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On a hot summer's day in 1982, while walking through a jungle path in Bankura, West Bengal, anthropologist Narayan Banerjee asked an old Santhal woman who was accompanying him to narrate her experiences as a migrant agricultural labourer. At this, she stopped and exclaimed "what a foolish question to ask! I have lost count of how many times I have gone to 'your' village and of course you know how we stayed and worked there, what we gave and what we received. Even if you were young in those days, surely you noticed."

As Banerjee later wrote 'she was right' - he had indeed noticed Santhal men, women and children visiting his village in Bardhaman twice a year regularly to undertake agricultural work, when he was a child in the 1950s, a phenomenon that then "never appeared strange to me in any way." But 'she was wrong' when she assumed that he knew them. In his words, "I never knew them individually, because they all seemed to look alike....I never bothered to ask why they looked tired on the date of arrival and departure, why there used to be more *kamin* than *Majhi* and why some *kamin*-mothers returned with empty backs and elbows.¹ I did not know them at all in spite of meeting them year after year in my own house, in my own village."

'Dwarfed and humbled' by his lack of knowledge, he wrote of that day in 1982, "a nameless tribal woman took me by the hand and helped me to see the strange world of their lives...She told me frankly about many things - her childhood, the unhappy marriage, desertion, return to her own village and her everyday battle for two square meals. She had

[as later elucidated this refers to their infants having died 'either of diarrhea or unintentional neglect']¹



absolutely no feeling of guilt for whatever she had done to keep her body and soul together. As a young child she used to accompany her parents year after year. She used to be fascinated at first seeing new places. Gradually it became a monotonous journey and at the same time, an evil necessity. It was a labyrinth from which there was no way out. And in that labyrinth she was not alone. Suddenly she was narrating the story of thousands of women like her, women for whom intermittent migration was a way of life.”

He went on to quote the old woman’s words, “Can you tell me, we women being mothers, what kind of future we are giving to our children? Are we not passing on our past as their future? Have we undertaken these innumerable treks to do just that?” (Banerjee, Narayan, 1989) Some 30 years later, after a series of surveys on gender and migration in different parts of India, a CWDS study found that a large number of women from historically disadvantaged communities (SC/ST) were ‘being corralled and condemned to a cycle of advance/debt based circulatory migration with little scope for social advance (CWDS, 2012). The question posed by the old Santhal woman to Narayan Banerjee in 1982 indeed has continuing relevance, even as her words contain an implicit challenge to common perceptions of a primordial and timeless compass to tribal women’s sense of the world.

Banerjee and Ray’s case study of seasonal migration in West Bengal (Banerjee and Ray, 1991) presents one of the most socially grounded accounts of migration by tribal women in independent India. It is unfortunate that the study itself remained unpublished. This essay draws on some of the descriptions and observations in this seminal case study as a starting point in framing some of the principal features and characteristics of adivasi women’s migration in contemporary India. It particularly draws on the historical perspective that distinguishes this study from most of the studies on contemporary migration, and links it with other historical studies across a wider area, as well as with some of the findings regarding the nature of migratory mobility of adivasi women drawn from a recent large survey on gender and migration in India

(CWDS, 2012) and other sector based micro-studies for the contemporary period.

Adivasi Labour Migration in Historical Context

In the districts of Bankura, Puruliya and Medinipur (west) ‘*Namal Jaoa*’ is the most commonly used term for seasonal agricultural migration. Its literal meaning in the local language is - to go to the east. It thus provides an ‘apt description’ of the phenomenon of seasonal migration from the south-eastern reaches of the rolling hills of the Chotanagpur plateau located within the above three districts, to the plains of Bengal further east.² While the source area for *Namal Jaoa* is dependent primarily on rain fed agriculture in hilly terrain marked by overdrainage and soil erosion on its slopes, the destination areas are all located in fertile alluvial and irrigated plains. At destination, migrants generally receive better wages and, more importantly, they find employment/income during their lean season. From periodic migration ranging from two to four times a year (in spells of two to four weeks each) they bring back not only cash but also some rice to supplement the inadequate amounts that they are able to raise from their own area/land. As such, they are definitely better able to survive through seasonal migration.

Yet, Banerjee and Ray had sensed ‘an undertone of misery... anxiety, sadness and helplessness was intimately associated with the word [*Namal*].’ They found a ‘general consensus on certain issues’ that the migrating women associated with their repeated treks every year. These were “neglect of children’s health and education, deteriorating health of family members, especially of women, unstable family life due to change of residence three or four times a year, increase in bigamy, divorce, desertion, indignity suffered by women at workplace as well as during travel, discontinuity in asset management such as livestock, house,

² Chotanagpur is the collective name for the Ranchi, Hazaribagh and Koderma plateaus. It covers much of Jharkhand state as well as adjacent parts of Odisha, West Bengal, Bihar and Chhattisgarh, and is home to some 15-20% percent of India’s tribal population.

backyard gardens, etc., fragmented and ad-hoc approach to social development of family, low, uncertain income, [and] a vicious cycle of indebtedness.”

Based on discussions with various ethnic groups involved in seasonal migration in the above three districts the study posited that “the phenomenon was originally restricted to a single community, viz. the Santhals and their brethren of Kherwar origin, such as Deshwali Majhis.”³ Seasonal migration to the plains of Bardhaman originated in the colonial period, and it is argued that continuity and expanding destination areas was later maintained due to increasing degradation of the source region as opposed to increasing industrial and agricultural development of the destination points, particularly due to improvement in irrigation facilities. A series of historical developments in the destination areas – from the famine of 1770 that wiped out ‘one third of a generation of peasants’ in the plains of Bengal to the development of coalmining, iron work, paper mills, potteries in Bardhaman, and then the opening of the Bankura Damodar Railway (1916) - had all contributed to an accumulating demand for and continuing flow of migrant workers into the district.⁴

³ Santhals are the largest tribal community in West Bengal (third largest tribe in India). In 2001, Santhals, numbering 2.28 million, constituted 52% of the Scheduled tribe population in West Bengal. Deshwali Majhis (A community of largely Santhal origin who underwent religious transformation during the Kherwar movements of the late colonial period and became more or less assimilated into Hinduism) were considered semi-tribal by the authors of the study, although they are officially classified as OBC.

⁴ Banerjee and Ray point out that by the end of the 19th century, more than 20 per cent of Bardhaman district’s population was supported by industry, commerce and other service professions. A form of seasonal migration for coalmining is also referred to in Dagmar Engels’ paper on Adivasi Women in Bengal (1993) where she mentions that Santhals and Bauris (Bauris are a Scheduled Caste, considered by colonial anthropologists to be a ‘tribal caste’, i.e., having been only tribal till very recently) formed the bulk of the labour force from the beginnings of coalmining in Bengal. The first coalfields in Raniganj, Burdwan were established in 1774, but regular mining actually began in 1820. Many of these workers used to back to head their villages for agricultural operations, and in fact a substantial number were settled as agricultural tenants in nearby lands by the 19th century coal companies, thus maintaining an agricultural identity.



However, it was agriculture and increases in rice production in the Bardhaman plains in particular that was of greatest relevance for adivasi women migrants. Land area under cultivation had expanded through colonial grants of revenue free wasteland in the late 18th century (after the famine), and cropping intensity increased in some areas after the construction of the Eden canal (1881) and then over a more extended area following opening the Damodar canal system in the 1930s and its completion in the 1950s. With expansion of irrigation and intensive rice cropping, the practice of agricultural migration by adivasi labour also grew and even led to scattered settlements of Santhals in the district by the first half of the 20th century. Banerjee and Ray pointed out that seasonal migration expanded phenomenally in the post-independence decades, contributing in no small measure towards making Bardhaman the ‘granary of Bengal’. Based on discussions with local farmers in select destination villages, and correlating rice yield per hectare and cropping intensity with census figures for agricultural labour, they calculated that the local agricultural labour force could not anywhere near fulfill the labour requirement for rice cultivation in the area and estimated that seasonal migrants accounted for from 40 to 60 per cent of annual agricultural labour days in the 1980s.⁵

The source region in the study had once been famous for its forest – in what the Mughals and the British called Jungle Mahals. The particular blocks covered by the study (Ranibandh block in Bankura, Manbazar/Banduan in Puruliya, and Binpur in Medinipur) were part of a compact forest tract inhabited mainly by the Santhals and Bhumij.⁶ The forest had earlier provided the wherewithal, food and land for subsistence agriculture as well as other forest produce for supplementing diets and

⁵ In 2001, Rogaly et al made a calculation for the Bardhaman district as a whole and arrived at the figure of a requirement of half a million migrants for the Aman harvest and even more for the transplanting. Seasonal Migration, Social Change and Migrants’ Rights: Lessons from West Bengal, *Economic and Political Weekly* December 8, 2001.

⁶ The Bhumij are a semi-Hinduised community of Mundari origin autochthonous to the area and forming even zamindaris (in the erstwhile estates of Manbhum, Barabhum and Dhalbhum in present day Puruliya and Bankura). In 2001, the Bhumij numbered 336,436 in West Bengal, constituting around 8% of the ST population in the state.

incomes. Such a situation however, changed dramatically from the late 19th century, when due to the rising value of timber with the opening of the railway in Bankura and Puruliya, large areas of forest were cleared of trees by several interest groups – the zamindars, timber contractors, and the people, both tribal and non-tribal - to meet the demand of the rail companies and particularly the spikes in demand during the two world wars. Although officially declared ‘protected forests’, a second phase of devastatingly intensive deforestation came during the mid-fifties. This latter phase occurred during the interregnum between the demise of private ownership claims of the zamindars over forest lands (with zamindari abolition) and before the government’s forest or revenue departments established full control, a short period during which forest trees were open for anyone to fell. Later experiments in Joint Forest Management from 1988 remained of an ad hoc nature and at the discretion of the Forest Department, for whom forest villages had become largely only a source of labour. The *longue durée* of erosion of the balance between the forest economy and cultivation that had marked the survival pattern of tribals in the area, had thus long given rise to and sustained the pressure for seasonal migration.

The specific tribal features of such seasonal migration were at the same time inextricably linked to the reconfiguration of land tenures/ownership and agrarian relations in the Jungle Mahals during the colonial period. Although pioneer tribals had reclaimed virgin lands in the area to make them arable, and were indeed encouraged to do so by both rent seeking zamindars and the revenue hungry colonial administration throughout the 19th century, most of the good land at the bottom of the valleys did not ultimately remain with them. In pre-colonial times, much of the Jungle Mahals had remained inaccessible to the Mughal land surveyors and under the Mughal zamindari system – in the area covered by the study - it was the autochthonous Bhumij who had first set up villages. These villages were largely rent free or with token rent (paid to the zamindar), under what was known as the *Ghatwali* system. A stratified socio-political order thus emerged among the Bhumij with the chiefs acquiring greater control over land and forest wealth. The Santhals, on the other hand, were not autochthonous to the area, and were



associated with the *Pradhani* or *Mandali* system. In this system, a band of settlers led by a pradhan or mandal, undertook to reclaim jungle land by paying a stipulated lumpsum to the zamindar. The Santhal reclaimers were not however, the virtual owners of the reclaimed land as was the case for the Bhumij.

With the entry of colonial administration and its systems of land settlement and with trading and commercial concerns like the British owned Midnapur Zamindary Company making inroads into a developing local land market - vigorous measurement of land holdings, payments of stiffer rents and revenues in cash, and an associated enlarged presence of non-tribal moneylenders/traders/peasants/artisans etc. played havoc with the non-competitive mode of tribal existence.⁷ Rampant indebtedness among the tribals and loss of land was the consequence. By the first quarter of the 20th century, the pradhani/mandali villages were completely bought over by non-tribal proprietors of land converting the Santhals into rack rented tenants/sharecroppers or landless labourers, while even the Bhumij chiefs/zamindars and Ghatwals became victims of moneylending Mahajans, and finally lost their forests and surplus land following zamindari abolition. Boxed into agriculturally less productive land and with depleted access to forest produce, the tribal peasants and agricultural labourers were left without sustenance in their home villages for a large part of the year. The pioneer adivasi settlers were thus pushed into survival oriented intermittent *labour* migration as a way of life that continues till the present.⁸

⁷ These were all areas that fell within the Permanent Settlement (1793) that was implemented by the British East India Company whereby the former landholders and revenue intermediaries (zamindars) were granted heritable, rentable, and alienable proprietary rights (effective ownership) to the land they held and the land tax was fixed in perpetuity. Under the Permanent Settlement, on one side the landlord class acquired greater power than earlier, while on the other the Company's policy of auction of any zamindari lands deemed to be in arrears created a market for land which previously did not exist. Intermediary rentiers proliferated increasing the rent and debt burden on tenant cultivators who were also unprotected from eviction/ replacement by others.

⁸ The Bankura district Human Development Report of 2007, which highlights the otherwise rapid development of the district yet records the continuance of seasonal migration from the uplands.



While, there are indeed area and tribe specific features in the above story of conversion of sections of the adivasi peasantry into migratory labour, its essential processes - set in motion by colonial rule and its practices - are repetitive across larger tracts and regions in middle India. Addressing questions of tribal social transformation at a wider level, K S Singh has argued that 1) the British survey and settlement operations, that were introduced in previously unsurveyed tribal regions, acted as an instrument for the transformation of tribes into peasants, 2) the colonial system ended the relative isolation of the tribal society; brought it into the mainstream of a new administrative set-up, put an end to the political dominance of the tribes in the forested territories they occupied, 3) tribal communities which had earlier been spared the strain of surplus generation were roped into a new system of production relations, and 4) while following a policy of strengthening the feudal crust of the tribal societies, formed by the rajas, chiefs and zamindars, the colonial regime simultaneously created conditions in which their economy and political system were undermined by 'rampaging market forces' (Singh, 1982). Labour historians tracking the migration of labour drawn from the Chotanagpur tribes (primarily Santhal, Munda and Oraon) for the Assam tea plantations have pointed to the continual decay of an agrarian economy characterized by mono-crop rice cultivation, poor soil condition, lack of irrigation and drainage facilities, soil erosion and deforestation that had made Chotanagpur's 'peasants and tribesmen' into a reservoir of cheap labour and transformed the region into a 'labour catchment area' (Das Gupta, 1986; Chakravarty, 1978). Drawing on detailed crop and arable land data in some of its sub-regions (Ranchi, Hazaribagh, and Singhbhum), others have shown that extension of arable land in forested landscapes (albeit unevenly), demographic pressures as well as colonial land tenure arrangements designed to give 'a good stiff rent', had also impacted the cropping patterns of the tribal economy with rice gaining at the expense of more drought resistant crops in many areas.⁹ The shift in crop actually made local agriculture less resilient

⁹ The switch to rice is of course understandable since rice can support more people per unit of land than most other staples (see Cambridge World History of Food)



against failure of the rains and more susceptible to famines and the heaviest outmigration from Chotanagpur in the late 19th and early 20th century was actually from the areas where the most rapid intensification of arable farming had occurred. (Mohapatra, 1991). In general, there is agreement that arable expansion in tribal areas brought in a range of non-tribal rentier interests and their retainers, who were soon able to acquire land in the tracts that were earlier controlled by tribals. Resistance to such depredations through a spate of tribal rebellions was militarily crushed by the British and ‘pacification’ policies led to the creation of an enormous population that had to move out of their regions in search of livelihood (Kaushik Ghosh, 1999). The colonial policy of ‘pacification’ through sedentarisation of semi-nomadic tribes in defined areas and their actual expropriation from much of the better quality lands thus both operated in tandem.¹⁰

As the survival economy of tribal communities became more tenuous and fraught, perennial mortgage of their land and labour became a prominent feature of their integration into the broader agrarian economy under colonial rule. These features persisted into the 20th century, despite belated experiments in protection of their ‘customary’ rights in some designated areas. From the late 19th century onwards, the ‘Agency system’ was put in place by the British, whereby the normal operations of ordinary law were not applied in ‘Scheduled Areas’ purportedly to protect tribal lands from takeover by outsiders.¹¹ Part of the ‘pacification’ drive in response to tribal rebellions, such an enclaving policy was based on the principle of supposed noninterference into the affairs of the tribals and isolation. Yet, even where restrictions on alienation of tribal land to non-tribals were enforced, market forces remained at work, and while mortgage of land to non-tribals became impossible, intra-tribal stratifications and transactions in land between tribals and tribals emerged, that spawned the emergence of a class of tribal or ‘insider’

¹⁰ K S Singh points out that it was in these enclaves that the concept of protection of the tribes as an ethnic community developed in stages.

¹¹ In these areas, usually the collector was vested with extraordinary powers by declaring him an ‘Agent’ of the government.



moneylenders as well. (Singh, 1982) Further, exploitation of forests for timber and related plantation through reorganized forest administrations (giving the colonial governments control over the forestry) in the latter half of the 19th century effectively transferred much of the wealth of the forests out of the hands of tribal residents, and pushed forward the conversion of the hitherto largely autonomous tribal indigenes into a subordinate ‘coolie’ labour force.¹²

Historical researches for the colonial period spanning the entire middle India girdle of tribal homelands, have documented the process of ‘dissolution of entire economies that were nomadic or forest based, the conversion of land into a scarce commodity, and a growing ethnic cleavage in access to the means of production’. Beyond Chotanagpur, in the Central Provinces too (present day M.P., Chhattisgarh, western Orissa), adivasis were ‘fairly consistently among the group who suffered expropriation’ either during or shortly after the colonial settlement period.¹³ Even when the rate of expropriation slowed, they were left cultivating the worst quality soils, resulting in their becoming ‘one of the most heavily coerced elements in the migrant workforce and the first resort of nearly every recruiting agent.’ (Bates and Carter, 1992).¹⁴

¹² It is interesting that the messianic Tana Bhagat movement among the Oraon (1914-16) that later came under the influence of Gandhi and fed into the non-cooperation movement, in fact, started with a refusal by one Jatra Oraon to accede to the demand by the local police for unpaid coolie labour by the Oraon tenantry. This was at a time when the Oraon of that area (Bishanpur in the present day Gumla district, Jharkhand) were being subjected to excessive requisition of labour for the construction of the summer residence of the Lieutenant Governor on the Neterhart plateau.

¹³ In the Central Provinces, under the malguzari settlement system, ownership was conferred on those who had acquired a proprietary status on quasi-feudal conditions as jagirdar or talukdar (malguzars), including some tribal chiefs or their relatives, grantees of state revenue, and others, but in contrast to Bengal, some measure of tenant-right was also included.

¹⁴ For example, Bates and Carter have shown that the settlement regime in Mandla district granted proprietary rights to the Gond tribals, who constituted over half the population in the 1860s, in only 432 out of a total of 11,430 villages. The Baigas, who were 4% of the population were granted only 20 villages. This pattern was repeated in all of the tribal districts in Central Provinces. In Betul, Seoni and Chhindwara where tribals constituted 35-40% of the population, less than 1 in 7 villages were allowed to remain in tribal hands. Within 20 to 30 years after these settlements, 270 villages were

Whether it was the Gonds and Baigas in the Central Provinces and Berar, or the Bhils of Khandesh (Maharashtra), Malwa (Madhya Pradesh) Mewar and Wagad (southern Rajasthan), the broad contours of the story followed similar trajectories; as tribals lost their autonomous or semi-autonomous modes of existence, large numbers became indebted peasants and agricultural labourers; as their earlier survival patterns were eroded by deforestation and restricted access to the forest commons and its products, many of them were converted into subordinate 'coolie' labour and seasonal migrants. The first super profits earned by the Europeans from indigo production in Bengal and Bihar were to a great extent dependent on the availability of cheap seasonal migrant labour from the Chotanagpur area, as was the spread of intensively cultivated wet rice fields in the Bengal plains. Similarly, in the Central Provinces and Berar - agricultural development in the Narmada valley wheat zone and the Nagpur-Berar cotton zone was made possible by the seasonal migration of primarily Gond tribals from the upland regions, while Bhils were drawn upon to fulfill the seasonal demand for labour in the cotton growing areas of Khandesh as well as the canal zones of the Bombay Deccan. It has been argued that such seasonal migrant labour in fact played a pivotal role in the continuing reproduction of agricultural underdevelopment in the upland areas of tribal concentration as well as the greater levels of development in the lowland areas that they migrated to. (Bates, 1985)¹⁵

transferred in Mandla – mostly to Marwari moneylenders, while between 1869 and 1912 the number of Gond villages fell from 294 to 129 in Raipur. (Bates and Carter)

¹⁵ For the cotton zone across the districts of Nagpur, Wardha, Amraoti, Yeotmal, Buldana and Nimar, based on cotton and other crop output data for 1890-91, Crispin Bates has calculated that the labour requirements of cotton in the late 19th century exceeded the capacities of local agricultural labour, at a time when cotton accounted for 30% of the gross cropped area (GCA) and argued that the importance of migrant labour must have become of even greater significance over the next few decades as cotton rose to cover 44% of GCA in the same zone by the 1920s. For the wheat zone of the Narmada Valley, Bates refers to specific contemporary descriptions of the inter-generational annual migration of Gond Chaitaharas from the Rewa Hills for 1867, 1901 and 1911. (Bates, 1985, 'Regional Development and Rural Development in Central India: The Pivotal Role of Migrant Labour', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 3.)



In the first half of the 19th century, ‘Boonooahs’,¹⁶ ‘Dhangars’,¹⁷ or ‘Hill coolies’ were the terms used by the British to refer to adivasi labour of Chotanagpur (usually from Santhal, Munda and Oraon tribes), who migrated seasonally during the winter months to various districts in Bengal (then including Bihar) for employment in the indigo plantations and factories (Van Schendel, 2012), for harvesting of the winter rice crop, for road building, and land reclamation around Calcutta. ‘Chaitharas’ was the popular name for the adivasi seasonal migrants (predominantly Gond) in the wheat zone in the Central Provinces.¹⁸ ‘Dhangars’ were among the first (if not the last) to be sent as indentured labour to foreign lands, when following the abolition of slavery, the global colonial plantocracy was in search of pliable and controllable labour to replace their erstwhile slaves (Kaushik Ghosh, 1999; Sanjukta Das Gupta, 2012.).¹⁹ It was in the latter half of the 19th century that the infamous recruiters of indentured labour for Assam’s tea plantations turned to the Chotanagpur area as the ‘favourite hunting ground’ for the so-called ‘jungly coolies’ who were their labourers of choice. (Samita

¹⁶ Writing on indigo labour, Van Schendell described ‘Boonooah’ workers as primarily seasonal labour, and quotes a 19th century observer Machell as writing, “the Boonooahs are the inhabitants of the Boons or the Jungles... They are very ingenious in making mats, nets, baskets &c., and are supposed by some to be the aborigines of Hindoostan.” Willem Van Schendel, 2012, ‘Green Plants into Blue Cakes: Working for Wages in Colonial Bengal’s Indigo Industry’ in Marcel van Linden and Leo Lucassen (ed) *Working on Labour: Essays in honour of Jan Lucassen*, Brill, Leiden.

¹⁷ John Mackay, an indigo planter over a period of 28 years till 1836, with plantations in ‘Jessore, Dacca and Nuddea in lower Bengal; Patna, Tirhut and Bhaugulpore in the province of Bahar’, claimed to have employed up to 500 ‘Dhangars’ at a time. He described these workers in the following words -, “There are no mechanics among them, unless assistant brick makers may be so considered; many of them are good hands at mixing the clay for brickmakers, and expert in forming tanks, but I would consider the Hill Coolies as fittest to be employed as labourers of the ground... [they] will travel a distance of 500 miles in, search of employment, and know the value of money, and carefully, save the wages they earn to carry back to their country to spend with their families.” John Mackay, Minutes of Evidence on Indian and British Immigration, *House of Commons Papers, 1838*, Vol. 22, p. 186

¹⁸ The term Chaitharas comes from the season of Chait (March-April), when the wheat crop is harvested.

¹⁹ For emigration of Dhangar and Hill Coolies, see House of Lords, Session papers, Session 1837-38, Vol. VIII, p. 44

Sen, 2012)²⁰, later extending their field further south to the tribal populations of the Central Provinces (Bates and Carter, 1992).²¹ Tea plantation labour however, was distinguished from the predominant pattern of seasonal migration of tribal labour. Most migrants for tea plantations were permanently divorced from their areas of origin, and their descendants in Assam, now referred to as 'tea tribes', still constitute a major part of tea plantation workforce both in Assam and the Dooars of West Bengal; they are still located within enclaves that combine agricultural and industrial characteristics, and are also still largely socially segregated from the rest of the local population.²²

The indigo fields and factories have long disappeared, colonial style land clearing/reclamation using tribal 'coolie' labour long reached its historical limits, and the migration stream of middle India adivasis to north-eastern tea plantations came to a close some years after independence, but the legacy of conditions and pressures that led to conversion of tribal communities into a surplus labour force that is most easily corralled into and dependent on labour migration for survival, continues to operate in contemporary times. Adivasis still remain a significant social component of particularly the rural migratory workforce of 21st century India, concentrated in hard manual labour based occupations. They are today predominantly to be found in agriculture, construction and brick kilns.

The transformation into migratory wage labour is also a feature of some tribal communities, whose modes of life and sustenance were somewhat different from those mentioned above. For example, the nomadic gypsies - Lambadas/Lambanis/Banjaras, - were cattle raisers/traders, long-distance transporters of goods, supplying grain to even the Sultanate and Moghul armies in their campaigns (Shyamala,

²⁰ Between 1879 and 1890, 53.36 per cent of workers in Assam tea plantations were from Santhal Parganas and Chotanagpur.

²¹ The catchment areas in the Central Provinces, from where migration of tribals for Assam's tea plantations took place, were mostly along the southern reaches of Chotanagpur and are largely located in present day Chhattisgarh and Orissa.

²² Despite being adivasis, Tea tribes however, do not have Scheduled Tribe status in Assam.

1984). Recent research has outlined how the Lambadas' encounter with colonialism also economically displaced, dispossessed, and converted large sections of them into hired and even conscripted labour, albeit along a more community specific historical route. When cotton and salt, the two prized items, which the Lambadas traded throughout the subcontinent, became an East India Company monopoly, the Lambada trader/transporters were shunted out of their pre-eminent role in long distance trade, and the establishment of faster modes of transport, the railways, etc. finally forced them to completely abandon their merchant caravans and turn to cattle raising and agrarian labour. Further, while legislations restricting access to forests and pasture lands then made the raising/grazing of cattle more difficult, the Lambadas were additionally subjected to ignominious physical restrictions on their own movements and were declared criminals under the infamous Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. Forced to settle on the inhospitable uplands outside the normal village boundaries (thandas) in the dry areas of the Deccan plateau, they were then conscripted and made to work as indentured labourers on colonial roads and railway construction projects, albeit often under police escort. (Bhangya Bhukya, 2010). The Criminal Tribes Act was repealed at independence, and its notified tribes denotified shortly after, but stigma and related social isolation of lambadas living in thandas persists. The agriculturally unproductive terrain of their settlements and chronic poverty has made for the community being a significant contingent of the migratory construction workforce in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra as well as other forms of nomad labour such as the sugarcane harvesters in western India.

Tribal Women's Migration in Contemporary Times: A Comparative Profile

One of the distinctive features of tribal labour migration streams has been the high participation of women. Significant numbers of women were involved in the more permanent migrations of tribal labour to the tea plantations of Assam and north Bengal as also in seasonal or circular labour migration across a wider set of regions and sectors from 19th



century onwards.²³ The habit of men and women migrating for work together in family or even larger tribal groups/gangs perhaps drew upon their heritage of moving together to reclaim land from the jungles for the establishment of new settlements whenever the need was felt, the practice of shifting cultivation, and nomadic/semi-nomadic ways of life. When transformed from autonomous indigenes and peasants into subordinate migrant wage labourers in a commercialising but colonised economy, many adivasis would still move or be recruited in bands that included women. A lack of any tradition of confinement/seclusion of women indeed distinguishes tribal society from other communities in India, among whom graded hierarchies are far more entrenched, and the seclusion of women has long been linked to higher social status. Nevertheless, women were not and are not positioned as equals within tribal societies (Sinha, 2005, Archana Prasad, 2011). Further, in the wage economy, whether tribal or non-tribal, women workers have long been paid lower wages than men and this was true for migratory labour as well. Still, the traditional lack of any severe internal restraints on women's labour and personal mobility in tribal societies has been an important factor in maintaining the higher rates of female work participation among adivasis and their relatively greater participation in wage labour based migration in comparison to other social groups in colonial as well as independent India.²⁴

²³ For the colonial period, Sugata Bose has shown that in the Jalpaiguri tea gardens (North Bengal Dooars), women in fact outnumbered men. In 1921 there were 65,938 female workers in the plantations of Jalpaiguri Dooars in comparison to 56,745 males. In the Assam tea plantations too, women ultimately constituted the majority of the workforce. Similarly Bates has shown that in the cotton belt, seasonal migrants were largely women and children. By his calculations, in the 1930s, typically 11.24 man-days and 17.74 woman-days were hired per acre in the Berar plains compared to average deployment of 3.88 man-days and 1.42 woman-days of family labour. For the post independence period, Banerjee and Ray show that tribal women clearly led the way for women from other communities in seasonal migration to the rice plains of Bengal.

²⁴ As per National Sample Surveys, in 2004-05, female work participation rates (FWPR) among Scheduled Tribes stood at 44.4% in comparison to 30.8% among SCs, 31.6 % among OBCs excluding Muslims, 16% among Muslims, and 23.4 % among upper castes. Since then there has been a comprehensive decline in female work participation rates across all communities with the decline appearing in sharpest form among STs.

In general, female labour migration in contemporary India is poorly recorded by the official macro-surveys and it is difficult to derive a picture of tribal women's work migration from these surveys. Since they define migrants as those who have changed their place of residence, women migrants vastly outnumber men in macro-surveys because of the widespread prevalence of village exogamy and patrilocal residence in marriage practices. Yet their estimates of female labour migration have remained notoriously lower than what field/ground experience/reports suggest. Since only one reason for migration is asked for, a significant amount of labour migration by women is camouflaged under other social reasons such as marriage or family movement. Further, the definitions followed by the official surveys have been slow to respond to the findings of micro-studies that women's labour migration is predominantly short term and circular in nature, both of which tend to be poorly recorded in official surveys. Even when special efforts have been made to bring temporary or short term migration within the ambit of macro-surveys as was done for 1999-2000 and 2007-08 by the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), changes of definitions between the two survey rounds have made for difficulties in trend analysis. Nevertheless, the three migration surveys conducted by the NSSO between 1993 and 2007-08 do provide some indications that a more significant presence of women is still a distinguishing feature of tribal labour migration, and also that tribal women's migration for work is relatively more temporary in nature and more concentrated in rural areas.

Notably, the above three rounds of migration surveys (NSSO) consistently show that the proportion of *migrant households* among Scheduled Tribes (STs) is higher than among other communities. Since migrant households here refer to households migrating within a reference period of only one year preceding the date of survey, we may safely assume that the higher proportion of migrant households among STs is because more tribal women migrate alongside their menfolk in

But even then, in 2011-12, FWPR among STs was 34.8 % in comparison to 24.2% among SCs, 23.3% among OBCs excluding Muslims, 13.6% among Muslims, and 17.9% among upper castes (Neetha 2014).

comparison to other social groups, among whom more women may be left behind by male migrant workers or be migrating to join their menfolk only much later. This is notwithstanding the fact that the overall female migration rates (i.e., proportions of the female population who have changed their usual place of residence) are lowest among ST women in comparison to women of other social groups. In other words, the NSS surveys indicate that relatively lesser proportions of tribal women effect more durable change of residence (whether due to marriage or employment reasons), but greater proportions of tribal women tend to migrate with their households for employment.²⁵ The 1999-2000 survey further showed that STs were the single largest group among female *temporary migrants for employment* in rural areas but not in urban areas.

Unfortunately the most recent migration report of NSS for 2007-08 has not given the proportions of STs among the newly defined category of short-term migrants for employment. We can however, fill some of the gaps in the report by referring to the findings of the set of surveys conducted by the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS) between 2009 and 2011, across 20 states in India, that have been consolidated to present a meso-level view of the broad patterns of women's labour migration in India (Gender and Migration, CWDS, 2012). The CWDS surveys again provide evidence of the relatively greater involvement of tribal women in female labour migration in contemporary times. They show that STs were over 26% of the migrant women workers in rural destinations and 21% in urban, which is close to three times their share of the general female population in rural areas and close to ten times in urban areas.

With the application of a more nuanced typology of migration, some of the distinguishing aspects of tribal women's migration that are only hinted at in the macro-surveys came out very sharply in the CWDS surveys. They showed that the most distinctive feature of adivasi

²⁵ The lower migration rate among tribal women is however changing at a rapid pace. Between 1999-2000 and 2007-08, the increase in the migration rate was highest among tribal women, having jumped from 35.7% to 44% bringing it much closer to the national average of a 47.7% migration rate for the female population as a whole than before.



women’s labour migration is their concentration in short term and circulatory migration – i.e., migrating and returning to their native villages every year or several times in a year. In comparison relatively smaller proportions of tribal women workers are involved in long term or medium term migration for settlement or more durable residence in urban areas. Table 1 below presents the consolidated findings of the CWDS surveys in relation to the distribution of types of migration among women migrant workers from different social groups.²⁶

Table 1:

Distribution of Women Migrant Workers by type of Migration (%)

Type of Migrant	General	OBC	MBC	SC	ST
Long term migrant	44.51	41.56	21.51	25.98	20.81
Medium term migrant	30.02	22.98	30.11	17.36	10.48
Short term migrant	3.93	11.91	10.75	14.54	25.16
Irregular short term migrant	6.42	1.13	1.08	1.08	1.45
Circulatory migrant of longer duration	2.90	9.93	5.38	19.52	22.10
Circulatory migrant of shorter duration	4.55	6.95	4.30	6.06	10.00
Daily/weekly commuters	4.97	3.69	25.81	14.67	8.71
Migrant for family care	2.69	1.84	1.08	0.81	1.29
All	100	100	100	100	100
Short term and Circulatory Combined	17.81	29.93	21.51	41.18	58.71

*Source: CWDS, 2012

As the table clearly shows, among the types of migration, the weight of short term migration, circulatory migration of longer duration, and circulatory migration of shorter duration is greater among ST women migrant workers than among all other communities/social groups. When taken together, it is most striking that the great majority (59%) of migrant

²⁶ Source: CWDS, Gender and Migration: Negotiating Rights, A Women’s Movement Perspective, (Key Findings), 2012.



women workers from scheduled tribes are involved in short term and circulatory migration. This is a significantly greater proportion than the 41 percent of such short term and circulatory migrants among scheduled caste women migrants, almost double the 30 per cent among OBC women and more than three times the proportion (18%) among the general/upper caste women migrant workers. Related to this high share of short term and circulatory migration is another finding of the CWDS surveys, namely that the destination areas of a majority of the tribal women migrant workers (56%) are rural in contrast to the majority of women migrant workers from the upper caste and OBC origin, among whom 71% and 54% respectively were found to be migrating to urban destinations. Only among migrant women workers of SC background is the 62% share of rural destinations higher than among tribals.²⁷

The CWDS study found that types of migration were very closely correlated with sectors and occupations. Service occupations (white collared, intermediate combinations of mental and manual work, as well as menial services such as paid domestic work) and manufacturing (factory based or home-based) are more linked with long term and medium term migration. On the other hand, heavy manual labour based seasonal occupations in the primary or secondary sector that are generally attached to the most degraded conditions of work and where the figure of the labour contractor/recruiter/agent looms large, are more closely correlated with short term and circular migration. At an overall level, the CWDS study showed that *labour migration by women* had led to limited occupational diversification and in fact had propelled their concentration in a relatively narrow band of occupations. Within this overall picture, tribal women were further concentrated in three sectors/industries, namely agriculture, brick kilns (in rural areas) and construction (in both rural and urban areas). These are the principal sectors/industries driving the short term and circulatory types of migration by women in contemporary times and for which recruitment, particularly in rural destinations is often of male female pairs or family units rather than

²⁷ All percentage figures in this para are rounded off to make for easy reading.

individuals of any one sex (which partially explains why migrant households are more among STs).²⁸ On the other hand, tribal women were found to be virtually absent in textile/garment factories, which have otherwise drawn in women workers from all other social groups/communities. The CWDS surveys showed that among tribal women migrants in urban India, it is not manufacturing, but, construction that featured as the most prominent employment, while in the feminized occupation of paid domestic work, adivasi women migrants were prominent among the 'live-ins', i.e., those who resided in their employers' homes, but relatively insignificant in the larger sea of 'live-out' domestic workers who generally live with their own families in destination areas. Finally, although, the small sample of mine workers in the CWDS surveys did not reveal much, it is perhaps significant that the few mine workers covered by the survey were predominantly of adivasi origin.²⁹

A corollary to the high share of short term and circulatory migration among ST women, was the finding that white collar services accounted for a mere 18 percent of ST women migrant workers, among whom young women from the northeast were more prominent than the adivasis of middle India. The low proportions of ST women in white collared employment was roughly the same as that of SC women migrants (19%), but strongly contrasted with the 66% of upper caste women migrants and 36% of OBC women migrant workers in white collar employment.

The table and figures given above follow the legal definitions of social group categories. The ST category thus makes no distinction between different groups of tribes or their differing social and regional histories. To our minds however, there is indeed a need to differentiate between the migrants from the tribes endogenous to the northeast of the country and the adivasis from middle and southern India. Even their

²⁸ The CWDS survey showed that 42% of rural women migrant workers had been recruited as part of a unit of labour that was either a pair or family based.

²⁹ Most of the women workers encountered in mining areas of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh during the field work were of course descendants of earlier migrants like in the tea plantations, which are also not drawing any fresh migrants.

migration and employment patterns are quite different. The CWDS surveys found, for example, that women migrants from the north eastern tribes were actually more concentrated in urbanwards medium term migration for modern service sector employment that is salaried and requiring relatively higher educational levels (salesgirls, office workers, etc.).³⁰ Lack of opportunities in the north eastern states has no doubt propelled the relatively recent but noticeable phenomenon of work/education based migration by young women from the northeast to large cities in other parts of India. Studies have shown that their conditions of work are exploitative, stereotyped, difficult and trying, (Singmila, 2007) and often compounded by race and culture based targeting.³¹ Nevertheless, their relatively stronger educational backgrounds, their services oriented occupational profile, and perhaps their initial context of exclusive rights over larger amounts of land and territory (relative to population) in their relatively more autonomous tribal homelands, has made for a qualitatively different social location from where women from the tribes of the northeast have made their entry into urban life in comparison to other adivasi migrant workers.

Migrant women workers from the middle India tribes in urban destinations are more concentrated in casual labour in construction, prominent among live-in domestics, and are even more concentrated in migration to rural destinations for agriculture, brick kiln work and again construction. Related to such a process of concentration are the other features of adivasi women's labour migration - namely circularity, a greater level of involvement of intermediaries – labour contractors and

³⁰ Young women from the north east were also found to be working in significant numbers as beauticians – particularly in more organized beauty parlours.

³¹ For example, migration may be the only option of finding employment for many women from the northeastern tribes, but rarely is it mediated by labour contractors or tied and controlled by systems of advance based debt bondage. Among middle India Adivasi women migrant workers on the other hand, the figure of the labour contractor/recruiter/agent looms large as does the system of advances/loans at the time of recruitment that spawns coercive/bonded conditions of work. Both have served the function of keeping migrant adivasi workers largely confined to hard manual labour with degraded conditions of work and residence that more independent labour mostly refuses to accept

recruiters, and a continuing living relationship with the agrarian tribal social order that is rarely sundered by migration. Why these features, that were spawned by the particularities of development of commercialization and enclaved capitalist enterprise under colonial rule, should persist more than 60 years after independence, the specific role of adivasi women's labour, and the differential manner in which they continue to be concentrated in the lowest echelons of the migratory semi-proletariat, are questions that cannot be answered without reference to continuities and changes in a) the sphere of labour processes and accumulation regimes as they have impacted tribal labour, and b) the particular location of tribal populations in the broader agrarian economy and social order. Some aspects of the disadvantaged location of tribes in an agrarian order whose foundations were shaped by colonial rule have been described in earlier sections. We may now turn to the labour processes, the gendering of such processes, and the accumulation regimes that have particularly engaged with adivasi women migrant workers.

Passing on their past as their future? Labour Processes, Accumulation Regimes, and Gender in Adivasi Migration

In any history of labour migration in India, perhaps the most dramatic story has been of the transportation of hundreds of thousands of adivasis from the mid 19th century from Chotanagpur, Santhal Parganas and later from the Central Provinces far away from their homelands to work the tea plantations of Assam and north Bengal. Coal mining and adivasi migrant labour were also closely connected, albeit much closer to their home lands, particularly since the first coal deposits were discovered in areas close to tribal settlements. Fairly well documented histories of adivasi women's involvement in these two sectors provide us with a valuable frame of reference for initiating an examination of both continuities and changes in adivasi women's labour migration.

Tea Plantations

In the migration stream for the tea plantations that came to a close only in the 1960s, it is well established that women had been particularly targeted by British planters and their recruiters. At lower wages than men, they provided the cheapest workers for the labour intensive task of plucking tea.³² They also became necessary for reproduction of the plantation labour force (among whom the death rate was excessively high). It has been pointed out that the 'productive advantage' in the recruitment of women was a factor in shaping the colonial plantation owners' preference for adivasis over the more 'male only' migrants from other communities. (Samita Sen, 2012) These preferences remained even though the cost of recruitment of adivasi labour was more than for other migrants. However, more than the simple play of market forces, what determined the conditions and characteristics of plantation labour were the peculiarly unfree methods of colonial labour recruitment and migration to distant lands, and the highly repressive, coercive and isolated conditions in which they - men and women - worked, and lived. For such purposes the tribals of middle India, whose community/family livelihoods were facing extinction, were particularly easy targets.

For the remote and isolated plantation enclaves, resident captive labour was seen to provide the most easily controlled (read coerced) and stable workforce. Indenture and the use of force (involving the whip, the stick and the legal power to recapture those who tried to escape) was initially used to keep men and women tied to slave like conditions in the plantations in Assam;³³ their children supplying labour reserves and

³² Initial clearing of the land, terracing and planting was primarily men's work in the period when the plantations were being established for which tribal male labour experienced in land reclamation was considered particularly suitable. As the tea production cycles became more established, captive tribal family units, detached from their social moorings was considered most suitable and easy to control.

³³ For an account of the methods of coercion used, see Rana P. Behal, Power Structure, Discipline and Labour in Assam's Tea Plantations, in *Coolies, Capital and Colonialism: Studies in Indian Labour History* edited by Rana P. Behal, Marcel van der Linden

reducing the expenditures required for long distance recruitment. Yet even when they were not indentured as was the case in the north Bengal plantations, for the migrants in the plantations the term of 'free' labour was hardly appropriate. Tribals brought to the north Bengal Dooars were paid wages that were half the wages of agricultural labour in the area around the plantations, and the labour lines in the plantations were kept strictly insulated from the agrarian society that bordered on it. (Sugata Bose, 1993)³⁴ In the case of indentured labour, notoriously dehumanised professional recruiters known as *arkattis* (who were mostly villagers in the labour catchment areas) were initially given the task of 'coolie catching' by licensed contractors (mostly Europeans with headquarters in Calcutta), who then sold them to the planters at a market price. In the case of the so-called 'free' labour, direct recruitment took place through garden *sardars* (migrants who returned to their villages to bring back more workers to the plantations) who persuaded their kin and village folk to migrate. The families so recruited, were often bound through loans from the *sardars* given to settle debts, and some money and goods from the planters on their arrival at depots managed by the plantation owners. Migrant workers in the plantations were bonded by contracts backed by penal sanctions which meant arrest of any worker who tried to leave within the contract period, and/or by loans and other methods of social control through the *sardars*. Further, apart from segregated isolation within the plantations, any inter-plantation mobility was made impossible by concerted functioning of the plantation owners in relation to their labour. Consequently, the characteristics of unfree and forced labour that characterized plantation labour from the beginning, persisted well after the abolition of the penal provisions in 1926.³⁵ At the eve of

³⁴ The manner of insulation was through prevention of outsiders entering the tea gardens where the workers were housed and prevention of the workers from moving out of the gardens.

³⁵ Ranajit Dasgupta has argued that the Assam and also the north Bengal plantation labour force came to be endowed with, despite some areal variations, certain economic and social characteristics, which were similar in some important respects to several other segments of the industrial labour force. At the same time, the plantation labour force had several distinctive socio-economic traits by virtue of the demands made upon it by the plantation system. It was essentially an enclave economy exhibiting a

independence (1946), a Labour Investigation Committee found in the plantations “a mass of illiterate people living far away from their homes of settlement scattered all over Assam, practically segregated from outside influence, unorganised and unable to protect themselves while the employers have formed themselves into one of the most powerful and well-organised associations in the country.”³⁶

The cruel conditions of plantation labour having stoked anti-British sentiments in the general populace involved in the freedom struggle, it was only natural that the Plantation Labour Act (1951) was one of the first sector specific labour laws to be enacted in independent India. Nevertheless, it is striking that close to six decades after its enactment and its stipulations that medical, housing and educational facilities etc. are to be provided by employers, a special survey of plantation workers found that more than half the women (56%) were illiterate, less than half of them (48%) had medical facilities, but unsurprisingly (in order to maintain a captive/dependent workforce), the majority (77%) were provided with housing, overwhelmingly within the borders of the plantations. (GOI, 2009) Further, more than three decades after the enactment of the Equal Remuneration Act (ERA, 1976), employers still continued to use women’s employment as a means of keeping wages depressed in tea plantations. (Sarkar and Bhowmik, 1999)

The peculiar enclave situation of the tea tribes has thus persisted in independent India, within which women have become even more concentrated in labour intensive manual tasks. They are the pluckers paid piece rate wages and constitute the majority of tea workers, but men dominate the more machine oriented activities as well as non-manual forms of employment and are more likely to have time rated wages. Gendered task segregation combined with the system of piece rates for

combination of both agricultural and industrial characteristics, and the imposition of a particular mode of control and authority over its labouring population which in its turn imparted to the plantation workers some qualitative characteristics which differentiated them from certain other segments of the wage-earning labour force, such as the factory and mine labour force.

³⁶ Rege Committee Report (1946) quoted in Ranajit Dasgupta, EPW, 1981.

the female intensive tasks in the plantations has emerged as the prime mechanism in the continuance of gender based wage disparities that have been recorded in every occupational wage survey in the plantation sector even after ERA, 1976. More recently, since the 1990s, the tea sector has been undergoing a crisis, and closures of many tea gardens have led to large-scale retrenchments. In general, a shift in the centre of gravity of the capital accumulation regime in the tea industry from production to trade in the post liberalization decades (since 1991) has meant that much needed investments are not flowing into the plantations. Further, the fact that the bulk of production of tea (80% according to GOI, 2009) is from the corporate sector (including MNCs) or by large estates, had enabled manipulations of prices paid to tea producers aggravating the crisis.³⁷ When combined with price fluctuations in export markets and enhanced internal competition under globalization, it is not surprising that many plantations have closed down and the spectre of retrenchment/unemployment/dispossession stalks plantations that in earlier times paid to bring in migrant workers from far off lands (Mishra et al, 2012).

Few among the descendants of tea plantation workers have been able to move to other occupations, their conditions of work and residence having kept them socially and culturally isolated, bounded to the plantations by work and residence, and with every successive generation bred from childhood into plantation work. It is a historical irony that in 21st century India, a new breed of urban based labour contractors (the so-called 'placement' agents/agencies) now looks upon the tea plantations as one of their prime hunting grounds for recruitment of young girls/women for the expanding market for live-in domestic workers in metropolitan cities.³⁸ A new mode of migration and indeed a kind of captivity, albeit within the amenities of urban households but nevertheless combining work and residence on employers' terms, is once again being offered to

³⁷ The plantation corporates appear as trade based buyers of tea, depress prices to be paid to producers and thereby put a financial squeeze on the production process in plantations, while increasing their profits from a rise in retail prices for tea.

³⁸ There can be little doubt that it is the tribal origins of many workers that has drawn these recruiters to the plantations, since the other areas from where such girls are recruited are from the tribal villages in Jharkhand, Western Orissa and Chhattisgarh.

the descendants of tribal migrants who built, worked and settled the tea plantations and are now faced with another crisis of livelihood and way of life.³⁹

Coal Mining

In the formative years of India's coal mining industry, tribal peasant families located in the area surrounding the collieries, were among the first recruits of both British owned mines as well as those owned by Indians (mostly from zamindari families).⁴⁰ One of the earliest methods of recruitment was through the *zamindari* and *nokarani* (service tenancy) systems where coal companies acquired zamindari rights over non-coal bearing surface land around the collieries for agricultural settlement of *malkatas* (the face workers) at nominal rents with the specific condition that the tenant families were to work a certain number of days in the company mine.⁴¹ Other methods of recruitment included using labour contractors who employed agents (*sardars*, usually village headmen) to recruit work gangs from villages – often by providing advances along with fare, food and drinking money to the workers. Some of these

³⁹ The situation of these workers and the role of the 'placement agencies' is discussed by my colleague N. Neetha elsewhere. We may only add here that during field work in the tea plantations of North Bengal and Assam in 2009-10 for the CWDS study on Gender and Migration, often parents, brothers and sisters of some of these young girls/women who have got lost or gone 'missing' or simply lost contact with their families, would crowd around the researchers making anxious pleas for help in tracing them or finding out about how their girls were faring.

⁴⁰ Commercial exploitation of coal in India began under the East India Company rule in the late eighteenth century. The first collieries were established in Raniganj in Bardaman district of Bengal, and for a century, the Raniganj field was the most important producer. Towards the end of the 19th century, the Jharia fields in Dhanbad district also became important for realization of good quality coal. Coal mining in Giridih began in 1857. By the beginning of the 20th century coalmining was undertaken in other areas – Rewa, Mohapani in central India and Singareni in Hyderabad, although Raniganj and Jharia still accounted for more than 80% of the country's coal in late colonial India.

⁴¹ Ranajit Dasgupta points out that these practices were common in Raniganj collieries in Bardhaman district as well as in Giridih (then a part of Hazaribagh district).

recruits were directly employed by the companies, albeit under the supervision of *sardars* whose control was based on kin/community hierarchies. Others remained as mining gangs operated by the contractors who were paid for the coal they raised, and where selection of workers, their supervision, and distribution of wages was done by the contractor who again used *sardars* to control the workers. Whatever the differences between one method and another, all involved considerable elements of obligation and compulsion of a non-economic nature that gave to tribal coal workers too, the particular features of unfree labour in colonial India. (Das Gupta, 1981)

However, adivasi women's role in the coal industry followed a different trajectory from tea labour. The technology and methods of extracting coal underwent many more fundamental changes over the years as did the gender organization of the labour process. In the early phase of underground mining, apart from the carrying of coal cut by their menfolk from the face to the pit bottom, some women also collectively operated a winding engine to bring the baskets/buckets to the surface (called a Gin), and 'beam engines' employed to do the combined work of pumping and winding.⁴² These manually operated machines were phased out by steam and eventually caste/tribe based 'family units' with women loading, lifting and transporting coal cut by their male partners remained the only mode of employment of women. From the late 19th century onwards, a non-tribal male only 'upcountry' workforce began to be recruited who would work round the year and gradually there was a withdrawal of adivasi workers who had tended to remain seasonal workers in the mines, spending a part of the year in agricultural operations in their home territories and lands. (Lahiri-Dutt, 2001)⁴³

⁴² A 'gin' derived from the word engine was located at each pit head. It consisted of a wooden drum with a rope round it and four arms on a vertical axis. On each of the four arms some six to nine women pushed the arm around and wound up the rope, raising one bucket of coal and lowering an empty bucket simultaneously.

⁴³ It seems that Bauris, who were perhaps earlier a tribe but are today designated as SCs, were among the first to bring women into coal mining – Santhals followed. Such was the initial concentration of Bauris in the coal mines that their community came to be identified as 'traditional coal-cutters.'

Colonial era owners and managers of collieries used to explain the greater presence of tribal women in coal mining as being based on their being accustomed to ‘naturally sharing in their husband’s work’. However, there is also sufficient evidence that many adivasi men and women in both coal mines and tea plantations actually migrated without their families and it was not only the ‘sharing of husband’s work’ that brought tribal women into the migrant workforce. (Dagmar Engels, 1993) Yet notably, the fact of single or individual status of tribal women migrants did not mean that they were stigmatized or isolated from their community as was often the case for the industrial women workers from other communities in colonial Bengal.⁴⁴ Ultimately of course, the female workforce in coal mining was reduced to nominal levels, particularly when the ban on women working underground came into effect (1930s onwards).⁴⁵

Even during the post independence period when coal mining was reserved for the public sector (it was nationalized in 1973), while overall conditions of work were improved and became more regulated, women continued to be eased out of employment and further displaced by mechanisation. Since the 1990s, liberalization, has again brought in several private interests into the sector, and promoted the rapid growth of what has been called “carpetbagger capitalism”, ie., wealth accumulation generally by “outsiders” extracting mineral resources at the expense of local populations), which follows a trajectory of rapid exploitation and

⁴⁴ The lack of stigma faced by adivasi women workers in their own communities contrasted with the situation of the widows, deserted women, and social outcasts who were so prominent in the female workforce drawn from other castes/communities that was employed by the first wave of modern industries in and around Calcutta.

⁴⁵ Although Lahiri-Dutt and others have maintained that it is the ban on women working underground that is responsible for the reduction of women coal workers, the fact is that even open cast mining has a small proportion of women workers. More than 80% of the country’s coal is today drawn from open-pit mines, but this does not appear to be leading to any increase in women’s employment in mining suggesting that it is not the ban on women working underground that is any longer a primary factor in keeping women out of mining. NSS employment figures for 2009-10, show that women constituted just 10% of the mining/quarrying workforce, and while male employment in mining had increased over 2004-05 (if only slightly), women’s employment had declined.

exhaustion of finite mineral resources without mitigation of ecological and social disruption and destruction.(C.P. Chandrasekhar, 2010) While some tribal women are indeed still being drawn into the highly casualised manual mining workforce in several privately and some illegally operated mines - ecological damage, disruption of tribal livelihoods and displacement in mining areas – all part of an extractive primitive accumulation syndrome have become more central to the engagement of tribal communities with mining in its current phase.⁴⁶ Where tribal women are still working in mines – mostly under contractors in open cast mines, their conditions of work have become increasingly unsafe, unhealthy and brutalized and at the same time their employment has become more volatile and uncertain. For example the CWDS survey found many tribal women from Jamtara district in Jharkhand either seasonally migrating for several months or commuting weekly for work in illegal coal mining and coal processing bhattas in Salanpur, Barabani and Jamuria, all part of the eastern coalfields around Asansol in Bardhaman. Despite low wages, back breaking labour, unsafe conditions, and being at the mercy of contractors linked to criminal mafias, the absence of any alternative options has pushed many – particularly young tribal women into such modes of employment. Their movement is sometimes in the form of family migration and sometimes in the form of casual circulation or commuting of gangs of women workers, albeit with their very employment having an uncertain future.

Seasonal Agricultural Migration – Short Term

Seasonal migration by adivasis for non-plantation agriculture that covered a wider terrain has perhaps not received as much detailed attention by labour historians. However, as mentioned earlier, women often outnumbered men in such migration in the late 19th and early 20th century, and it is safe to assume that many of them also used to move without husbands or fathers and indeed continue to do so. For the more

⁴⁶ Currently 70% of India's coal production is from the tribal areas of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. Jharkhand and Orissa alone have 53% of the country's coal reserves and displacement of tribals from land and livelihood due to mining has mobilized thousands of tribals in movements against such displacement.

contemporary period, Banerjee and Ray's West Bengal case study indicated that the high rates of tribal women's participation in seasonal migration for rice in Bardhaman was linked to their outnumbering men in wage based agricultural labour in the source area. In contrast, in the destination area, local women were traditionally less involved in agricultural labour, although they were prominently employed in post harvest processing tasks in the households of land owners.⁴⁷ Their study however, also pointed out that the shift in processing tasks out of households into modern rice mills had reduced the availability of such employment for local women and given rise to their moving into agricultural operations that were earlier primarily done by migrant women workers.

The West Bengal case study brings out an aspect of tribal women's migration that has not received much attention, namely the dynamics of interaction between tribal women's migratory labour and the developing class formations in the countryside including the labour and gender roles of women workers of non-tribal communities. The authors point to a distinct realignment within the resident workforce in Bardhaman whereby the numbers of women in the ranks of local agricultural labour had increased substantially by the 1980s, even as with land reforms, the employers of agricultural labourers were now principally owner/cultivator/farmers (small, medium and large) rather than zamindars or their agents, as was the case earlier. Nevertheless, they noted a decided preference among farmer employers for Santhal women in operations like seedling removal, transplantation, weeding, and threshing (considered women specific tasks) along with 'an undercurrent of dislike of local workers'. This was despite farmers' acceptance of a negotiated norm that 180 days of employment in a year should first be ensured to local agricultural labourers.⁴⁸ Interestingly, these farmer

⁴⁷ Banerjee and Ray's calculations showed that the average number of days worked for wages by local women in a destination Bardhaman village was less than half the number of days so worked by women in a source area village in Puruliya.

⁴⁸ Such a negotiated norm was of course really time and region specific to West Bengal under a left front regime, where the peasant organization Krishak Sabha included agricultural labourers in its fold, and when increased prosperity among the farmers



employers had expressed an even more specific preference/liking for Santhal women from the Bengal districts of Bankura/Purulia/Medinipur in comparison to the Santhals who came from Jharkhand (then a part of Bihar) because the work of the former was considered to be more systematic, neat, and tidy. At the same time, the latter were being increasingly favoured because they could be made to work for lesser wages and longer hours. The preference for the Santhal women of West Bengal and the reasons given is perhaps best explained by the longer history of seasonal migration by Bengal based Santhal women and their ensuing greater inter-generational experience and acceptance of the intensive work demands in wet rice production processes, in comparison to the relatively newer entrants from a more extended catchment area.

It is possible to speculate that the specialised use of female labour in transplanting and weeding in Bardhaman emerged from a long process of task distribution along lines of gender among tribal seasonal agricultural labour migrants, rather than as an outgrowth of the practices of family labour on farms.⁴⁹ In family labour based farming of wet rice, the intensive task of transplanting would and does require all family members – male and female - to pitch in, since the period in which the task has to be completed is short. In the source area villages, the traditional negotiators of wages from the side of the tribal migrants were the *pradhans*, *mandals*, or *sardars*, who were the first to be approached by labour recruiters in earlier times and women were nowhere involved in wage negotiations.⁵⁰ It appears to us that the use of such patriarchal

hiring agricultural labour allowed such negotiations to get worked out relatively peaceably. Banerjee and Ray argue that such was the explicit preference for migrant workers, ('from whom it was possible to extract more work') that without establishment of such a norm, migrant workers would corner a much larger share of employment.

⁴⁹ Female specialization in rice seedling transplanting is by no means universal. In Punjab, for example, most of the rice transplanting is done by male migrants from Bihar.

⁵⁰ This has of course changed. In some cases relations between individual farmers and groups of workers have become so stable that workers are mobilized on phone. In other cases, farmers make contact with anyone willing to mobilize workers and no longer deal only with the *pradhans*, etc. whose social authority among their tribesmen and women have in any case waned. Interestingly, Banerjee and Ray had noted that whereas farmers

institutions/intermediaries would have been a factor in institutionalising wage differentiation along lines of gender.⁵¹ Lower wages for women is likely to have led to a preference among employers for allocating the tasks requiring most labour intensity to them, which in rice cultivation is sowing/transplanting, weeding, and harvesting. Harvesting would of course require all hands, but transplanting and weeding could be done more cost effectively if primarily women were deployed. The more general gender specific tasks in rice cultivation in Bardhaman, also appears to have emerged from the history of longstanding availability of a large number of tribal female agricultural labourers, and their inter-generational disciplining and experience in particular labour processes. As such tribal women migrants have been central actors in shaping the iconic image of rows of women bent over ankle or knee deep in flooded paddy fields transplanting rice seedlings in the plains of Bengal.

Banerjee and Ray's study also noted that by the end of the eighties, although wages were still generally lower than the statutory minimum wage, 'there was practically no wage differential between men and women in Bardhaman' (in contrast to the source areas in Puruliya and Bankura, where such differential was then still in place).⁵² A decade or so later, another study on seasonal migration for rice cultivation in Bardhaman showed that women were no longer predominant among migrant labour for transplanting. (Rogaly et al, 2002). It would seem that the gender specificity of tasks in rice cultivation that is described by Banerjee and Ray and indeed intrinsic to popular perception, linked as it is to a long history of female labour being cheaper and therefore more prolifically employed in labour intensive tasks, may not sustain in

earlier stayed among the tribal worker households in their attempt to mobilize workers, now when and if they go for such mobilization, they stay in nearby towns.

⁵¹ Even in official minimum wage notifications, women agricultural workers were given lower wages than men before the enactment of the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976.

⁵² Such differences in gendered wage patterns were attributed to differentials in levels of political mobilization in the two areas. In Bardhaman, the credit for wage equalization was attributed first to political pressure exercised by the left parties who had mobilized agricultural labourers in struggles, and secondly the 'spell of agricultural prosperity' because of which farmers agreed to pay.



situations of wage equalization in conditions of widespread rural unemployment/underemployment and agrarian distress.

It is nevertheless interesting that in the midst of all these processes, seasonal agricultural migration in Bengal has also seen a decline of the *sardar* system, and the emergence of more rough and ready negotiations by farmers with any person in a village who comes forward to form a group and generally labours with the gang. (The traditional *sardars*, chiefs or *mandals* functioned more as controllers of labour than actual labourers) Further, some kind of labour mandis at bus stops/rail heads have also come into being, where groups of labourers offer themselves for work to farmers in search of migrant labour. The decline of *sardar* based recruitment and control of migrant workers has been attributed in part, to changes in the traditional social and political structures of the tribals (their villages are no longer organized on the basis of the Mandali system and a single clan/lineage unit and the power of traditional headmen/chiefs is much eroded), as well as the changed equations between migrant workers and farmer recruiters. Where earlier it was the farmers' need for labour that took them into remote tribal villages, now the workers are also more actively seeking such work, even though such migratory labour does not appear to be a preferred way of life and is related to inner social disturbance, particularly among the women. Apart from the push compulsions of poverty and underemployment, the relatively high proportions of female headed households and single women in the tribal source area, also needs to be taken into account. Whether cause or consequence of seasonal migration is difficult to tell (probably both), but it is striking that significant increases in numbers and proportions of divorced/separated/widowed women coincided with increases in seasonal migration.⁵³

⁵³ Banerjee and Ray show that between 1951 and 1981, the sex ratio among the divorced/separated/widowed had risen in Puruliya from a 4395 (per 1000 males) to 6343 and from 8131 to 11,793 in Bankura in the 15-24 age group. The sex ratio among the divorced/separated/widowed was showed as having doubled when all age groups were taken together.

The earlier hegemony of Santhal women in this particular agricultural migration stream is now eroding; from within the tribal source areas in Bengal, there is increasing participation of Bhumij and artisanal communities, etc., who earlier looked on such labour with disdain. Yet the special role of Santhal women in leading and laying the ground for women from other communities to enter the seasonal migration stream for rice cultivation in Bengal is incontestable. In migration streams to the same Bardhaman plains led by non-tribal communities from other parts of the state, women are singularly absent (See Rogaly, op.cit).

Feeding a qualitatively different regime of capital accumulation is the short term migration of tribal girls from Rajasthan for work on cotton seed farms in Gujarat. Such migration is of relatively recent origin driven by an expansion of cotton cultivation – primarily of hybrid BT cotton - and related production of cottonseed.⁵⁴ Mass scale seasonal migration of adivasi women and men, principally from the districts of Godhra, Dahod and Panchmahal in Gujarat to cotton farms across the state is indeed a regular phenomenon, the majority migrating short term for picking/harvesting operations. Longer duration circular migration for cotton was also observed by CWDS researchers. In Surendranagar and Rajkot districts of the Saurashtra region in Gujarat, some tribal migrant families, including several that were female headed were found to be migrating for a period of seven to eight months in a year under what is called a ‘partnership’ system between migrant tribal labour and the richer and often non-cultivating landowners or their agents. These migrants stay for the whole period in rough quarters set up in the *wadis* (fields) and are referred to as wadi workers. They, along with their family/kin members (numbering 5-10) perform all the agricultural operations, from preparing the fields to planting the cotton seed, guarding and looking after the crop

⁵⁴ The area under cotton in Gujarat increased from 1.6 million hectares in 2003-04 to 2.4 million hectares in 2006-07. For the country as a whole the increase was from 7.6 to 9.1 million hectares across the same period. (Venkateswarlu, 2007). Gujarat produced more than 33% of the country’s cotton in 2009-10, although this reflected an absolute as well as relative drop in production from its peak in 2007-08, when the state accounted for 36% of India’s cotton production. (India Country Statement on Cotton, 69th Plenary Meeting of the International Cotton Advisory Committee, 2010)

till it is ready for harvesting. At harvesting time, they bring in more migrants from their home villages and work alongside the others as well as supervise. For all this they receive 20-25% of the net profit after sale of the crop (if sold immediately after the harvest) or of estimates of profit calculated at spot price rates if the land owners hold on to the crop to get a better price later.⁵⁵

However, it is for hybrid cottonseed production, concentrated in the northern districts of Sabarkantha, Banaskantha, Mehasana and Gandhinagar that tribal girls (mostly adolescents) from Rajasthan (primarily Bhils residing in the drought prone and hilly Udaipur and Dungarpur districts) have been targeted in recruitment for cross pollination activity. While commercial cotton farming has indeed been subjected to higher input prices at one end and crop price volatilities at the other, both generated by globalized agricultural, trading and industrial interests in the liberalization era, it is the specific methods of control over the production process exercised by private seed companies and the use of the labour of very young female migrants (staying without their parents) that marks out the particulars of the accumulation and employment regime in cottonseed production. Public sector research and development of hybrid cottonseed varieties had made India the pioneer in commercial cultivation of hybrid cotton, but since the mid 1980s there has been a decline in cottonseed hybrids developed and marketed by state agencies, a substantial increase in the area under private hybrids, and from 2002, the complete domination of BT Cotton hybrids.⁵⁶ As is well known, the American multinational, Monsanto holds patent rights over the BT gene. The WTO imposed patent regime has resulted in growing control of MNCs over India's cottonseed business, even as it initially spawned some illegal BT cottonseed production by private companies

⁵⁵ Based on a rough calculation of the number of labour days involved and the payment received that year (2011), CWDS researchers calculated that they actually received less than what they would have received if they were paid daily at the prevailing agricultural wage rates.

⁵⁶ The 1st commercial hybrid - Hybrid 4 (H- 4) was released in 1970 from Main Cotton Research Station of Gujarat Agricultural University.

and some individual farmers in Gujarat.⁵⁷ Currently private seed companies - MNCs and Indian companies (who have a sublicense and royalty agreement with Monsanto) - account for nearly 90% of the total cottonseed produced and marketed in the country. Although these companies are not directly involved in production, they exert substantial control over farmers and the production process. They set the norms and procedures to be followed by the farmers while cultivating seeds in the fields. A 'seed organiser' mediates between the company and the seed farmers to organise seed production. Companies make production agreements with seed organisers with buy back arrangements of the resultant seed, and the seed organisers in turn make similar agreements with seed farmers. (Venkateswarlu, 2004, 2010)

Gujarat has seen the maximum increases in area under cottonseed production and accounts for more than half of the cottonseed acreage in India.⁵⁸ In hybrid cottonseed production, each individual flower bud has to be emasculated and pollinated by hand and requires a particularly large labour force and in Gujarat this task is completed in 50-80 days, starting in August.⁵⁹ According to a detailed study conducted in 2003-04,

⁵⁷ Before the government of India approved the commercial release of BT cotton hybrids, a private seed company based in Gujarat developed local BT cotton hybrids through back crossing the BT gene with local hybrids and unofficially started marketing the seeds. Cheaper than the joint venture Mahyco-Monsanto Biotech (MMB) produced seeds first released in 2002, the illegal local BT cotton hybrids became popular in the market. This encouraged many small companies, including some individual farmers to enter into production of illegal BT cotton hybrid seeds. However, between 2003-04 and 2009-10, there was a substantial increase in the area controlled by MNCs and larger Indian companies, and a decline in the share of smaller companies.

⁵⁸ Of the total 60,000 acres of cottonseed production in India in 2006-07, Gujarat had largest area covering nearly 25,000 acres (41.6%) following which an even more significant rise brought it to 38,000 acres constituting 54.3% of country's cottonseed acreage in 2009-10. A rough calculation of the the migrant labour intensity per acre as given in Venkateswarlu's study indicates that at present, close to 2 lakhs migrate seasonally to Gujarat's cottonseed farms. Apart from those who come from Rajasthan, adivasis from Panchmahal and from within Sabarkantha are also part of this migration stream.

⁵⁹ The removal of stamens or anthers or the killing of pollen grains of a flower without affecting the female reproductive organs is called emasculation. Cross pollination is

seasonal migrants constituted more than 70% of all labour involved in cross pollination in the Gujarat cottonseed producing districts, among whom more than 58% were found to be female, of which more than 70% were in the 8-18 age group. Most of these migrants were tribal girls from Rajasthan, the others migrating from contiguous tribal areas on the Gujarat side of the border with Rajasthan. Farmers recruited migrant labourers from their home villages through a labour contractor called 'mate' who was given advances to be paid to the recruits and the equivalent of one or two weeks' worth of wage payment for each worker. The per day wage rates were fixed in advance and the agreement lasted for one crop season. Each mate, who is generally from within the tribal community mobilised around 20 to 100 labourers and placed them with different farmers who paid the mate a commission for each worker. Despite wage rates being fixed on a daily basis (for a 12 hour workday after excluding breaks), payments were made twice or thrice during the season through the contractor, and substantial amounts are withheld until the completion of the agreement period. The labour contractor further deducted 10-15% of the wage amount per day of employment per worker. Farmers only interacted with mates, who in turn made agreements on behalf of the labourers.

Within this overall scenario, recent changes recorded by a study in 2010 point to a slight decline in the share of larger commercial farms (because of the unprofitable procurement prices offered by the seed companies) and the emergence of more small farms and sharecroppers functioning solely on family labour, particularly in more remote tribal pockets.⁶⁰ (Venkateswarlu, 2010) The seed companies, whose accumulation strategy is based on keeping their procurement prices at the lowest and using monopolistic market structures in the seed market to ensure excessively high sale prices, have thus been the principal

done by placing pollen grains from one genotype of the male parent on to the stigma of flowers of the other genotype, the female parent.

⁶⁰ It may be recalled that because of the excessively high prices, the government had to intervene to impose price controls on BT cottonseed in 2006.



beneficiaries of the cheap labour of young tribal girls (whether as migrant wage workers or unpaid family helpers).

Circulatory Migration – Sugar Cane Cutters

In contradistinction to the general short duration pattern of seasonal agricultural migration, is that of sugar cane cutters in western India (Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka), where the annual spell of migration is of a longer duration covering the major part of the year – generally from November to June.⁶¹ The cane cutters move across a wider set of fields, and all importantly, they are employed, not by the farmers whose fields they harvest, but by the managements of sugar mills (cooperatives as well as others privately owned) through agents/contractors. Again recruitment is not of individuals, but of groups or gangs of workers, but what distinguishes the particular pattern of recruitment is that the gangs are composed of units of pairs of workers (each comprising of a male and a female and generally a husband and wife team) called *koytas*.⁶² Wages are piece rated, i.e., paid by the tonne, and labour is mobilized through a system of advances that are given before the season begins. Advances effectively tie the gangs of *koytas* to particular factories/employers/contractors. The division of labour within *koyta* gangs assumes that the men cut the cane, clean the stalks of leaves, while the women arrange the cane in rows and make bundles that can be loaded, although it has been observed that women may also participate in the cutting of cane (Teerink, 1995, Breman). Output demands per day are particularly onerous, driven by the demand to keep the factory machines fully supplied.

⁶¹ The other major sugar cane belt in north India (Uttar Pradesh) does not draw on female migrant workers, although during the CWDS migration survey, it was found that some tribal boys from the crisis ridden tea plantations were being recruited for sugar cane in UP.

⁶² *Koyta* is also the local name for the sickle like implement used for cutting the cane.

The work gangs are mobilized by intermediaries (*mukaddams*). Most *mukaddams*, like the *sardars* in Bengal and the ‘mates’ in Rajasthan, are from the villages and communities of the labourers. Advances from factory officials or from another intermediate tier of non-labouring contractors are paid out to the *mukaddams*, who disburse them to each *koyta*. *Mukaddams* are responsible for supervision of the work of their gang and many of them (with their wives) are themselves labourers. The final payment of wages given out at the end of the season is also routed through the *mukaddams*, along with any weekly subsistence payments in cash and kind (which is of course deducted from the final wage as is the first advance). Some professional and non-labouring contractors are simultaneously moneylenders. They may even augment the factory advances with loans at the time of recruitment which raises the amount of the advance paid to the *koytas*, but leaves the workers paying interest on the additional loan part of the advance, and it is not uncommon for some *koytas* to remain indebted at the end of the season and therefore bonded for the next year’s season as well.⁶³ Migrant labourers holding bullocks and a cart transport the bundled sugarcane to the factory themselves; some with only bullocks are given carts (with rubber tyres) by the factory on payment of a certain amount per day. Those without any bullocks, carry the bundles of sugarcane to the main road from where it gets transported to the factory in trucks. As would be obvious the workers with no bullocks receive reduced wages.

A prominent stream of tribal involvement in such migration is of Bhils from districts Nandurbar, Dhule, in Maharashtra (Khandesh region) and the Dangs forest district in Gujarat whose destination is the sugar cane belt in south Gujarat.⁶⁴ The introduction of canal irrigation, better seed varieties, fertilizers and credit facilities from the 1950s had vastly expanded the area under mono-crop sugar cane in south Gujarat, and

⁶³ This was observed to be happening among Lambani sugar cane cutters from Parbhani district by the CWDS gender and migration research team. The advance given to them in 2010 ranged from 20,000 to 30,000 for a *koyta*.

⁶⁴ Khandesh, located on the north western corner of the Deccan plateau, was the terminal territorial part under the rule of the Mughals. Under the British, it was a district of the Bombay province.

agro-industrial growth was spearheaded by the sugar mills established by sugar co-operatives, albeit with corporate style management structures (Breman,1978, Teerink, 1995). From within the larger area of Bhil concentration (i.e., along the contiguous border districts of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra), Khandesh, that lies adjacent to Gujarat's main sugarcane belt, is the region from where Bhil sugarcane cutters are primarily drawn. Similarly the formerly nomadic tribe of Vanjaris/Banjaras residing in the poorly irrigated and dry rain shadow belt of Marathwada in Maharashtra (mostly districts within the Aurangabad Division), constitute a large proportion of migrant cane cutters for the much larger complex of sugar mills in better irrigated western Maharashtra. Maharashtra is the state where the first cooperative sugar mill was established; it houses the largest number of such mills; the state competes only with Uttar Pradesh as the top producer of sugarcane in the country; and the size of its *koyta* based seasonal migrant cane cutting workforce is by far the largest in India.⁶⁵

The historical processes and compulsions by which the Bhil peasantry and landless labourers of Khandesh became seasonal migrant workers follows the familiar story of introduction of revenue assessments and settlements in forest areas along with a set of private property relations that led to sedentarisation followed by endemic indebtedness and pauperization among the tribal peasantry after the establishment of British rule over Khandesh (1820). This was combined with military subjugation of recalcitrant tribal chiefs and control through the offer of pecuniary allowances to those who supported British control. (Vasudha Dhagamwar, 2006)⁶⁶ Later, forest laws as elsewhere restricted customary access of tribal groups to forest lands for produce and grazing that further eroded their means of subsistence.

⁶⁵ At the time of writing there were 196 listed sugar mills in Maharashtra, in comparison to some 25 in Gujarat. The estimated number of migrant cane cutters (tribal and non-tribal) is well over 10 lakhs in Maharashtra and 2 lakhs in Gujarat.

⁶⁶ Judith Whitehead points out that 48 Bhil chiefs in Khandesh and Mehwasee areas were 'subdued' through military engagement, of which 19 were killed in battle or as outlaws, 7 were transported to prison and one was murdered.

In Khandesh' Tapti river valley, settlers - more attuned to the commercial property systems brought in by the British - came from outside (mainly Gujar kunbis from Gujarat) who combined cultivation with moneylending, thus acquiring much of the land earlier tilled by the Bhils on their own account.⁶⁷ Rapid commercialization of agriculture took place, with cotton that was systematically promoted by the British, as one of the chief crops. Actual cultivation was mostly done by Bhils who were either attached and mortgaged labourers (*saldars*) or sharecroppers (*gavandyas*). [S.D. Kulkrarni, 1974] Such was the power acquired by richer and largely non-tribal land owners/moneylenders over the debt bonded Bhils that even tenancy reforms initiated immediately after independence were manipulated by them to evict many a Bhil peasant family from the small landholdings that they owned.⁶⁸ The dispossessed Bhils thus became easy to recruit as seasonal migrant workers by the sugar industry that emerged from the 1950s. Indeed such migration enabled the Bhil peasantry to extricate themselves from the grip of the *saldari* bondage in their home lands, even as it spawned what Jan Breman has called neo-bondage in the developing capitalist systems of production.

The Vanjaris/ Banjaras/Lambanis, on the other hand, impoverished by the loss of their trading occupation, had settled in the dry hilly lands of the contiguous belt stretching across Marathwada in Maharashtra, northern Karnataka, and Telangana in Andhra Pradesh.⁶⁹ Their settlements (*thandas*) are generally located outside or at some distance from other caste Hindu or multi-caste villages, on poor quality soil and with a limited resource base. (J.J. Roy Burman,) Although legally freed of criminal status in 1952 (they are today classified as a De-notified tribe

⁶⁷ Dalit and backward castes of Mahars and Dhangars were also own account cultivators similarly affected.

⁶⁸ Moneylenders took adivasi lands through a series of methods including registering themselves as tenants of the debtees, and then became owners under the Tenancy Acts. Adivasi lands were also auctioned by co-operative credit societies because of non-payment of dues.

⁶⁹ In 1977, Banjaras or Lambada/Sugalis as they are known in AP, were given ST status leading to a surge in their numbers due to migration from Maharashtra, where they did not have the same status.

under the OBC category), their capacity for sustenance remained diminished and they formed a major contingent of migrant labour recruits for the expanding sugar cane industry in Maharashtra.⁷⁰ A survey of sugarcane cutters in 165 villages in Marathwada in 2002-03 showed that Vanjaris/Banjaras together constituted 48% migrating from from the region, among whom the Vanjaris were the overwhelming majority. Their community brethren, more commonly called Lambanis in Karnataka (where they are classified as SCs) are also prominent among the migrant cane cutting workforce in the north Karnataka as well as in the southern Mysore region.

As a distinctly post independence phenomenon, seasonal migration for sugarcane has served the development of co-operative based capitalism in agriculture and the emergence of a politically powerful agro-industrial capitalist class from among the landed cultivating castes/communities, particularly in Maharashtra and also in Gujarat. An insistence on hiring migrant workers for the cutting of cane and keeping local workers out has been a particular strategy of cheapening labour costs and exercising hegemony and control over both local agricultural labour as well as migrant labour. (Breman)⁷¹ The sugar mills located near the source areas of such migration bring their workers from elsewhere rather than employ local workers (in Nandurbar, for example, Bhil workers are brought from Madhya Pradesh, while Nandurbar Bhils are

⁷⁰ Some internal differentiation has also taken place within the community, reflected in incipient demands that 'Banjaras' in Maharashtra be considered to be a separate caste from the 'Vanjaris' who are considered to be more advanced and more educated. A legal contestation between the two communities throughout the eighties ended in Supreme Court of India ruling that the Banjaras and the Vanjaris belong to the same caste group and be included in the Nomadic Tribes of Maharashtra. The 1931 census, which was the last census giving caste wise enumeration of Indian population, treated Banjaras and Vanjaris as belonging to the same caste group. The Mandal commission also listed both Vanjaris and the Banjaras among the nomadic tribes of Maharashtra. Rajeshwari Deshpande, (2009) 'Caste Associations in the Post-Mandal Era: Notes from Maharashtra', Occasional Paper, Center for Advanced Studies (CAS) Department of Politics & Public Administration, University of Pune

⁷¹ Breman points out that it is not shortage of local labour that has driven the use of migrant workers in cane cutting.

recruited for mills outside the district).⁷² Yet the recruiting system, based as it is on *mukaddam* led community or village based gangs, foregrounds the tribe/caste boundaries of labour mobilization and associated catchment areas. The marginalized nature of the community base of sugarcane cutters (which also includes other dalit and OBC communities) has made for their being kept physically and socially isolated from villages whose sugarcane they harvest. Further, their conditions of work and stay are notoriously subhuman. Inadequate shelter facilities or protection from the elements and marauding wild life is particularly harsh on the women cane cutters. The nomadic form of labour in sugar cane, its long season of unsettlement and constant shifting, its intensive and long hours of work that is determined by industrial demand rather than the normal agricultural labour day, have all combined to prevent social, educational or cultural advance for the families of cane cutters. Further, neo-bondage based on cycles of dependence on the advances ensures inter-generational continuity of unfree labour mobility. For the women the nature of unfreedom is doubly predicated by the fact that the piece rate system ensures that their wage is subsumed in the *koyta* wage (generally paid to the male member) and they therefore receive no independent income for their labour.

Circulating at the bottom of the economy: Brick Kiln Workers and Construction Labour

As far as tribal women's migration for non-agricultural occupations is concerned, the CWDS surveys had particularly highlighted their present concentration in construction, as well as brick kiln work. In construction – where the workforce is more male dominated than brick kilns, adivasis may actually constitute the largest social group in the sector's female

⁷² This is discussed in detail by Teerink and was observed in the field by the CWDS research team as well.



workforce.⁷³ A high density stream of migration for construction in which women are particularly prominent is from the contiguous tribal belt on the Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan borders mainly to various parts of Gujarat, and also to other parts of all three states. Brick kiln labour has a higher proportion of women as well as a wider set of labour catchment areas that can be found in practically every state. Nevertheless mass migration of tribals for brick kiln work have been observed in western Orissa from where they migrate to the southern states of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka and other parts of Orissa (Agnihotri & Mazumdar, 2010). Similar mass scale migration takes place from several districts in Jharkhand, from where they go to the brick kilns of Bihar, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh. While brick kiln work is definitively seasonal, with the kilns operating for around eight months in a year (generally October/November to June), tribal migration for construction also tends to follow a seasonal pattern, with most workers returning to their home villages in the rainy season. Migration for brick kilns and construction are no doubt interlinked, both having expanded as part of the real estate boom, particularly since the 1990s (although the NSS classifies construction as a separate industry while brick making is put under manufacturing). However, while brickmaking has remained an unorganized industry with localised and dispersed patterns of ownership, the construction industry, although largely unorganized, has seen a most rapid growth of a large organized and corporatized segment on the capital side, even as its workforce remains virtually defined by its casualised nature.⁷⁴

Illustrative of the weight and distinctive patterns of tribal migration for construction, a survey/study of 42 Bhil villages in central western

⁷³ N.Neetha's detailed analysis of employment by social groups has shown that in 2011-12 the share of construction was significantly higher among ST women as compared to all other social groups. (Neetha 2014). As far as migrant workers are concerned, the 2007-08 NSS survey on Migration in India showed that overall, women constituted just 10% of the migrant workforce in construction.

⁷⁴ The organized sector accounted for 48.7 per cent of the what National Accounts Statistics calls operating surplus/mixed income (OS/MI) from construction in 2003-04. Its share jumped to 71 per cent by 2007-08, dipped to 60 per cent in 2008-09, but again moved up to 66.4 per cent the following year.

India in the latter half of the 1990s (Mosse et al, 2005), estimated that the overwhelming majority of the 65 per cent of households involved in seasonal migration from these villages went for casual urban construction work. According to the authors of the study, construction work had become the primary source of cash for Bhil families. 42% of these migrants were women, who tended to be poorer, older and married with children. They argued that whether for work on construction sites, stone quarries, brick-making or digging cable trenches the seasonal flow of Bhil casual labourers from upland villages had contributed directly to the physical expansion of the industrial growth poles in Gujarat such as Surat, Baroda and Ahmedabad. For construction, some migrants travelled on their own to nearby towns and cities, where they offer themselves for work and are recruited as daily wage labourers at '*nakas*' (informal labour markets/mandis). Others travelled in kin groups (which include younger women) having some direct contacts with builders/contractors. Still others were mobilised in their own villages by '*mukkadams*' – who in this case were identified as former tribal labourers turned supervisors and village moneylenders, a few of whom had settled in town. *Mukkadams* arranged cash advances from contractors/employers (in the monsoon season) for tying the prospective migrants for work that was relatively long-term. While the extent of the first kind of migration varied with the availability of household labour in any year/village (influenced by domestic cycles), the extent of the last advance driven survival migration, was seen as definitively a factor of poverty. Tribal migrants were not to be found in the skilled segments of the construction workforce (masons, carpenters, etc.) which incidentally are completely male. They dug earth, mixed the mortar, carried cement bags, the women carried headloads of bricks and other construction materials and underpayment of wages was common.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ According to the study, women head loading broken stone were expected to carry 400 headloads a day - each receiving a stone 'token' for every headload. When the loads carried were fewer than the target, wages were reduced. Underpayment of wages was common, statutory minimum wages rarely applied, while naka workers often remain without work for 10-20 days a month.

At a broad stroke level, the study found Bhils from eastern Gujarat villages mainly migrating to nearby Baroda (Vadodara) city, their links to contractors established through repeated migration, while those from Jhabua or Ratlam (in Madhya Pradesh) travelled far off to Kota, Surat or to Bhuj and typically depended upon *mukkadams*. The authors argued that migration was associated with changes potentially disruptive of cooperative agricultural life linked to increased monetization and need for cash, the increase in wage labour ‘at the expense of systems of reciprocal exchange, a decline in joint cultivation or well management, and significant strains on intra-household relations (gender, marital and inter-generational)’. And yet importantly they also pointed out that seasonal labour migration to urban construction sites had become perhaps the only means - to reproduce ‘valued agricultural livelihoods.’ For most Bhils, such migration was not an external factor engendering non-agrarian identities, but ‘was integral to the reproduction of subsistence agriculture and village culture’.

Brick kiln work, on the other hand is concentrated in rural areas, and completely based on contractor recruitment. While a lower end of the tier of contractors may be from the tribal community (*mukaddams, sardars, etc.*), the CWDS migration survey had found that many contractors, and particularly the big ones, are from outside both community and village. Such professional contractors are not workers themselves and they operate through an army of small agents/musclemen who may or may not be from within the communities. Their primary mode of recruitment is through advances given for each *Jodi* (pair). At the time of their journey to the brick kilns, contractors provided musclemen, who ensured that the workers reach their particular destinations, but such escorts were singularly absent when thousands return from dispersed sites of work with one common destination – the labour catchment area. In the month of May, 2010, at the station of Kantabanji, a small town with a population of less than 25,000 in Orissa’s Balangir district, CWDS researchers observed over 300 men, women and children, carrying the clothes, pots and pans, etc. that they required for their seven to eight

month stay at the brick kilns, alighting from just one train.⁷⁶ They had spent two days on the journey and were tired, yet eager to return to their village homes. Some were seeking out some motorized transport tempos and bargaining on the rates. Others just started off on foot, even though their trek might involve upwards of 40 kilometres. This was just the initial trickle that heralded the flood of thousands more over the next few weeks. Several such trains unload an estimated two lakh brick kiln workers at Kantabanji in May June, and almost every year some workers die on the journey due to overcrowding in the trains. Yet, even within that relatively small batch of first returnees, so many were angry and bitter at having been able to bring back so little of what they had earned from the hardest of labour, the bulk of their earnings having gone to pay off their advances and for basic food supplies at the brick kiln sites.

The labour process in brick kilns involves softening of the soil/mud with water, digging out of the softened mud with a spade (generally done by males), packing the clay into moulds with hands, emptying them on the ground in rows (done by men and women), then stacking them for further drying in the sun (done by women and children). These workers (*patheras*), who mould the raw bricks, are recruited in male female pairs (*jodis*). Specialized firers of the kilns, on the other hand, are always male and generally different from all other categories of brick workers, and almost never from tribal communities. Other categories of workers include (with some permutations and combinations) those who manually carry and arrange the green bricks at the kiln (*beldars*) and those who manually carry the fully baked and cooled bricks to storage points (*nikasis*) - mostly women. All functions involve hard toil out in the open all day. Payment rates are generally fixed per 1000 bricks for all categories (although at different rates for the different categories of workers), except the firers who have time rated wages and managerial personnel on monthly salaries. The manual workers stay onsite, at some distance from any village or other residential settlement, in rough

⁷⁶ In 2001, the population of Kantabanji was just 20,090. For such a small town, Kantabanji has a number of hotels and lodges where brick kiln owners, particularly from Andhra Pradesh come and stay while negotiating with the contractors.



temporary shacks, although some of the more longstanding and larger kilns have built single-room tenement lines. The workers are bonded to a brick kiln each year by advances paid by the contractors, often well before the work season begins.

One study of the brickfields of Hoogly district near Kolkata found adivasi women (of Oraon, Munda, Bhumij, Kol tribes) migrating singly from Chakradharpur, Palamu, Ranchi, Hazaribagh in Jharkhand. Their task was to carry eight to ten bricks weighing about forty kilograms for a distance of 100 meters from the moulding department to the furnace, (a total distance of fifteen to twenty kilometres a day). These women, also known as ‘coolies’ (referred to as beldars above) had also to perform other jobs such as fetching water from a distance, carrying coal bags etc., and were generally managed by a *sardarin* (female sardar). Segmentation of labour tasks followed ‘ideas and myths about what each group are good at’ largely based on ethnic and community identities. Thus, *patheras* tended to be non-tribal family women from dalit and OBC families of Bihar and Bengal, while the firers were all from UP, etc. (Ghosh, 2009) Although the same principle of community and gender segmentation in allocation of jobs was observed by CWDS researchers in brick kilns across the country, the community composition of each segment varied. In another district of West Bengal (Medinipur), tribal women (Santhal) from Purulia were working in family units as *patheras*, those from Jharkhand (Munda, Oraon, etc.) were carriers of bricks. Similarly in western Orissa, many tribal women (of Kondh, Gond and Saora tribes) were a part of the *Jodi* based *pathera* units. Like among the sugarcane cutters, such *Jodi* based labour combined with piece rates has meant that *pathera* women receive no independent income. For all segments of female brick kiln labour - the cycle of advance based migration marks out their particular form of bondage, and the unsettlement of the annual trek that occupies the major part of any year ensures there is little scope for educational, social and cultural advance for either the women or their children. Indeed the old Santhal woman’s question regarding passing on the past to the future remains valid for the majority of adivasis involved in labour migration in contemporary India.

Conclusion

Tribal community practices and cultures, particularly the lack of traditional restrictions on women's work and labour, have indeed been a significant factor in bringing larger proportions of tribal women into more mobile forms of labour in comparison to other social groups in India. However, this paper shows that the longstanding and higher propensity to labour migration among tribal women has not fundamentally altered their conditions of historical disadvantage in the agrarian economy, and in fact has integrated adivasi women in the developing labour market under capitalist development at several levels of additional disadvantage. While the principal patterns of tribal women's migration have been identified in the paper with an eye to the sectors/segments in which they have critical mass, the focus of the description, discussion and analysis has been on the nature of work/employment relations being shaped by their migration, and its implications for an equality and emancipatory agenda. It would appear that the predominantly survival oriented circular and short term pattern of contemporary tribal women's migration predicates a regularized mobility for irregular employment that simultaneously constrains and constricts possibilities of social, cultural, and educational advance. Such constrictions additionally derive from the nature of the regimes of capital accumulation that draw on tribal migrant labour, related forms and conditions of recruitment and labour mortgage, and the disproportionate targeting of tribal communities and villages as labour catchment areas for the hardest of manual occupations. In laying out the particular features of the sectors/segments of labour in which tribal women migrants are presently concentrated, it becomes clear that several characteristics of unfree labour that characterised the deployment of tribal labour under the colonial regime continue to persist in India, more than 60 years after independence, albeit under new and changing regimes of accumulation.

British administrative systems had ended the isolation and political autonomy of tribal society, brought them into a system of production relations and surplus generation geared to colonial/feudal interests and

extractive capital accumulation, and transformed even low population density tribal areas into labour surplus economies. In the process, large segments of tribal populations faced resource dispossession, pauperisation, and debt based manipulation of their lives and labour. As peasants increasingly confined to agriculturally poor lands with a single agricultural season, and with reduced access to forest resources, adivasis were the most easily drawn into mortgaging their labour and intermittent migration that enabled greater commercial agricultural development in areas other than their own. The broad contours of such a constrained and disadvantaged social and economic location of tribal populations have persisted in independent India providing a continued basis for the dominant pattern of survival oriented migration as opposed to social development oriented migration. Labour migration by tribal women in the post independence decades has however, served the interests of a wider range of classes than was the case in colonial India, enabling as well as pushing forward a greater level of class differentiation in Indian society since independence.

The agricultural classes benefiting from seasonal agricultural migration by adivasi women include individual cultivating farmers (medium and large) at one end and more organized agro-industrial capitalist interests at the other. The sector/case evidence cited in this paper suggests that in more short term migration streams for cultivating farmers, some of the earlier overtly patriarchal methods of recruitment of adivasi women have declined (sometimes as a consequence of political mobilization), as have gender based wage inequalities. This is notwithstanding greater economic and even social compulsions to periodically migrate for survival, persistently harsh conditions of work, and even a growing competition from an expanding pool of agricultural labourers – men and women, local and migrant, as agrarian crisis has swept through agriculturally developed as well as underdeveloped regions. On the other hand, the use of rent seeking labour contractors, advance/debt based tying of labour, the denial of any independent wage for women, combined with longer duration circular migration is more prominent in migration streams serving capitalist accumulation by regionally organized agro-industrial interests as well as commercial

farming linked to or controlled by national and multi-national agribusinesses.

Migration for non-agricultural employment of tribal women has been concentrated in manual and 'unskilled' labour in construction and brick kilns. A third front has been opened for live in domestic service combining work and residence on employers' terms. Such a narrow field highlights the fact that little skill and occupational diversification has been achieved through migration. Further, the link between such occupations and temporary or circular types of migration vests the majority of tribal women migrant workers with the dual characteristics of retaining agricultural origins even as their occupation has become in great part industrial. Such a dual characteristic is partially linked to the value attached to agricultural livelihoods despite being unable to derive a living from such agriculture. At the same time, the particularly degraded conditions of tribal women's migratory employment in agriculture and non-agriculture, the chronic cycle of debt/advance based recruitment, low incomes, wage reducing dependence on contractors, and related unfreedoms does not seem to be capable of providing any security of livelihood or settlement outside agriculture. Jan Breman's formulation that migration has engendered a shift from local feudal bondage to neobondage in the developing capitalist systems of production most appropriately applies to adivasi women's experience of labour migration in contemporary India and highlights the incapacity of the present regime of development, growth and accumulation to reverse the conditions of historical disadvantage faced by tribal women. An acknowledgement of this incapacity is perhaps the first step towards the search for alternate pathways to freedom and equality.

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