

# Unfree Mobility: Adivasi Women's Migration



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India's 2011 census counted 52.4 million men and 51.9 million women belonging to 705 ethnic groups who are constitutionally defined as Scheduled Tribes (ST). A majority of the Scheduled Tribe population is concentrated in the middle India girdle of forests and table lands located across the nine States of Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal. About 12% inhabit the North-eastern region, about 5% in the Southern region and about 3% in the Northern States (Govt. India, High-Level Committee (HLC) on status of Tribal communities, 2014). Many tribal communities across India employ the term *adivasi* (original inhabitant) as a political term of self-reference- although this term is not recognised by the Government of India, and does not resonate with the tribal communities of north-east India.

Women migrants from the north eastern tribes are more prominent in urbanwards migration for modern service sector employment requiring relatively higher educational levels (salesgirls, office workers, etc.). Studies have shown that their conditions of work are stereotyped, difficult and trying, and compounded by racial preferences and prejudices. Yet, greater levels of education, and perhaps their initial context of exclusive rights over larger amounts of land and territory (relative to population) in the relatively more autonomous tribal homelands in the northeast, makes for qualitatively different social location in comparison to the less literate and more dispossessed adivasi migrant workers.

## **Adivasi labour migration in historical context**

- In the districts of Bankura, Puruliya and Medinipur (West Bengal) *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 provides an 'apt description' of the phenomenon of seasonal migration from the south-eastern reaches of the rolling hills of the Chottanagpur plateau located within the above three districts, to the plains of Bengal further east.
- Seasonal migration to the plains of Barddhaman originated in the colonial period. The famine of 1770 that had wiped out 'one third of a generation of peasants' in the plains of Bengal, and the development of coalmining, iron work, paper mills, potteries in Barddhaman,- had all contributed to an accumulating demand for and continuing flow of migrant workers into the district.
- The source area was the forested hilly tracts in what was called Jungle Mahals where

pioneer tribal Santhals had reclaimed land for agriculture, but lost most of the good land at the bottom of the valleys to non-tribal proprietors. Santhals were converted into rack rented tenants/sharecroppers or landless labourers. Left without sustenance in their home villages for a large part of the year, the Santhals were pushed into survival oriented intermittent labour migration as a way of life that continues till the present.

- Similarly, in the Central Provinces and Berar (parts of present-day states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra) - 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 the tribal Bhils were drawn upon to fulfil the seasonal demand for labour in the cotton growing areas of Khandesh (a region located in north-western Maharashtra and southern Gujarat).
- It has been argued that such seasonal migrant labour in fact played a pivotal role in the continuing reproduction of agricultural under-development in the upland areas of tribal concentration as well as the greater levels of development in the lowland areas that they migrated to.

### **Features of tribal women's migration in contemporary times**

- A distinctive feature of tribal labour migration streams has been the high participation of women. A lack of any tradition of confinement/seclusion of women indeed distinguishes tribal society from other communities in India, among whom graded hierarchies and the seclusion of women are far more entrenched. Nevertheless, contemporary research has shown that women were not and are not positioned as equals within tribal societies.
- The three migration surveys conducted by the NSSO between 1993 and 2007-08 provide some indications that a more significant presence of women is still a distinguishing feature of tribal labour migration, and that tribal women's migration for work is relatively more temporary in nature and more concentrated in rural areas.
- CWDS surveys on women's migration, conducted across 22 states in India between 2009 and 2011, showed that the most distinctive feature of adivasi 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.
- The CWDS study also showed that 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 looms large, are more closely correlated with short term and circular migration. It is in such heavy manual labour based occupations that the great majority of tribal women migrants are located, predominantly in agriculture, brick kilns (in rural areas) and construction (in both rural and urban areas).

- Adivasi women migrants are also prominent among full time 'live-in' domestic workers, i.e., those who resided in their employers' homes and indeed tribal girls are particularly targeted by intermediaries for live-in work in upper-class households. Yet, their numbers are insignificant in the larger migrant sea of 'live out' domestic workers who generally live with their own families in destination areas.

## Regimes of Labour and Gender

### Tea Plantations

- In the migration stream for the tea plantations that came to a close only in the 1960s, 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.
- More than the simple play of market forces, conditions and characteristics of plantation labour were determined by the peculiarly unfree methods of colonial labour recruitment and migration to distant lands, combined with repressive, coercive and isolated conditions of work and life on the plantations.
- Despite the enactment of special labour legislation for plantation workers after independence (The Plantation Labour Act, 1951), the peculiar enclave situation of the tea tribes has persisted, within which women have become even more concentrated in labour intensive manual tasks.
- 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.

### Coal Mining

- Adivasi women's role in the coal industry followed a different trajectory from tea labour. (Around 80% of India's coal deposits are located in the Chottanagpur plateau). Machines, operated by women in the early phase, 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 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, were left out. Further, with the ban on women working underground in the 1930s, the number of women in coal mining was reduced to nominal levels.
- Post-independence, when coal mining was reserved for the public sector (it was nationalized in 1973), women continued to be further displaced by mechanisation. Since the 1990s, liberalization again brought in several private interests into the sector. Illegal mining also spread.

- 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 across parts of the eastern coalfields around Asansol in Bardhaman. Low wages, back breaking labour, unsafe conditions, and being at the mercy of contractors linked to criminal mafias, are characteristic features of young tribal women who have been pushed into such modes of employment.

### Seasonal Agriculture

- Mass scale seasonal migration of adivasi women and men, for cotton picking in Gujarat is a regular phenomenon, the majority migrating short term and paid at piece rates. CWDS (2012) also observed tribal migrant families, including several that were female-headed, migrating for a major part of the year, referred to as *wadi* (farm/plantation) workers. They perform all the agricultural operations in the cotton fields. For all this, land owners pay them 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 (when landowners hold the crop to get a better price later).
- A longer duration pattern of seasonal agricultural migration, is that of sugarcane cutters in western India (Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka), where the annual spell of migration covers a major part of the year. Cane cutters are employed, not by the farmers whose fields they harvest, but by the managements of sugar mills through agents/contractors. Gangs of workers are recruited, composed of units of pairs of workers (each comprising of a male and a female pair) called *koytas*.
- Tribal Bhils from districts in northern Maharashtra (Khandesh region) and the Dangs in Gujarat have been migrating to the sugar cane belt in south Gujarat for several decades. Within Maharashtra and north Karnataka, the gypsy tribes- Vanzaris/Banjaras/Lambanis are prominent among cane cutters. For women cane cutters, unfreedom is even greater. 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.

### Construction and Brick Kilns

- 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 and 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.
- In Medinipur district of West Bengal, CWDS researchers observed tribal women (Santhal) from Purulia were working in family units as moulders of raw bricks (*patheras*), while other tribals 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 male-female pair (*Jodi*) based moulders.