markets and the areas for action at the policy level.

Neoclassical economists were equally negative in their assessment of the benefits of migration for the poor, arguing that migration contributed little to household budgets, was selective and favoured the better off and increased inequality in sending villages. An early and often quoted study by Connel et al. (1976) based on villages studied by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in India found that migration rates were lowest among the landless poor and remittances contributed only 2-7% of village incomes and less for poor labourers. Drawing on this work, Lipton (1980) asserted that rural-urban migration did not equalize incomes between or within regions for the following reasons (de Haan, 2000):

1. The selective nature of migration, providing higher returns to the better off and better educated, prevents equalization within areas of origin.
2. There are costs and barriers associated with migration, including on access to information about opportunities, which tends to steer the gains of migration to the rich.
3. The absence of the most productive household members leads to a lowering of labour intensity, which is 'socially maladaptive, especially in the medium run, while the rural work force is growing much faster than other, scarcer ... factors of production'.
4. The volume of net remittances is usually low.
5. Return migrants are likely to be the old, sick and unsuccessful, and skills brought back are unlikely to be of much help.

Indian scholars almost always emphasize the distress dimensions of migration by the poor (Murthy, 1991; Rao, 1994; Reddy, 1990; for example, write about migration for 'survival', identifying the main drivers as the worsening situation of dry land agriculture created by drought and crop failure). This has become the dominant school of thought in India now.

The literature on chronic poverty and migration has grown out of these research traditions. It views migration largely as a distress response to a poor agricultural base and a force that has depleted rural areas of labour, leaving behind impoverished residual populations with high dependency ratios and social stigma (see, for example, Kothari, 2002). Migration has also been viewed as a dimension of chronic poverty (Sen and Hulme, 2002), although it is not clear exactly what causality is implied (i.e. poverty drives migration or migration causes poverty or both).

Migration as a livelihood strategy

More recent studies have recognized migration as a routine livelihood strategy undertaken year after year and not just a response to shocks such as drought, floods and earthquakes (de Haan, 2000; Deshingkar and Start, 2003; Rogaly and Coppard, 2003). Migration can improve cash flows within households, which can be used to repay debt, purchase health care, finance marriages and other important social events and ultimately reduce poverty and vulnerability. In fact, circular migration is often linked to debt cycles and the need for money for repaying debts, covering deficits created by losses in agriculture or meeting expenditures of large magnitude on account of marriages, festivals, ceremonies, etc.

The earnings from migration can be substantial. A study by Narain et al. (2005) of Jhabua district in Madhya Pradesh shows the importance of migration earnings for

poor households. Data were collected from 550 households in 60 villages from June 2000 to May 2001. After income from agriculture, income from wage employment was found to be the largest source of income for households in all income quartiles. For the first three quartiles, the wage income came mostly from migration. Households in these quartiles earned about 65-70% of their total wage income from such seasonal migration. In contrast, households in the top quartile earned the largest share of total labour income (63%) from regular jobs in the private or public sector and only about 30% from off-village labour. In absolute terms, however, households in the top quartile still earned more from in-village employment than households in any other quartile and more from off-village employment than households in the first and second income quartiles.

In the tribal districts of Andhra Pradesh studied by Murthy et al. (2004), the average annual household income derived by tribals from migration (Rs1795) was comparable with earnings from cultivation (Rs1978) in 2002-2003. They found furthermore that migration contributed more to tribal household budgets than all drought relief programmes put together, including food-for-work programmes, which contributed Rs. 607, and also more than the collection of non-timber forest products, which contributed Rs395 (Murthy et al., 2004). In the 12 villages in Jharkhand studied by Dayal and Karan (2003), remittances accounted for 23% of the annual household income in sending households. In Mahapatra's 1998 study, on average 42% of annual household income was derived from migration. Regardless of income quintile, migrants saved around 60% of their income because they were provided with food and lodgings. For landless migrants, migration was the most important source of household income and they used the earnings to lease in land.

Migration and improved living standards

Qualitative accounts of the impacts of migration on household and individual wellbeing and wealth vary. But on the whole, migration money can help the household to maintain or improve its food consumption and even lead to greater investment in health, education and productive assets. In Jharkhand, 98% of migrants reported an improvement in their lives because of migration (Dayal and Karan, 2003). Migrant households have a better diet and spend on average 15% more on food than non-migrating households. Roughly 13% of those owning five to 20 acres of land spent their additional income on productive uses.

Migration has enabled some poor households to preserve their wellbeing rank. Qualitative data collected by Shah and Sah (2004) in a village in Bhadwani district show that migration helped landless households to maintain their standard of living over a decade. The researchers assessed the change in wellbeing rank over 10 years and found that 55% of the original 180 households had retained their original wellbeing status (including those that were already poor), 7% had experienced an improvement

and the remaining 38% had deteriorated in status. The analysis suggested that i) improvement was generally associated with access to irrigation through private sources or obtaining a salaried job; ii) deterioration owed largely to division of landholdings and, at times, to indebtedness and; iii) some households, especially the landless, could retain their wellbeing status in the better-off or medium categories owing to migration (Shah and Sah, 2004: 259).

Accumulation and Copes

Whether or not saving and accumulation occur as a result of migration depends on the mode of recruitment, skill and wage levels and the ability to access remunerative work, which in turn depends on social networks, education and assets, location, caste and gender. In general, those who migrate through middlemen earn and save less than those who have good contacts and migrate independently. Such migrants are usually poor, uneducated and unskilled. Personal business acumen, entrepreneurial skills and confidence also matter a great deal. For example, research on seasonal migration conducted under the Andhra Pradesh Rural Livelihoods Project by Samal (2006) in two villages in Mahabubnagar district and two villages in Ananthapur found that most households did not save much but some did accumulate wealth. One of the major factors leading to the accumulation of assets was the repetition of migration to the same destination. Long-term migration to places like Mumbai, Hyderabad and Bangalore enabled migrant households to accumulate because of the relatively higher wages and absence of middlemen. Migrants were predominantly from the lower social strata of SCs, STs and BCs (95%). They were mainly illiterate, landless labourers and marginal farmers.

The WORLP surveys found that skilled workers did particularly well in getting remunerative work in brick kilns and construction sites. While this did not mean that migration was viewed as the ideal form of employment, it was certainly seen as better paid and more secure than employment in the village.

However, many other studies emphasize the negative aspects of brick kiln work and construction labour, describing it as bonded labour, perpetuating debt and representing the worst form of distress migration. For example, Chakravorty (2004, in Srivastava, 2005) describes the process of recruitment and payment of brick kiln workers from Kalahandi, Bolangir, Koraput, Gajapati and other districts in Western Orissa who migrate to AP and other parts of Orissa through middlemen: 'The workers take advances, which are adjusted against a notional wage rate, such that when the workers return home (with small sums of cash), they are still in debt to the contractors or kiln owners, whom they have to repay the next season.' The differing accounts possibly owe to subjective assessments of the impacts on migrants and their families but also to the changing returns from migration, with wages having increased significantly recently. There have also been changes in recruitment, with the role of middlemen now much eroded.

Migration is regarded as an accumulative option by the tribals of Shivpuri district in the north of Madhya Pradesh. A study by the Jain (2006) found that a majority of the 450,000 tribals in the area who used to be able to make a living from forests are now completely dependent on migration for their livelihoods. The tribals migrate with their families to towns and cities in Rajasthan. Only the children and the elderly are left behind. In a season, two adults from a family working together earn around Rs. 5700. Although expenses are very high, migration is still regarded as an accumulative option.

Migration and debt

In some cases, migration reduces the need to borrow. In the village studied by Llewellyn (2005), migration to brick kilns reduced borrowing from moneylenders and reduced bonded labour. Migrant work appeals to villagers because it presents a chance to earn more money or a larger in-kind payment than they could earn in the village. Llewellyn states that: 'In a shock situation, people who previously would have had no choice but to submit to a year's bonded labour for Rs5000 can now weigh the option of soliciting an advance from a contractor and migrating instead.'

But the relationship between debt and migration is not straightforward. Some analysts have concluded that migration increases debt levels because of higher expenditures during transit and at the destination; others have argued that migration improves the creditworthiness of households and they are able to borrow more because of that (Ghate, 2005).

Conclusion

In this paper show that migration is higher in remote rural areas and, within those areas, among the chronically poor, who in this case are the SCs and STs. An important finding was that permanent migration constituted a small proportion of total movements for work and that circular migration was the most important form of mobility. This demonstrates powerfully the inadequacy of official statistics in capturing the mobility of the poor.

In remote villages, migration involved all but the poorest (disabled, old and sick) and the richest households. In the case of the poorest, this is because they do not even have labour to sell on account of being old, sick or disabled and therefore cannot undertake physical work. In the case of the richest, the reason for not migrating is that they can live comfortably from farming and/or other enterprise. The broad base of migration has resulted in its benefits accruing to a large number of households, challenging the notion that migration benefits only a privileged few with the right contacts, assets and education.

Circular migration earnings account for a higher proportion of household income among the lower castes and tribes, namely SC, BC and ST (in households with one

person working outside the village). Migration is critical to managing risk and smoothing consumption for a majority of chronically poor households living in remote rural areas. The extra income from migration has allowed the family to eat regularly and better, pay for health care when needed and spend on social events. Migration has improved the creditworthiness of families left behind in the village, who can now obtain large loans easily.

For those who have few assets, education or social networks, migration provides a way of coping and survival, providing income for consumption and paying off debt. For people with more skills, social connections and assets, migration can bring in enough cash to set the household on an upward accumulative trajectory that can eventually lead to an exit from poverty. Migration from RRAs can thus become an important poverty interrupter. However, the accounts given here show that it is difficult to define precisely at what level of accumulation this exit occurs, because accumulation is of different kinds, ranging from not having to borrow any more, to being able to spend on marriages and health, eating better and investing in tube-wells and irrigation.

FGDs and key informant interviews suggest that, although the purchasing power of migrating households has improved, this has not led to an increase in the price of essential commodities. This is because the poor in the village buy grain from government outlets that are supplied through a state-level network and also because migration is seasonal, so workers return during the peak agricultural seasons and the price of labour has not been affected.

The evidence so far suggests that sending areas benefit from migration first through an improvement in the lives of households with migrants and over time through knock-on effects on the entire village, through improved agricultural productivity and more economic activity. However, further resurveys would be needed to develop a more detailed picture of the impact of migration on sending villages.

The complexity of the migration process is such that its costs and benefits must be viewed against the overall social, political and institutional context of remote rural areas. While it is obvious that migration is not an ideal or easy way of earning money and improving the living standard of the family, it is often the only option in places that have suffered from log jams of disadvantage. The remote villages in AP and MP have indeed suffered from some combination of poor governance, leakage and corruption, social exclusion, physical isolation, restricted access to natural resources and low rainfall.

The costs and risks of migration are heavy, including the risk of disease, injury and not being able to send children to school. Given a choice, migrants would not sacrifice their children's future or their own health, but they are compelled to do so because they cannot look after themselves or their children properly when they migrate.

The fault lies with the institutional and policy environment and not with migration per se. The case histories also show that the distinction between employment, bondage and trafficking for chronically poor and socially excluded groups is blurred. Occupations at the destination are frequently in the 3D category and often border on illegality or are illegal. Policy responses need to be developed that can help the most vulnerable migrants, not only migrants who are working legally.

The emphasis of policy should be on minimizing the costs and risks of migration and maximizing its returns. At present, migrants cannot access to subsidized food through the Public Distribution System (PDS), which works on residence criteria; they cannot easily access state schools, cheap housing or government health care. There is an urgent need to reform policy in these critical areas. While investing in dry land areas should remain a priority for government, people's own efforts to access the benefits of growth in other regions should not be discouraged.

At the same time, there is a need to provide migrants with access to information on jobs, wage rates and their rights. There is also a need to create awareness among the police and other government departments who view migration negatively. There are now a number of NGOs in India that are providing migrant support, but they operate on a small scale with limited funding.

Some lessons can be drawn from the recent experience of China, where the poverty-reducing effects of rural urban migration have now been officially recognized and efforts are being made to make migration a less painful and expensive experience. Employers are being put under pressure by government to pay migrants on time and schools and other urban amenities are being provided for migrant workers. The system of registration (the Hukou system) is being gradually reformed to give migrants access to housing and government services; donor-funded projects, such as the urban poverty reduction project of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) are putting migration concerns at the centre of their agendas.

The future of circular migration is uncertain. It will continue as long as regional inequalities persist, but the pace of development and urbanization is now increasing in sending states, so it is very likely that commuting will increase rapidly. People may eventually be able to live in the village and work in nearby towns and farms. Until such a time, it is imperative for policy to recognize the importance of mobility and circular migration, in particular for sustaining the livelihoods of the poorest groups in India living in remote rural areas.

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