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**LABOUR AND THEIR LIFEWORLDS:
A STUDY OF ORAON TRIBAL WOMEN'S SEASONAL
MIGRATION AND LIFE STRATEGIES IN
THE BRICK KILNS OF BIHAR, INDIA**

Abstract

This study adopts a lens of life-course principles to examine the experiences and trajectories of seasonal migration of Oraon tribal women from the Latehar district of Jharkhand to brick kilns in the Kaimur district of Bihar. By focusing on historical time and place, timing of lives, linked lives, and human agency, the study seeks to investigate how depeasantisation, debt bondage, and the other agrarian conditions force Oraon women to seek opportunities in distant brick kilns. By employing the case study and survey method, this study selected 40 Oraon tribal migrants working as Nakasi worker across four selected brick kilns. The study addresses three research questions: (1) How do the structural conditions of the agrarian transition shape the migration journey of Oraon women at different life stages? (2) What is the role of the debt and local intermediaries in producing the new forms of bondage in brick kiln industry? (3) How do Oraon women exercise their agency? The study shows that migration of tribal women operates as a household survival strategy and a mechanism of semi-proletarianization where the wages are only meant for survival. Their transition from cultivators to “muddy labour” is shaped by diverse systems of caste, gender, debt, and agrarian decline. The advance payment (peshgi) system and the sardar-mediated recruitment process create new forms of bondage that bind workers across seasons. Yet within these structural constraints, the women exercise forms of agency through negotiation and coping strategies. By demonstrating the core value of integrating structural and life course principles, this study also contributes to debates on India's agrarian transformation by foregrounding the lived experiences of tribal women within broader political-economic processes.

Keywords: *Muddy labour, Oraon Tribal Women, Seasonal Migration, Livelihood Strategies, Brick Kilns.*

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Introduction

Every winter, when the paddy has been harvested and the fields of Latehar lie fallow, hundreds of Oraon tribal women along with their families leave their homes in Jharkhand and choose to sell their labour in the brick kilns of Kaimur district in Bihar.

They opted brick kiln as a destination to sell their labour not because they wish to, but because they have no option. Their local ecology, including agrarian land is degraded, seasonally fragmented, depleted and often failed to feed their families during the lean season. Crops failure, out of pocket expenditure due to health and family emergency press them to sell their labour and therefore they follow the *sardars*¹.

In the era of late capitalism, migration in varied forms became a worldwide phenomenon. It also carries wide-ranging social, economic, and political consequences. People from class (individually, family or community) move in pursuit of improved opportunities and a better quality of life. At its core, migration reflects a deeply human impulse: the desire to seek out new possibilities to address the hardship of the life. So far, this journey has hardly straightforward. Those who migrates often face cultural barriers, discrimination, and the unsettling prospect of losing their sense of identity (Sundari, 2007; Kishore and Kiran, 2013).

Among tribal populations, migration is frequently driven by pressing socio-economic realities such as unequal land distribution, scarce resources, limited employment options, and debt. In lean season, these conditions push them to leave their ancestral homelands in search of survival elsewhere (Rozelle et al., 1999; Gowda and Shivashankar, 2007; Bagchi and Majumdar, 2011). So, there is a need to understand the intersecting socio-economic realities through the domain of the sociology of migration.

Earlier research shows that the social and cultural contexts of migration often focus on the areas where migrants move (Appadurai, 1996) or from where migration takes place (Gardner, 1995. Osella and Osella 2000, 2003). However, the reasons behind people's decisions to migrate need to be explored in depth. These all came under the purview of the sociology of migration which has identified several primary factors that drive the phenomenon of migration. Several major causes of migration have been identified in the literature dealing with the study of migration in sociology. These reasons include drought, crop failure, lack of non-farm employment options, inadequate availability of basic amenities in rural areas, problems associated with corruption, and inadequate representation of tribal communities (Deshingkar & Start, 2003).

Season migration is often interpreted within the context of a broader system associated with capitalist production, resulting in exploitation

and oppression (Breman 1985, 1996; Mukherji 1985; Standing 1985). This understanding frequently blurs the distinction between the role of migration within the broader societal structure and the standpoint of migrants. Through their migration to urban areas, they can access improved employment opportunities and higher wages, thereby bolstering their economic stability (Yadav, 2020). This study also pointed out that seasonal migration serves as one of the major visible manifestations of rural poverty and the absence of the development plans and policies. Here, it is important to discuss the nature of the migration, its potentialities associated with upward mobility. Earlier studies show that migration became a strategic means for the individual, family or community to escape from the disadvantageous condition of marginality (Yadav, 2020; (McDowell & De Haan, 1997).

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the life courses and lived experiences of female seasonal migrant's labour at the brick kilns of the Kaimur district of Bihar, India. This research design is theoretically informed by the life course paradigm of Elder, lifeworld of Ponti and colonization of lifeworld by Habermas. Elder (1994) mentioned that life-course paradigm is useful to understand and capture the biographical complexity and subjective meanings by focusing on the human lives and changing society. Ponti (1962) concept of lifeworld is used to understand the perception and experiences and colonization of lifeworld (Habermas, 1987) is useful to discuss the way modern capitalist system stabilizes itself by altering the communicative fabrics of the migrant labourers. In this present study the focus is on the female migrant workers who are involved in Nikasi work at Brick Kiln. Four brick kilns are selected through purposive sampling where Oraon women are engaged in Nikasi work. This study has chosen one case and one FGD for in-depth investigation. The methods used in this study is interview, FGD and case study method. Apart from this, this study also surveyed 70 individuals (including households) from the Oraon tribe engaged in Brick kiln to understand the static data. 40 out of 70 individuals only expressed their willingness to participate in this study. Consent was properly taken and also make them aware about the aims of the study.

The Underpinning of the Phenomenon

Figure 1 seeks to show how the lack of social capital and advance in form of debt forced the Oraon tribal women to look for work in Brick kiln. Mainly the Oraon women prefer to choose the Nikasi a low skilled work. Through the above conceptual underpinning, we try to show the shift from traditional agriculture-based livelihoods to labour in brick kilns, leading to a process of depeasantization. Economic distress and the need for subsistence drive families to decide whether to migrate for labour. This decision is influenced by both family compulsions and personal choices of women. This seasonal

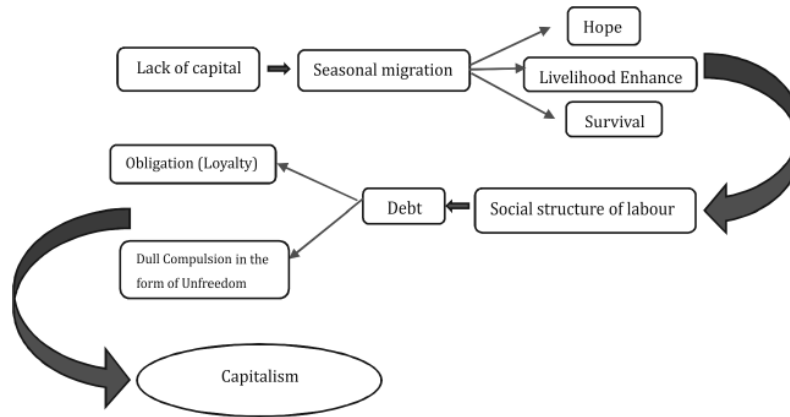


Figure 1: Author's own compilation

migration of Oraon women is driven by socio-cultural, economic, and credit-complex factors that are deeply rooted in historical and structural contexts. Their labour in brick kilns acts as a flexible means of capital accumulation and labour exploitation, creating new types of labour relations and human capital. Through this process, new forms of bondage and unfreedom, and new ways of capital accumulation emerge. This study will discuss the relationship between seasonal migration of women, labour exploitation, and socio-economic factors which can be elucidated in the line of life course principles. In next section, we will discuss the organisational form of brick kiln.

The Brick Kiln Organization

The brick kiln industry in India is primarily based on rural migrant labour, a neglected section of society with health, social, and economic issues. Workers migrate from their native villages during October to May to build temporary huts at the kiln site. 92% of the workers are migrants, while 8% are locals. Work allocation is based on work from different states, with labour being classified into four categories (Banerjie, 2016; Kaji, 2019).

Table 1: Worker Labourers Classification and nature of work in Brick Kiln

Type of Worker	Nature of Work
Pathera labourers	Pathera involves preparing clay, moulding bricks, and drying them, typically done by a husband and wife, who are exclusively involved in the process.
Bharai labourers	The labourers who carry unbaked bricks to kilns on mules or Rehdi
Jalai labourers	To prevent the bricks from burning, the kiln must be kept at a constant temperature.
Nikasi labourers	Bricks are extracted from the kiln and loaded onto a bullock cart for transportation.

Table compiled by Author.

This study focused primarily on nikasi labourers. At the field site, Oraon tribal communities particularly women were found working in brick kilns. They have been hired informally by the recruiter, mainly Sardar, sometimes mediated by the social capital, kin, and relatives. The recruitment of labor in these kilns follows a rigid four-tier hierarchy. At the top, the owner popularly known as Seth followed by contractors called Sardar; then supervisors also known as Thikedars; and finally the labourers themselves, known as Dadan. Contractors bring migrant labourers to the kilns, while supervisors keep a close watch over their daily work and output. Because power is concentrated at every level of this chain, breaking free from such bonded arrangements remains extremely difficult for the labourers trapped within it (Panda & Mishra, 2018). The following table shows the description of recruitment in Brick kilns in study area.

Table 2: Recruiters to the Brick Kilns

Recruiter to the Brick Kilns	Migrants
Kiln Owner	04
Broker/ Contractor	36
Total	40

Source: Interview by author Field Survey.

The vast majority of labourers, 36 out of 40, were recruited through brokers or contractors (commonly known as Sardars), and only 4 were directly recruited by the kiln owners themselves.

Table 3: Category Wise Distribution of Sampled Respondents on Migration status, Nature of work, Debt status, and Recruitment status

Respondents Category	No.	Migration status	Nature of work	Debt status	Recruitment status
Marginal land	20	Migrants	Nikasi labourers	n=13	Broker & social network
Tenants (dependent on others land)	07	Migrants	Nikasi labourers	n= 10	Broker & social network
Landless labourers	13	Migrants	Nikasi labourers	n= 13	Broker & social network
Total	40	40	40	36	

Source: Field Survey, 2023

The following table delineates the category wise distribution of respondents on the nature of migration, debt, work and recruitment. Out of 40 labourers, 36 has taken debt which shows the debt is prevailing across all the category. The participants are mainly from the three categories marginal

landholders, tenant and landless labourers and result also shows that all the respondent were recruited from the social networks and brokers.

Lifeworld of Oraon Tribal Women Labourers

This section discusses the lifeworld of the Oraon tribal women. Lifeworld refers to a social world which is subjectively experienced and communicated. It is a world represented by the every day stock of knowledge which is culturally transmitted for interpretation. This section seeks to understand the shared meaning, everyday routine and lived experience of the Oraon tribal women through which these communities make sense of their existence. As discussed in earlier section, the lifeworld of these migrant women is shaped by the debt, ecological degradation, and dull compulsion. These are the everyday tyranny of their life. Discussing Habermas (1987) is important here, he stated that market logics, modern rational structure progressively colonized the lifeworld. It eroded the meaning, cohesion, and autonomy of the everyday life. In the field area, their colonisation can be easily observed. The traditional lifeworld of these communities is fundamentally aligned with place-based rituals and organised around agriculture and forestry; however, after the state formation, and capitalist penetration, their social life and egalitarianism began to be subjugated. Progressive colonisation of the lifeworld by the systematic imperatives has been started, and it is continuously shaping the lifeworld of the tribal community. Tribal areas of Jharkhand is agriculturally a dry, mono-crop area, and ecological degradation, the decline in landholdings and capitalist penetration induced scarcity has pushed tribal families toward seasonal migration. Once their reciprocity and egalitarianism dissolve, they become partially subjugated, but the complete subjugation in the form of colonisation prevails as a cultural field in brick kilns.

In brick kiln, their days are not guided by the communal rhythms but the target sets by the thekedar. During a conversation at the site, one female labourer captured this displacement with quiet meticulousness: *“At home, the work is hard, but it is ours. Here, we work more than in the house, but even the money goes in the Malik’s name. We are just hands.”* The shift from “ours” to “just hands” shows the lifeworld colonisation aptly described by Habermas as the replacement of meaning-laden, self-directed labour with anonymous productive function under another’s authority. The lifeworld of these women is an embodied one. Phenomenologically, their experience of the kiln is inseparable from their physical selves which consists the repetitive motion of moulding bricks, the heat of the firing zone, the dust that settles in the lungs, the tiredness that accumulates without rest days. Merleau-Ponty (1962) aptly mentioned that the body is not merely an instrument but the very medium of experience finds urgent expression here. These women do not simply *have* bodies that labour; their sense of time, possibility, and selfhood is

constituted through that labour. It shows that the lifeworld of Oraon women at the kiln needs to be understood through the totality of enclosure. The kiln is not just a worksite. It is a cultural space in which the boundaries between labor and domesticity entirely dissolve. Brick kiln became a site carries a totality of lived experience of the tribal community in which productive work and familial life are interwoven and became a single, shared existence.

Debt Bondage in the Brick Kiln Industry of Bihar

This section discusses how debt bondage in the brick kilns of Bihar induces exclusion. Debt here is not a financial number or loan, but it accelerates the process of exclusion that pushes the nikasi workers to the condition of marginality. Here, debt can be understood as a cumulative disadvantage. It is a process that denies the entitlement and accessibility of these workers. Through a case study, this study attempts to show how debt penetrates the lifeworlds of the nikasi labourers. Debt bondage is not merely economic exploitation; it is something more, where debt colonizes and invades the social space of the nikasi labourers. This section examines the historical context and temporal aspects, the timing of life events, the interconnectedness of lives and familial strategies, and the role of human agency in interpreting the case.

Case 1

This case is of Dhanwanti Oraon, age 44, female, who belonged to the nikasi labour group. She stated that for the past five years, I have lived and worked in a brick kiln. I have no option to leave it. Indeed, it is also far from my village in Jharkhand and a last option for our survival. I came here after taking peshgi, advance money for the fulfilment of daily expenses and other needs. Now that advance follows us every season: the *malik* cuts it from our wages, keeps the accounts in his book, and we keep coming every year, trying to clear the debt. What we get after selling the labour is very less amounts, and it never matches the hours we put in. We live in a temporary hut beside the kiln, with smoke, dust, and muddy ground all around us.

Still, we return every year. In Latehar, there is no work, even getting the casual daily wage work is uncertain. Some days there is no work at all. Here, in the brick kiln, the piece-rate system and continuous work mean that if my family and I push ourselves, we can save a little. At the kiln, we survive not only through our labour but through each other. In the kiln, our migrant community gives us courage to endure and to keep anticipating that our lives will be different.

The above case shows how the debt bondage and advances create a compulsion in form of unfreedom and bondage. The long hours of 12-16 hours,

poor working conditions, slum like housing with less amenities, health risks are the features of the brick kiln. Uncertainty at village work is also a reason for the migrant worker to choose kilns and it get additionally supplement by the debt, advances and their aspiration to save small amounts. Her narration places “her voice” at the center while aligning with documented patterns of bonded brick-kiln migration, hardship, constrained choice, and hope for mobility. The dispossession and condition of marginality at brick kiln also generates a sense of community, as worker from similar lived situation share similar kind of false consciousness.

The above discussed case is based on the life course principle. This principle mainly includes the key element such as historical time and place, timing of life events, linked lives and family strategies and human agency. Taking account of the historical time and place, Dhanwanti’s life reveals the condition of rural poverty, lack of income generation opportunities, landlessness and uncomplimentary ecological conditions forced families into informal, bonded kiln work. Decline of agricultural surplus and values along with inadequate social welfare scheme and protection make debts or advances from kiln owner as a one of the few significant accessible credit sources. The other key element is timing of life events. The case shows that entry into kiln work occurs often after marriage when the accountability and needs increase. The family member also helps in brick associated tasks which can also be understood as attached labour (Jodhka, 1994). This kind of labour attachment shapes future work trajectories and limit the mobility. The other one is the linked lives and family strategies. The decision of migration in case of Dhanwanti is a household survival strategy. It shows that entire family migrates to brick kiln and parent deliberately involve children in work to get more payment even they express strong aspirations for intergenerational mobility. The other one under the discussion of life course principle is human agency under constraint. From a life course view, her choice of kiln work is an example of agency within the structural constraints. It shows that worker who engaged in brick kiln actively compare all the options. The option ranging from local casual labour, agriculture, government schemes, or kiln. The selection of the kiln as a last option which is ascended due to dull compulsion and survival strategy. It permits them for thinking about some futuristic saving and plan for debt repayment, despite they are aware about the associated risk and working conditions. The above case is not an individual biography, but it is an example of how the whole life courses of the migrant workers are organized around debt, migration, family obligations and agency within the structural constraints.

Debt as insurance and Unfreedom: A discussion

Debt can be understood as a kind of social relationship. It is embedded in the social relation of production. This section examines how debt functions

as an instrument of control, why it continues, and what it means for the lives of Oraon families engaged in nikasi work. Debt in form of advance can be framed as incentives designed to foster a productive labour force even in conditions that are very unpleasant and dangerous. The above discussed case of Dhanwanti shows that brick kiln became one of the sites where debt as a crucial source of credit for migrant labourer. The debt as advance is not online an incentive but it also has contradiction. It serves dual purposes. In the case of the labourer, it addresses their immediate need such as a medical emergency, ceremonial cost or the cost of a funeral. For the kiln owner, it secures a cycle of obedient, immobile workforce for the seasonal time of brick kiln. The contradiction is due to the productive force which makes debt as a kind of social relation of production. Kiln owner and its associated agencies and the labourer both parties enter the arrangement knowingly, yet the symbolism of the power between them is asymmetrical. In Weberian terms, debt as a transaction operates entirely outside the domain of formal rationality (*Zweckrationalität*) — there are no contracts, no standardised terms, no impersonal rules governing the exchange. What exists instead is a relationship of personalised dependence, closer to what Weber described as traditional domination, where authority rests not on codified law but on customary obligation and the patron's discretion (Bremen, 2009; Kumari, 2018).

The advance, then, functions as a form of substantive insurance for people who have been excluded from the structural mechanism of formal social protection. Wages in brick kiln are too low which did not permit saving. At the time when labourer have not any other access of the institutional credits, the kiln owner's advance becomes the only buffer between a family and catastrophe. Debt is used as a capitalist ploy, and tactics seem to be an insurance for the labourer against their needs and scarcity, but the capital has a monopoly over the conditions for the disadvantage and creates a bond in the form of unfreedom. It is measured in months of bound labour where one has to surrender their autonomy, and in the slow absorption of entire families as a workforce into a regime of productive unfreedom. Marx's concept of "dull compulsion of economic relations" finds vivid expression here: the labourer chooses bondage not because it is desirable, but because all the available possibilities and alternatives have been already foreclosed (Bremen, 2010).

In kiln, there is also a gap between the subsistence costs and actual wages. The piece work kind of the arrangement reproduces the labour dependency into coercion. Workers who fall behind on production targets or having need engaged their family members including children into the cultural field of brick kiln. It creates or manufactures a kind of bondage which can be understood as the obligation of the labourer to sell uninterrupted labour until the debt is cleared. It also produces a hereditary condition for the labourer to be engaged in brick kiln industry (Kumari, 2018).

Debt bondage is a cumulative disadvantage and it is not a single life event. Through the life course principle this study shows that debt make their life more vulnerable and their marginalities is visible in social relation of production. The debt is applied to the entire family household. Somari Oraon, a nikasi worker mentions that “Whenever we need money, they give us without papers.” (extracted from field notes).

She narrated one incidence, in previous year, my husband took an advance of ₹18,000 to settle an older debt. She does not know how much has been repaid. They do not tell anything; they just say keep working; the hisab (final count) will be at the end of the season. We keep working and also involve our children in working. Her children are out of the school during their life in brick kiln. Here, the discussion of concept timing in lives is important to understand that a childhood spent at the kiln rather than in a classroom excludes future mobility. As Somari added gently, *“we wanted him to go to school but how he can, we also need his hands here, who will take care if he goes to school. The school here is far from the kiln.”*

The narration shows that there is no exist. One who carrying the debt have to come in next season. Women who engaged in brick kiln are not independent to exit. They also have to support their husband whose name is in record book. The register carries one name for one labour role.

Phulmani, a nikasi labourer stated that: *“My husband takes the advance, my husband’s name is in the register. But I am the one making bricks from four in the morning. They don’t count my work separately.”*

Female nikasi labourers also do additional work of their husband such as loading baked bricks onto truck to enhance their saving. It shows that the adaptability of the labourer can be understood as a human agency in constrained circumstance. Labourer opted for practical choices and each choice operates within a power structure that effectively excluded them. This exclusion led marginality can be seen at the time when there is no work in kiln or at the time of closures. Without the permission of the owner, worker was not allowed to exit or seek work elsewhere. Mishra (2011) also illustrative work also showed the same happening. Waiting in brick kiln is also a social time. Sugna, an older female labourer engaged in nikasi work narrated that ‘during lean time, we wait in brick kiln. we cannot go, our waiting is aligned with their requirement.’ Malik said and we wait; we don’t have any choice when we take advance payment.

Her narration can be understood in line the principle of cumulative disadvantage where skills become kiln-specific, social ties narrow, the sense of what is possible shrinks to fit the rhythms of production and repayment. Starting from the migration which gets harden through the debts, dependency and internalised structural constraints. From taking debt, bringing and

aligning family in production sites, dropout and pulling a child from the school for surplus saving closes the door of exist. Agency exists at every stage, but it grows narrower with each step forward.

Conclusion

This study shows that the brickkiln is a site where materialism shapes the labour body and also social production of relation through debt. The brick kiln is not merely a workplace. It is a total environment whose material reality bends the life trajectories of everyone who entered into it. The materiality of the milieu such as its isolation, its rhythms, its boundaries is not a backdrop to exploitation. It is one of its instruments which accelerate the colonisation of lifeworld (Habermas, 1987). The brick kiln creates a milieu in which the only available framework for daily life is the logic of production. The enclosure is not only physical such as barriers, drying yards, mud-walled shelters but also social and psychological. The boundaries of work and home is collapsed. The labourer eats, sleep and do all the domesticated work in brick kiln; also breath the same dust, experience the muddy clay and even heat at the time of nikasi. By taking insights from the Ponty (1962) works, this study concludes that the body of the female migrant labourer is not just a body which is in the brick kiln but through their body the space of the brick kilns is perceived and given meaning. It shows that brick kiln is their lifeworld where the material conditions of kilns subjugate and colonizes their experiences and perception. This study also shows the cycle of debt is a mechanism of cumulative marginality. This study suggests that there is a need for an integrative approach that includes materialism and social structure to understand the social relations of production in the brick kiln. The brick kiln determines the life course environment of the labourer.

Note

1. Sardar here refers to the labour recruiters who arrive in their villages each autumn with advance payments that are simultaneously a lifeline and a chain

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