

# Caste Dynamics in Labour Migration: Study of Migration from Ganjam District, Odisha to Gujarat and Kerala

Madhusudan Nag

Benoy Peter

Divya Varma



Work Fair and Free



aajeevika  
bureau



CMID

**Caste Dynamics in Labour Migration:  
Study of Migration from Ganjam District,  
Odisha to Gujarat and Kerala**

**Madhusudan Nag**

Doctoral Scholar  
Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum

**Benoy Peter**

Executive Director  
Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development, Perumbavoor (Kerala)

**Divya Varma**

Director – Knowledge and Policy  
Work Fair and Free, Bangalore, and Aajeevika Bureau, Udaipur

**Work Fair and Free  
Aajeevika Bureau  
Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development**

**Work Fair and Free** is a knowledge institution driven by a commitment to advance the agenda of an equitable and dignified world of work for India's laboring communities. We carry out grounded and rigorous research, insightful policy work and innovative teaching and training, all supported and informed by impactful practice in urban industrial centres as well as rural migration pockets. Work Fair and Free has been conceived and incubated by **Aajeevika Bureau**, a pioneering workers' rights organization with a long presence in the western Indian labour migration corridors.

**The Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development** is an independent non-profit that advocates for and promotes social inclusion of migrants in India. Established in 2016, CMID's priorities include designing, piloting and implementing programmes for mainstreaming as well as improving the quality of life of migrants. CMID's work also includes technical support in the formulation, refinement and implementation of strategies, policies and programmes that promote inclusive and sustainable development, working with diverse state and non-state actors.

The **Working Paper Series** disseminates our ongoing research to stimulate discussion and exchange ideas on contemporary migration and labour issues. The series aims to inform evidence-based policies and interventions in the world of work.

**Disclaimer:**

Work Fair and Free working papers are pre-publication editions and subjected to an in-house review process. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in them are entirely of the authors. The supporting institutions assume no responsibility for errors, inaccuracies, omissions, or other inconsistencies, whether such errors or omissions result from negligence, accident, or any other cause.

For enquiries and feedback, please write to: [contactus@workfairandfree.org](mailto:contactus@workfairandfree.org)

Image courtesy: Madhusudan Nag

Design: Bijoy | [bejoie05@gmail.com](mailto:bejoie05@gmail.com)

# Caste Dynamics in Labour Migration: Study of Migration from Ganjam District, Odisha to Gujarat and Kerala

## Abstract

The paper maps the emergence of a new migration corridor from the Ganjam district on India's east coast to the southern state of Kerala since the late 1990s. It marks a significant shift in the labour movement from the eight-decades-old, well-established Ganjam-Surat (Gujarat) corridor. While tracing the trajectory of Odiya migrants, particularly from the historically marginalised Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) communities, the paper argues that caste is a structural force that has shaped migration and contributed to the emergent corridor from Ganjam to Kerala. It describes how caste and migration mutually influence and shape each other. Caste is not only an identity marker of migrant workers but has a bearing on all aspects of migrants' work and lives as a social structure. The paper further illustrates how caste continues to be reproduced through the referral-based recruitment prevalent in urban India.

**Keywords:** Migration, labour, caste, India, Odisha, Kerala

## Acknowledgements

This working paper is an outcome of a study carried out through a research fellowship jointly curated by Aajeevika Bureau, Udaipur and Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development (CMID), Kochi. The authors would like to thank Dr. Maansi Parpiani, Dr. Tara Nair, Dr. Geeta Thatra and Ananya Iyer for their review and editorial support.



A village in Surada block, Ganjam



A village girl on her way to the market at Surada block, Ganjam.

## Contents

Introduction	6
Methodology	8
Ganjam – Geographical and Demographic Features	8
Surada Block	8
Ganjam as a Major Sending Region	9
Key Findings	10
Evolution and Growth of the Ganjam-Surat Corridor	10
Caste Dynamics along the Ganjam-Surat Corridor	10
Exclusion of Odia SCs and STs from Ganjam in Surat	11
Emergence of the Ganjam-Kerala Corridor	13
Conclusion	15
References	17





A returnee migrant in Ganjam, who now runs a daily needs shop after long years of work in Surat

## Introduction

The development trajectory of India in the last few decades has been shaped by a neo-liberal capitalist growth model. This urban-centric model, focused on attracting foreign capital for technological and infrastructural growth has led to uneven regional development, creating islands of prosperity on the one hand and dwindling rural economies and livelihoods on the other (Srivastava & Jha, 2016; Lerche & Shah, 2018; Srivastava, 2019). Labour migration, especially of 'footloose' labour from the hinterland to the centre, is also growing in tandem with the changing nature of globalised capitalism (Bremner, 1996).

The geographical contours of migration, whether internal or international, play a significant role in shaping the prospects of the migrating individuals (Borjas, 1987; De Haan, 2002; Faichamps & Shilpi, 2013). For historical reasons, that also have to do with optimising search costs, migrants who move out from a specific 'source' location tend to migrate to a particular 'destination' (Ghate, 2005). The continuous movement of people from the source to the destination and vice versa, leads to the emergence of migration corridors in the long run (Tumbe, 2018). The emergence of such corridors is also determined by the economic geography of cities and the political economy of various interests that govern urbanisation (Mata-Codesal & Schmidt, 2020). The Economic Survey of 2016-17 highlighted some of the emerging migration corridors and patterns in age-specific mobility, that could be attributed to the shifts in the country's economic landscape.

A common fallacy about caste in labour studies is the notion that caste-based hierarchies and practices are a rural phenomenon that do not feature in the more 'modern' process of urbanisation. However, recent literature on caste across disciplines establishes that it is still a significant determinant of economic and social outcomes in the current times (Thorat & Newman, 2009; Desai & Dubey, 2011). Recent quantitative and qualitative studies have thrown up compelling evidence that establish caste as a major factor in influencing migration decisions (Deshingkar and Akter, 2009; Vartak & Tumbe, 2019). Studies related to social network theory highlight the importance of caste in migration and its subsequent outcomes (Munshi & Rosenzweig, 2016). It is also well established

that a marked demographic feature of internal migration in India is the overwhelming representation of lower castes and tribes in circular migration, especially among the informal sector workers who perform low-skilled work in the urban peripheries (Breman, 1996; Mosse et al., 2002; Rogaly, 2003; Keshri & Bhagat, 2012).

In his studies, De Haan (1999) argues that migration as an enterprise is also characterised by a significant element of cost that is a function of individual's identity and mode of migration. Upper caste migrants have an asset base and sufficient reserves back home because of which they can afford to take more risks and migrate to longer distances in search of better opportunities. On the other hand, migrants from the lower castes are largely able to undertake short distance and circular migration as the routine health and income shocks in rural households require them to frequently return to the source. Post-migration outcomes are a function of the distances and the cost involved (De Haan, 1999; Deshingkar & Start, 2003). The social position before migration also provides an important reference point for migrants to judge their post-migration outcomes (Engzell & Ichou, 2020).

The triggers of migration are numerous. Besides the obvious reason of finding better work opportunities in the absence of local ones, migration becomes a tool to escape caste and class-based discriminations and the unfair labour market present in rural areas. Migration is, thus, used as a device to exercise everyday resistance against exploitative systems (Scott, 1985; Vartak & Tumbe, 2019). Deshingkar and Akter (2009) term such vulnerable migration as the 'exit choice' of lower castes against the exploitative caste structure.

This paper qualitatively examines inter-state migration from Surada block of Ganjam district in Odisha and explores how the institution of caste influences the decision to migrate along with the choice of destination. The findings from Surada allude to the larger trends in outmigration from the district as they highlight the changing character of and underlying issues associated with migration out of Ganjam, a major sending region in the state of Odisha.



Odia Migrant Workers in Kerala  
Courtesy: Savanan, CMID





Returnee migrants in Ganjam.

## Methodology

Ganjam district of Odisha is historically known for its out-migration. Within the district of Ganjam, the block of Surada was selected to understand the caste dynamics in migration decision making for the study. Surada is one of the largest blocks in the district in terms of its area and population. It was specifically selected for two reasons. First, the population of Surada is the most diverse, on both social and economic dimensions. Second, Surada is one of the largest recipients of remittances from other states. Qualitative research was undertaken between 16 October 2021 to 19 November 2021 by the lead author, who is a trained migration researcher, a native Odia speaker and is currently pursuing their PhD. As part of the study, 43 key informant interviews (KIIs), 16 focus group discussions (FGDs) and 10 case studies were conducted in Surada. Participant observation was also undertaken. Additionally, discussions and consultations with experts such as grassroots organisations and local labour activists were held to triangulate the findings. These were presented at a knowledge sharing workshop jointly organised by Aajeevika Bureau and CMID in Mumbai in December 2021.

### **Ganjam – Geographical and Demographic Features**

Ganjam district is broadly divided into coastal plains in the east and hilly lands in the west. The southeast region that is closer to the Bay of Bengal has fertile land with irrigation facilities while the Chilika lake in the northeast provides livelihoods in fishery and salt production. The north-western region is covered by the mountain ranges of the Eastern Ghats and is less developed than the coastal plains in the northeast. While the proximity of the hills to the sea makes the district prone to floods and cyclones, the west zone faces frequent droughts. Administratively, Ganjam district has 22 blocks, with a majority of its population living in rural areas. Although ranked first by population and fifth by area among the districts of Odisha, Ganjam has a dearth of labour-intensive industries. The Ganjam District Gazetteer (2017) notes that 75% of the workforce is engaged in agriculture.

### **Surada Block**

Surada block is located in the north western part of Ganjam district. According to the Census of India (2011), the total literacy rate of Surada stands at 55.1%, which is well below the overall literacy rate



of the district. The block has one of the largest percentage of Scheduled Tribe (ST) and Scheduled Caste (SC) population in the district, with 7.6% of the population being STs (3.4% in Ganjam) and 24.1 % being SCs (19.15% in Ganjam) (Census of India, 2011). Although a Hindu dominated block, it shares borders with districts such as Kandhamal and Gajapati which have a sizeable Christian and tribal population.

The villages and streets in Surada block are stratified based on the traditional jati (caste) groups, which are further internally stratified into sub-castes. For instance, there are eight sub castes within the Brahmin caste according to the state or place from which they originally migrated. The Odia Brahmins are categorised as Danua, Padhia, Bhodri, Sahu, Sarua, Guharia, Halua, Chasa, Strotriya or Vedic Brahmins. Khandayat and Kumuti are some of the other upper castes. Chasa, Paik, Goud, Mali/Raula, Teli Kumuti and Pano Christian castes fall under the Other Backward Classes, i.e., OBC category. The Pano, Hadi, Dhoba, Dom, Bauri and Dandasi majorly constitute the SC population in the district. Among the STs, Surada is home to the Kandha, Koli, Malahar and Jatapu tribes. Some sub-castes such as the Christian Pano, though counted as OBC in official records, are still considered lower caste in practice and are equivalent to the Pano Harijan (Hindu SC) in caste hierarchy (Ganjam District Gazetteer, 2017).

### Ganjam as a Major Sending Region

Based on the history and magnitude of out-migration, the Government of Odisha has officially identified Ganjam as one of its eleven migration-prone districts (Telegraph, 2018). Migration from Ganjam has been well documented. For instance, the Royal Commission on Labour (1929-31) reports that Ganjam district had migrants traveling to Rangoon, Assam, Bengal and Bombay from 1803 to undertake earth work or to work in plantations, construction of dams, roads, rail lines, jute mills, textile mills, brick-kilns among others. Studies in the context of Ganjam demonstrate that temporary migration from the region is structural and rooted in the historical processes of exploitation and marginalisation (Tripathy & Dash, 1997; Mishra, 1998). Persistent poverty and minimal levels of labour absorption in agriculture, with a near absence of ‘non-farm’ employment, have been the most prominent triggers of migration (Tripathy & Dash, 1997; Sahu & Das, 2008; Das & Sahu, 2019). This has been accentuated by the vagaries of weather in the form of frequent droughts and floods that the region experiences, which affect the sustainability of livelihoods in the agricultural sector. In contrast, destination-based migration studies have highlighted the harsh conditions of work and living that characterises the life of a migrant (Sarangi, 2001; Sharma et al., 2014; Varma & Sharma, 2019).

Interestingly, the Ganjam District Gazetteer (2017) claims the following:

“ Migration from Ganjam District is not attributed to distress. It is rather attributed to the quality of expertise people possess. Ganjam traditionally sends more than half a million people to Gujarat to work in textile Industries, diamond cutting and polishing Industries and ship breaking yards. Such huge migration to Gujarat is not due to distress conditions but due to the demand of such labourers in these Industries. Such migration is mostly suo-moto through peer-connection.

However, this does not truly reflect the history and trends underlying migration from the region. While the Ganjam-Surat corridor is a widely studied historic labour migration corridor, emerging corridors that connect Ganjam to the rest of the country have not been the subject of research. Existing studies also do not explore the caste dynamics in this migration corridor, nor do they explain why lower castes and other marginalised groups do not feature so prominently in this corridor. This paper, thus, aims to explore Ganjam as a sending region with particular reference to the role of caste in the choice of destination.



A Christian majority village in Ganjam.

## Key Findings

### Evolution and Growth of the Ganjam-Surat Corridor

Ganjam emerges as a key internal migration corridor, featuring among the 17 districts with the highest male out-migration across state borders in India, according to the Working Group on Migration (2017, p. 21). A salient facet of this migration panorama is that the Ganjam-Gujarat migration corridor constitutes a substantive 78% share of the aggregate out-migration cohort (ibid, p. 22). The industrial city of Surat in Gujarat has been one of the major destinations for migrant workers from Ganjam. Migration from Ganjam to Surat picked up during the late 1970s or early 1980s (Mishra, 1998; Ghate, 2005; Sahu & Das, 2008). The growth of the export processing zones and many small industries in Gujarat created abundant opportunities for employment. Meanwhile, agriculture in Ganjam was severely hit due to frequent natural disasters (Das, 1993). The workers from Ganjam were initially engaged in gardening and construction work in Surat. Eventually, they found work in the textile industry, slowly replacing labour from Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. The workers also found their way into the diamond industry in Surat. Thus, Ganjam-Surat became one of the major labour migration corridors in the country. It is estimated that there were 6-8 lakh migrants from Ganjam in Surat in 2018 (Das, 2020). The cultural presence of migrants from Ganjam in Surat is quite visible. 'Odia Mess' eateries run by the Odias providing native cuisines can be widely found in Surat. The Odias also observe the 'Rath Yatra' (Car Festival) in Surat.

### Caste dynamics along the Ganjam-Surat corridor

In Ganjam, historically, the Brahmins, Khandayat, Kurmi and the OBCs were primarily the landowners and thus, constituted the dominant caste groups (Government of Odisha, 2013). Those from the lower castes were dependent on them for their livelihoods. This was the case for most of the SCs, STs and for some from the OBCs. Farm workers from lower castes were engaged by the upper castes through the 'Halia-Mulia' system. The Halias were primarily the OBCs, while the SCs and STs were employed intermittently as the Mulias. Those who were considered as lower castes or 'untouchables' were treated harshly. The caste dynamics also reflects in migration decision making. For those from the lower castes, migration was not just a matter of survival, but it was also liberation from caste

oppression. Hence, the youth from the SC communities such as the Hadis and Panos, who were treated as untouchables in the village, preferred working outside the village. With natural disasters diminishing the opportunities for work in agriculture, the Halia-Mulia system weakened and workers from the lower castes were desperate for work. Such workers were taken to many places including Surat by contractors as 'Dadan' labour (Tripathy & Das, 1997). Dadan migrants are those who have taken loans or wage advances from contractors or sardars to work outside the state.

The upper castes considered migrating outside the village for work to be beneath their social status. Taking up any work in the village or nearby areas had, hence, been socially undesirable for the land-owning OBCs. However, they soon moved far away from the villages to seek work and found Surat to be an ideal destination. Migration of the OBCs to Surat was strengthened as initial migrants helped others from their kin groups to move to Surat. To put it in the words of 65-year-old Lakshman (name changed) from the Goud caste (OBC) who moved to Surat during the 1970s:

“ We had land but we were a large family. Migration to other states was not a good option for our people. We thought migrating to another place meant losing respect as a landowning family. However, farming suffered a loss in the 1970s. There was a shortage of labour in the sugarcane and paddy fields. Landless labourers preferred to work in places other than their villages. People from Hadi and Pano castes always preferred to work outside Ganjam. Later, people from our caste also went to Surat. My brother and I went to Surat with our relatives.

When Lakshman went to Surat, he did not face much difficulty because people from his caste and village were already working there. They helped him and his brothers find a job and accommodation. While he has returned home, his son and one grandson currently work in Surat. With relatively better agency and advantage in accessing education compared to the SC/ST communities, the OBCs were able to leverage the income from migration to send remittances that contributed to the household economy significantly. This changed the old perception among OBCs and other dominant castes that migration for work outside the village meant losing social status.

Resourceful migrants from the OBC community in Gujarat were able to quickly climb the social ladder, graduating from unskilled to skilled workers and even becoming entrepreneurs. Gopinath Sahu (name changed), an OBC, had migrated to Surat in 1985 when he was 17 years old along with his elder brother. Although his family had land and he was able to study up to higher secondary, he had to migrate to Surat due to lack of employment opportunities in Ganjam. Besides, frequent crop failures made life miserable in the village. Learning about his desperation, Gopinath Sahu's cousin who worked in Surat asked him to come over. He first worked as a helper to a cook in an Odia mess. After one month, he managed to get a job in a textile factory. After three years in Surat, because of his experience and education, he became a Tapawala. He continued this work for almost eight years. With the improvement in banking facilities in Ganjam, he became a banking agent. Gopinath Sahu has been living in Surat for almost four decades now. He visits Ganjam during festivals and family functions to spend time with his relatives back home. He claims that he is among the more famous and relatively wealthy migrants from Ganjam in Surat. All his family members speak Gujarati and Hindi. His children speak Gujarati better than him.

### **Exclusion of Odia SCs and STs in Surat**

While a substantial number of workers from the SC/ST communities from Ganjam came to Surat as 'Dadan' labour initially, this number gradually decreased. As the number of migrants from the dominant castes in Surat increased significantly, they treated the SC workers from Ganjam just the way they had ill-treated them back in their villages in Surada. Such 'unwelcoming' treatment of SC migrants by fellow OBC Odia migrants in the city kept the former on the margins and they slowly withdrew from Surat. Consequently, the OBCs and other castes constituted the dominant ethnic





A public meeting in Surada block, Ganjam.

group in the Ganjam-Surat migration corridor, whereas the SCs had minimal presence. According to Gopinath Sahu,

“ In Surat, you will find people from all castes and villages of Ganjam. When I first went to Surat in 1985, there were people from lower castes who worked as daily labour and sometimes in the textile factory. Nevertheless, their proportion in Surat has diminished now. The people from these castes mostly go to Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

Tilak Naik (name changed), a 50 year-old from the Pano SC community and a former migrant to Surat, confirms this. He had migrated to Surat in 1991 when he was 19 years old. Tilak Naik worked in Surat from 1991 to 1995 in different textile units. He had travelled to Surat with the help of a person of his caste but from a different village. Some intermediary helped him with finding work in the handloom industry. According to him,

“ At that time, there were many upper caste people of our region working in Surat. I worked in a cloth factory where no upper caste people from Odisha worked. I shared the accommodation with friends from my caste. During my stay in Surat, I had to change factories several times due to caste discrimination by my fellow Odia workers. We (SCs) were asked to sit separately during lunchtime and were not allowed to use the common water facilities. All the workers at the workplace knew our caste and backgrounds. So even the workers from Gujarat, Rajasthan and Maharashtra behaved the same way as the upper caste Odia. In order to avoid confrontation, I used to change workplaces frequently once the number of Odia labour in that factory increased.

During those days when banking was not so easy, the main challenge for the migrants from lower castes was to send money back home to Ganjam. It was expensive to return to Ganjam every month. The Tapawalas mainly belonged to the higher castes and generally refused to take any parcel from the SCs. If at all they did, they charged extra for going to the SC hamlets in the village.

In Tilak Naik's words,

“ People from our caste in Surat were few and we felt isolated in Ganjam. On the other hand, they (the OBCs) went to Surat with their family members or relatives. Given their large numbers, the OBCs stayed in Surat like they did in their villages. I stopped going to Surat when I got information about potential work in Andhra Pradesh's Vijayawada.

After working in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu for a year, Tilak Naik had stopped migrating for work. However, when the 1999 cyclone hit Ganjam, his family's financial conditions worsened and he had to migrate again. He did not want to go to Surat again since not many people from his caste worked there. Instead, he found out about another destination from other migrants of his caste. He said:

“ Some of my distant relatives asked me to join them in going to Kerala. There were five people; all belonging to our caste. They told me that one contractor from Kerala they knew while working in Chennai had given the work address. Wages were much better compared to Surat and the contractor's behaviour was good.

### Emergence of the Ganjam-Kerala Corridor

Experiencing discrimination and harassment by the upper caste migrants from Ganjam in Surat during the 1970s and 1980s, similar to what they faced in their villages in Surada, the SCs and STs eventually tended to avoid Surat as a destination of choice and explored places where they felt more comfortable. Beyond the 'Dadan' system, social networks started to play a key role in migration. Although the situation in Surat was not as discriminatory as it used to be, the SC workers found it difficult to get decent work even after going there. The youngsters from the SC communities preferred to go to Kerala, Tamil Nadu or Delhi instead of Surat. It was revealed from FGDs that during the late 1990s, Kerala became a promising destination for migrants from Surada and the most favoured destination among youngsters. Large proportion of the early migrants from Ganjam to Kerala were SCs, STs and those from the Christian communities. However, now people from all castes go to Kerala.

Raghunath Nayak (name changed), a Hindu Pano (SC), is a 62 year-old construction worker from Surada working in the Thrissur district of Kerala. Raghunath Nayak has had the experience of migrating to Surat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala. His first move was to Surat during the late 1970s, where he went to work in the construction sector along with his uncle and cousins. He later worked in a loom unit in Surat as a helper. He narrated,

“ I have been going to other states for work for almost 45 years now. We worked in Surat for nearly two years. At that time, so many Odias were there in Surat. One day, when we had returned from work, we saw that the room was unlocked and all our belongings were thrown around. Later an Odia from Nayagarh district informed us that people from Ganjam had done the damage. We got angry and complained to the house owner. However, he did not respond. On another occasion, when we went to an Odia mess for lunch, a confrontation occurred, and we were insulted and beaten up. They (the upper caste Ganjami) informed our co-workers from Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra about our caste background after which they stopped cooperating at work. In another incident, I had sent money home through a Teli person (OBC) and later came to know that he did not deliver the full amount to my family. I got angry and picked up a big fight in which they were injured. Fearing repercussions, I had to run away from Surat that night. My cousin, uncle and friends also came with me as they feared that they may also be targeted because they were from my caste and village. We came to Mumbai by train without food and money. After two days, a few of us got to work in Maharashtra, but I do not remember the exact location. I worked as a hamal (loader) in a rice mill.

After returning from Maharashtra, Raghunath Nayak worked for eight years in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh in different sectors. In 1997/ 98, a labour contractor took him from Tamil Nadu to work in the pineapple fields of Kerala. When he first went to Thrissur, they were nine people from Ganjam and all belonged to the Scheduled Castes. At the time of the interview, 20 people from his caste and surrounding villages were working in Thrissur. People from the Goud, Chasa, Kuruma communities and other upper castes also started migrating to Kerala eventually. The accommodations were separate, based on family networks and caste groups. However, they maintained good relationships. According to Raghunath Nayak, sometimes labourers from the upper and lower castes ate each other's food in Kerala, but the same people would not even dare to take water from the lower castes when they were in Ganjam. He felt that the situation was improving.

People like Tilak Naik also found Kerala to be a much safer place compared to the gruelling treatment by OBC migrants from Ganjam in Surat. According to him,

“Working in Kerala is more peaceful. People do not bother about our caste even after they come to know. Now even upper caste people from Ganjam work in Kerala. But they are less in number and not in a position to misbehave with the SCs. Besides, the younger kids are not like their fathers or grandfathers who mistreated our people in Ganjam.”

His two sons currently work in Kerala. One of them joined him in 2004 and the other, in 2011. His elder son works as a mason and the younger one as his helper. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Tilak Naik's elder son returned home, but the younger son continued his work in Kerala. He came home after the regular train services resumed. He experienced no difficulties in staying and getting food in Kerala during the lockdown. On the contrary, some people from the same village who worked in Tamil Nadu and Surat had suffered. They rushed back by paying a hefty sum for transportation.

Hailing from the Hadi caste, 27 year-old Banshi Hadi (name changed) is a first-generation migrant in Kerala. Having studied up to Class 6, he was the first in his family to go to other states for work. His father was a Halia in a Goud family. He has not gone to any other place for work except Kerala. Banshi Hadi first went to Kerala in 2010 with people from the Pano caste, who were the early migrants to Kerala. He used to take care of cows and buffaloes initially and is now a construction worker. He felt that Kerala is the right place for him because the owner gives “respect”. At present, there are many from his village working in the same area. When asked why he had not gone to Surat, he said

“From my family or even from the Sahi (colony), none works in Surat. Most go to Kerala, and others to Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Bhubaneswar. Therefore, I had no scope of even thinking about going to Surat.”

The Christians from Surada also preferred to move to Kerala as they found it difficult to obtain accommodation in Surat and faced harassment from the upper caste Odias. The Christians not only went to Kerala but also to Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. The Surada Christians arrived in Kerala through their relatives living in the neighbouring Kandhamal district. Here, a significant number of Christian families have migrated to southern Indian states. This was particularly after the Kandhamal riots in 2008, a conflict between the Hindus and the Christians that displaced the latter. With a considerable Christian population in Kerala, the Odia Christians who migrated to the state had better jobs, higher wages and they also felt less threatened. As the Surada block shares a border with Kandhamal, the riots also impacted the Christian communities there. According to a key informant,

“Christian people of our region do not go to Surat. Some have gone, but their experience was not good because in Surat a person gets a good job only if he knows the people or if any relative works there”.

The field visits in the villages of Surada confirmed that caste dynamics form an important determinant of migration patterns out of the block. The villages with a large share of the SC population had people migrating mainly to Kerala or any other destinations but not to Surat. In villages dominated by the OBCs, the migration was primarily to Surat with fewer people going to Kerala and other states.





A returnee migrant handing over his remittance during the pandemic.

## Conclusion

With the help of a qualitative research design, this paper examines the dynamics of inter-state migration from Ganjam district of Odisha with a focus on Surada, one of the largest blocks in Ganjam. It explores how the institution of caste influences not just the decision to migrate, but also the choice of destinations. Historically, the OBC and upper caste Hindus were dominant in Surada and owned most of the land. The SCs, the STs and the Christians of Surada have been dependent on the upper castes for their livelihoods. The villages and streets in Surada are stratified based on traditional caste hierarchies where caste practices such as untouchability prevails even now.

With the fall of agriculture in Ganjam during the 1970s due to frequent natural disasters, people from all castes in Surada were forced to look for jobs outside the state. Surat, an industrial hub in Gujarat, offered abundant opportunities for work and emerged as a major destination for all caste groups from Surada during the early stages of such migration. With the textile industry in Surat thriving, Ganjam-Surat emerged as a major labour migration corridor in India for the SCs, STs and the Christians whose livelihoods were severely impacted. The large presence of Odias in the city added to its attraction as a favourable destination. They took up work provided by the contractors, primarily in unskilled jobs in construction and gardening. For the upper castes from Surada who perceived working outside the village as 'socially undesirable', Surat provided sufficient anonymity to take up odd jobs since it was far from their native place. With better agency and resources acquired, given the historical advantages of being upper castes, the OBCs thrived in Surat learning skills, finding better opportunities with jobs in the textile and diamond industries or as entrepreneurs. They helped their next of kin in Surada to migrate to Surat.

With their strong presence in Surat, the upper castes began enforcing caste hierarchies in Surat just like the ones prevailing in their villages back in Ganjam. For the SCs, STs and Christians who viewed migration as not only a means for livelihood but also liberation from caste discrimination, the discriminatory treatment by the fellow OBC migrants deterred migration to Surat and eventually they started to withdraw. As a result, their numbers as migrants to Surat dwindled over time whereas the number of migrant OBCs leveraging kinship ties swelled. For the past five decades, Ganjam-Surat has continued to be a major labour migration corridor in India. The quest for a safer destination

among the SCs, STs and the Christian migrants from Surada attracted them to Kerala where work was abundant, wages for unskilled work were higher compared to Surat and the employers were less harsh. For the OBCs and the Brahmins, who did not prefer to undertake arduous physical labour but were interested to work in the looms or other factories, Surat continued to be the preferred destination. The presence of the upper caste migrants from Surada/Ganjam was negligible in Kerala. As a receiving society, the caste of migrant workers was not of any consideration. With social networks as the dominant driver, from the late 1990s, Ganjam-Kerala emerged as a second labour migration corridor, particularly for the SC, ST and Christian migrants from Surada. The large presence of Christians in Kerala also acted as an additional pull factor in the case of the Christian migrants, particularly after the Kandhamal riots in 2008.

The findings from the study demonstrate that caste continues to be a crucial factor in migration decision making. This is especially for communities from certain regions in India that substantially depend on migration for survival. Migrants tend to cluster around in areas where there is a large presence of people from their own communities. While doing so, the social stratifications that prevail at the source tend to get replicated at the destinations too, limiting the scope of social emancipation that migration could potentially offer to the marginalised communities. This can compel migrants from the marginalised populations to explore newer destinations that are more egalitarian, more secure and have the potential to accelerate the social mobility of their current and future generations compared to the traditional destinations.



An upper caste residential area in a village in Ganjam.



# ଆନ ଗାଁ ଆନ ବିକାଶ

## ଗୃହିତ୍ର ଦୁର୍ଭିକ୍ତ ସାହି କୋଠ ଘର

ଗ୍ରା:ପ:-ବୋରସିଙ୍ଗି , ବ୍ଲକ୍:ସୋରଡ଼ା

A community centre in Borasingi village, Surada

## References

- Borjas, G. J. (1987). Self-Selection and the Earnings of Immigrants. *American Economic Review*, 77(4), 531–553.
- Breman, J. (1996). *Footloose Labour: Working in India's Informal Economy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Das, B., & Sahu, G. B. (2019). Coping with Cities and Connecting with Villages: Migrant Workers in Surat City. *Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, 62(1), 89–112.
- Das, K. (1993). *Peasant Economy and the Sugar Cooperative: A Study of the Aska Region in Orissa*. Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum
- Das, S. K. (2020, June 24). Agents Urging Returned Migrant Workers in Ganjam to Go Back to Work in Surat. *The Hindu*.
- De Haan, A. (1999). Livelihoods and Poverty: The Role of Migration – A Critical Review of the Migration Literature. *Journal of Development Studies*, 36(2), 1-47.
- De Haan, A. (2002). Migration and Livelihoods in Historical Perspective: A Case Study of Bihar, India. *Journal of Development Studies*, 38(5), 115–142.
- De Haan, A., Brock, K., & Coulibaly, N. (2002). Migration, Livelihoods and Institutions: Contrasting Patterns of Migration in Mali. *Journal of Development Studies*, 38(5), 37-58.
- Deshingkar, P., and Akter, S. (2009). *Migration and Human Development in India*, Human Development Research Paper 2009/13, UNDP.
- Deshingkar, P., & Start, D. (2003). *Seasonal Migration for Livelihoods in India: Coping, Accumulation and Exclusion (Vol. 111)*. London: Overseas Development Institute.
- Dubey, A., & Desai, S. (2011). Caste in 21st Century India: Competing Narratives. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46(11).
- Engzell, P., & Ichou, M. (2020). Status Loss: The Burden of Positively Selected Immigrants. *International Migration Review*, 54(2), 471-495.
- Fachamps, M., & Shilpi, F. (2013). Determinants of the Choice of Migration Destination. *Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics*, 75(3), 388–409.
- Ghate, P. (2005). Serving Migrants Sustainably: Remittance Services Provided by an MFI in Gujarat. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 40(17), 1740–1746.



- Government of India. (2011). Census of India, 2011. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India
- Government of India. (2017). India on the Move and Churning: New Evidence in Economic Survey 2016-17 (pp. 264–284). Ministry of Finance, Department of Economic Affairs, Economic Division.
- Government of Odisha (2013). Comprehensive District Plan 2012-13, Ganjam District.
- Government of Odisha. (2017). Ganjam District Gazetteer (2017). Gopabandhu Academy of Administration (Gazetteers Unit), General Administration Department.
- Keshri, K., & Bhagat, R. B. (2012). Temporary and Seasonal Migration: Regional Pattern, Characteristics and Associated Factors. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 81-88.
- Lerche, J., & Shah, A. (2018). Conjugated Oppression within Contemporary Capitalism: Class, Caste, Tribe and Agrarian Change in India. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 45(5–6), 927–949.
- Mata-Codesal, D., & Schmidt, K. (2020). The Mexico–US Migration Corridor in T. Bastia & R. Skeldon (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Migration and Development* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Misra, S. N. (1998). *Dynamics of Rural-Urban Migration in India*. Anmol Publications.
- Mosse, D., Gupta, S., Mehta, M., Shah, V., Rees, J. fms, & Team, K. P. (2002). Brokered Livelihoods: Debt, Labour Migration and Development in Tribal Western India. *The Journal of Development Studies*, 38(5), 59–88.
- Munshi, K., & Rosenzweig, M. (2016). Networks and Misallocation: Insurance, Migration, and the Rural-Urban Wage Gap. *American Economic Review*, 106(1), 46–98.
- Rogaly, B. (2003). Who Goes? Who Stays Back? Seasonal Migration and Staying Put among Rural Manual Workers in Eastern India. *Journal of International Development*, 15(5), 623–632.
- Sahu, G. B. and Das, B. (2008). *Income, Remittances and Urban Labour Markets: Oriya Migrant Workers in Surat City*. Adhikar, Bhubaneswar.
- Sarang, R. (2001). *Oriyas in Surat: The Ugly Face of Industrialisation - A Case of Squalor, Crime, Police Harassment and Insecurity for Eight Lakh Textile Workers without Identity*. Odisha Khadya Adhikar Abhijan.
- Sharma, A. (2014). *Studies, Stories and a Canvas: Seasonal Labor Migration and Migrant Workers from Odisha*. Centre for Migration and Labor Solutions, Aajeevika Bureau.
- Scott, J. C. (1985). *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. Yale University Press.
- Srivastava, R. (2019). Emerging Dynamics of Labour Market Inequality in India: Migration, Informality, Segmentation and Social Discrimination. *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, 62(2), 147–171.
- Srivastava, R. S., & Jha, A. (2016). *Capital and Labour Standards in the Organised Construction Industry in India: A Study Based on Fieldwork in the National Capital Region of Delhi (Monographs and Working Papers)*. Centre for the Study of Regional Development, Delhi
- The Telegraph. (2020, April 18). 11 Districts Migration-prone.
- Thorat, S., & Newman, K. (2009). *Blocked by Caste: Economic Discrimination in Modern India*. Oxford University Press.
- Tripathy, S. N., & Dash, C. R. (1997). *Migrant Labour in India*. Discovery Publishing House.
- Tumbe, C. (2018). *India Moving: A History of Migration*. Penguin Random House India Private Limited.
- Varma, D., & Sharma, A. (2020). Precarious Employment in Power Looms. In S. Irudaya Rajan and Sumeetha M. (Eds.), *Handbook of Internal Migration in India* (pp. 642–650). Sage Publications.
- Vartak, K., & Tumbe, C. (2019). Migration and Caste. In S. Irudaya Rajan and Sumeetha M. (Eds.), *Handbook of Internal Migration in India* (pp. 253–267). Sage Publications.



Work Fair and Free is a knowledge institution driven by a commitment to advance worker-centric knowledge and action so that informal labour migration can become more secure and dignified. Conceived and nurtured by Aajeevika Bureau, a pioneering labour rights organisation in India, we aim to bring together grounded and rigorous research, insightful policy work, and innovative teaching and training, all supported and informed by impactful practice in urban industrial centres and rural migration clusters.



[workfairandfree.org](https://workfairandfree.org)



[@workfairandfree](https://twitter.com/workfairandfree)



[@Work Fair and Free](https://www.linkedin.com/company/workfairandfree)



[@workfairandfree](https://www.instagram.com/workfairandfree)



[@WorkFairandFree](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCWorkFairandFree)