



# The labor of social change: Seasonal labor migration and social change in rural western India

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I examine the relation between seasonal labor migration in rural western India and social change in the home communities of the migrants. The phenomenon of seasonal migration has been studied from the lens of remittance flows and net-loss-and-gain-of-labor between regions. However, there remains a paucity of studies that examine how marginalized people employ their personal experiences, ideas, and sensibilities in the process of circulating between their home and destinations to contest their historic, unequal power relations in their home villages. This research is an effort to fill that gap.

Based on research conducted in Yavatmal district of Maharashtra in rural western India during summer 2014 and summer through fall 2015 and drawing on Gramscian concepts of counter-hegemony, I claim that in rural Maharashtra, seasonal labor migration has caused ripples in the social lives of the villages, impacting landowning farmers, landless laborers, and relations of production. These changes are visible in quotidian politics: in new farmer and laborer subjectivities, challenges posed to the common sense of social conduct, and migrant politics of resistance visible in the migrants' "war of position" against landowning farmers. While migration and development policy, both in India and globally, has focused on the integration of internal migrants in their destinations, the quotidian political conflicts in the home communities of internal, circular migrants continue to remain largely unexamined. By studying migration as a social process, this paper exhorts policy analysts to situate "home" as an appropriate avenue to understand how communities transform through migration.

## 1. Introduction

In the Global South, the agricultural sector is not producing adequate employment opportunities prompting laborers to seek work elsewhere often in urban centers (ILO, 2011). Work opportunities for laborers in cities tend to be seasonal and informal (Bremann, 2013) while gaining access to the "formal" economy often requires substantial social and cultural capital (Jeffrey, 2010) that these laborers may not possess. This paper focuses on internal migration, which is migration within the borders of states and territories (Skeldon, 2015). Bell and Muhidin (2009) estimate that globally, the number of internal migrants is about 740 million. In the Global South, the lack of decent and sufficient employment opportunities in urban areas is resulting in laborers to engage in seasonal migration, where laborers migrate from their home communities to one or multiple locations for a short period to work (Deshingkar & Grimm, 2004). A large body of evidence shows the importance of migration to the livelihoods of rural populations and the dynamics of rural economies (Rigg, 1998).

The relations between labor migration and development have been

empirically understood both as beneficial and as disadvantageous to the migrants and their home communities. On one hand, it has been shown that development and migration are linked through a "virtuous circle" where development drives mobility and the other way around (Portes, 2009). On the other hand, underdevelopment and migration have been linked with a similar "vicious circle" where uneven development fosters conditions for laborers to migrate away from their economically "underdeveloped" home communities in search of work, resulting in the loss of skilled labor and further underdevelopment in their home community (Gamlen, 2014). Critical literature on development and migration is skeptical about seasonal migration being a long-term solution to the development of migrants' home communities (Skeldon, 2010). So too, the labor recruitment process that results in migration may involve passage into debt bondage, which may lead to "unfreedom" of the migrants (Bremann, 2013; 66). It has also been shown that migrant remittances are often expended on "conspicuous consumption" in their home communities, resulting in inflation, increased inequalities, and little economic production, thus, leading to a lack of creation of any new opportunities for returning circular migrants to

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apply their skills (Appleyard, 1989).

Internal migration, in addition to an outcome of these interconnected agrarian transitions, is also a driver of change in rural areas. For migrant families in the Philippines, capital derived from earnings in the Middle East represented a major source of funds to purchase farmland and farm machinery in their home villages (Banzon-Bautista, 1989). Higher earnings derived from migration may lead to mobility into or within a land-owning class (Kelly, 2011). Indeed, migration, rather than land ownership, may, in some places, become the marker of a superior class position (Aguilar, 2009). Migrants returning from urban centers may bring with them liberal-democratic values (Shain, 1999) and new expectations and ideas about politics and struggle, as in the case of one of the causes of peasant movements in West Java (Fauzi, 2005).

The phenomenon of seasonal migration has been studied from the lens of remittance flows and net-loss-and-gain-of-labor between regions. However, there remains a paucity of studies that examine how marginalized people employ their personal experiences, ideas, and sensibilities in the process of circulating between their home and destinations to contest their historic, unequal power relations in their home villages (Gidwani and Sivaramkrishnan, 2003). This research is an effort to fill that gap. This study of migration as a social process is an intervention in a longer arc of geographers' engagement with migration studies. The orthodox focus in geographical engagements with migration research has been on methods and theories that explore causal factors for migration, the characteristics and distribution of migrants, and migration flows, marked by "an obsession with precise measurement, numbers, and sophisticated statistical techniques" (Robinson, 1996). This was succeeded by a new period when migration geographies encountered a "cultural turn," one where migration has come to be understood as "an extremely cultural event" (Fielding, 1992).

The markers of this cultural turn in migration geographies is epistemology sensitive to culture and consciousness and the role of migrants' agency; however, the bulk of research in this post-quantitative paradigm in migration geographies centers on Europe and North America, and second, this cultural turn in migration geographies has not yet engaged with internal migration within countries (King, 2012). Notable recent exceptions that focus on the social geographies of internal migration in South Asia include examination of the relations between labor migration, masculinities, and gendered notions of nation-building in northern India (Sabhlok, 2017) and the devaluing of migrant labor bodies employed by the Indian state for "nation-building" and for the building and maintenance of infrastructure to bolster national defense (Sabhlok, Cheung, and Mishra, 2015). This paper on changes in social relations in the migrants' home communities resulting from seasonal migration of landless rural laborers is an attempt at filling the gap in scholarship in migration geographies. The Indian drylands provide a fertile ground for this research because factors that encourage outmigration of labor and the informal nature of the urban labor market has resulted in the circulation of large numbers of rural laborers (Deshingkar, 2005). These laborers return to their home villages, seasonally, to encounter a complex mosaic of social relations of class and caste, within which, the laborers often occupy a subaltern position. Subalterns are subordinate in terms of their class, caste, gender, and culture, and occupy a historically dominated position vis-à-vis another group, i.e. the elites (Prakash, 1994).

In India, nearly 68 percent of all workers are employed in agriculture, yet growth in the agricultural sector has stagnated since the early 1990s; today, it only accounts for 16 percent of GDP (Gupta, 2012). The rural laborer households are among the most economically, socially, and politically marginalized because of a high incidence of poverty in the households and because they often belong to the "lower" castes within the hierarchal arrangement of caste categories in India. Over the last decade, landlessness has continued to increase in India as have the proportions of agricultural and non-agricultural laborers in the rural workforce (Chandrasekhar, 2014). Taken together, these factors

have induced migration from dryland villages to irrigated villages (Ramamurthy, 2010: 412) and from rural areas to urban areas where rural laborers seek out new work opportunities. Yet it is unlikely that migrating laborers find secure employment in urban areas given that the informal economy in India employs close to 92 percent of the Indian workforce (Breman, 2013). Of these informal sector laborers, around 30 million to a 100 million are estimated to be seasonal migrants (Breman, 2007). Note that in rural India, a typical "poor" person is not a farmer but a wage laborer dependent upon irregular wages (Harriss, 1992). When migrant landless laborers return home to their villages, they do so to a place where they have been not just economically disenfranchised but also socially and politically marginalized. Rural India, thus, provides a compelling locale to understand the relations between labor migration and social change, or how migration fosters conditions for historically subjugated communities to redefine their relationships within their own home communities.

This research draws on a Gramscian approach to socio-political change by focusing on the mechanics of counter-hegemony especially how marginalized groups resist historical relations of class and caste wherein these groups occupy a position of subjugation. These relations reproduce an agrarian society where caste and gendered hierarchies have long determined land and asset ownership, claim to dignity and respect, and, the consent of lower caste landless laborers to the social, economic, and political power geometries in the rural society that peripheralize these groups. This research provides an insight into *how* migrants resist their subjugation in their places of origin, how these changes in the relations of production impact rural elites, and explore the limits to the politics of the subaltern. In other words, the central question this paper seeks to address is, does the seasonal migration of landless laborers impact changes in social relations of production in their home villages? If so, how? While this paper explicitly engages with agrarian class and caste relations, it is unable to do so with gender relations. To the extent that this paper links migration studies and critical theory within geography, it is important to mention that feminist geographers have led this endeavor. Feminist geographers have highlighted missing scales such as the body and the household within studies of migration and the relevance of these to the analysis of migration at scales such as the nation and the region; in the analysis on mobility, theorized migration and mobility as a political process, thus, questioning the masculinist assumptions about the political-economic forces that create conditions for labor migration; illuminated the cultural struggles of migrants resulting in their interpretation and experience of spaces; brought to bear an understanding of subjectivities and identities that allow migrants to be constituted through intersecting and competing processes; and given credence to migrant agency (Silvey, 2004). These contributions have created possibilities for the study of internal migration as a social process such as the one undertaken in this research.

This paper is organized into nine sections. I start by discussing development indicators in eastern Maharashtra in India to discuss the suitability of the research sites. This is followed by a brief description of the research methods applied for data collection. I then examine the existing literature on the relations between labor migration and social change, which, while a significant step forward from traditional approaches in geography, lacks an explanation of how migration reconfigures social relations of production. I argue that Gramscian notion of counter-hegemony provides the theoretical apparatus most suited to explain migrants' work in reshaping the cultural life of village society by positing challenges to the "common sense" of social conduct and mounting a "war of position" against the hegemony of the ruling bloc of landed farmers. This follows a longer narrative of observations from the field or the "results" of this research, which I contextualize with the existing literature through a discussion. The conclusion summarizes the findings of the research and their implications for migration policy.

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