

Contextualising Labour Migration in Colonial Manbhum

Jayanta Pandey

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Achhruram Memorial College, Jhalda, India

Abstract

Labour migration in Manbhum, which continues to date, is primarily a colonial repercussion. In pre-colonial times the adivasi people of Manbhum enjoyed a near self-sufficient economy, outside influence was minimal. The colonial intervention not only changed the well-balanced socio-economic ecosystem of the adivasi people of Manbhum but also made them economically vulnerable. The Britishers intentionally destroyed their self-sufficient economy through different means like new land revenue system, conservation of forests. They did this to ensure a smooth supply of cheap migrant 'coolies' from Manbhum to the newly opened up tea plantations, coalmines and factories. The migrant labourers were ruthlessly exploited and often forced to work and live in an unhealthy environment.

KEYWORDS: Labour migration, Livelihood, Dispossessed, Deforestation, Commercialisation, Indentured labour.

Introduction:

In the colonial period, the district of Manbhum had witnessed a consistently rising out-migration of labour in search of livelihood. Manbhum was one of the most backward areas in eastern India. During the colonial era acute poverty, crop failure, scarcity of water, insufficient irrigation facilities, famines, lack of non-agricultural jobs were familiar to the people of Manbhum. As a result, the rural poor inhabitants were forced to migrate to the tea plantations of Assam and north Bengal and the coalfields of eastern India for their subsistence. This paper aims at exploring the drivers of the out-migration of labour from Manbhum within one framework. While doing so colonial socio-economic, political, cultural and ecological perspectives, related to labour migration, will be taken into account. It will also examine the process and nature of labour migration from the area. In the last section different academic points of view, seeking to explain labour migration, have been analysed. In conclusion, a general scenario of the whole process has been presented.

Human migration, as we can see, is a universal phenomenon. It is a means for survival strategy for poor people. There is no commonly accepted definition of migration. International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines migration as the movement of a person or group of persons, either across the International border or within regions.¹ According to a scholar, migration refers to the movements of people from one geographical location to another, either on a temporary or permanent basis.² In short, migration is the movement of people from one place to another for a better life. Its causes, nature and types vary over time and space. Migration can be seasonal or permanent.

A close study of pre-colonial Indian history suggests that India was a land of low human mobility, That it was a land of self-sufficient villages living undisturbed until the arrival of the Britishers. People usually died in their own villages of birth. A village looked outside only for a few essential products like salt, spices, fine clothes and coins

for paying taxes.³ Migration was confined to the occasional pilgrim, merchant, military mission or shifting of adivasi families from one place to another in the hills and forests. Colonial rule and its accompanying commercialization affected the people of rural India adversely in a variety of ways. With the rapid expansion of the capitalist economy, large scale migration (especially work related) exploded in India. Economically backward regions of eastern and Central India evolved as the main source of the cheap migrant labour force. Manbhum was one of the important labour catchment areas in Eastern India. It had seen both seasonal (towards coalfields) and permanent (towards tea plantations) out-flow of labour.

Manbhum is presently known as Purulia and in the early 19th century it was a part of the 'Jungal Mahal'.⁴ Manbhum was situated in southwest Bengal and in the east Chotanagpur plateau. Geographically, it is a part of the Chotanagpur plateau. The district is separated from the neighbouring plains by an average elevation of 300 – 600 metres from the sea level. The colonial demographic profile of the region suggests that it was predominantly a tribal populated area. adivasi communities like Bhumijis, Oraons, Kols, Mundas, Koras, Birhors, Savars, Kherias, and Santhals were the main inhabitants of the land.⁵ Agriculture was the primary source of livelihood. In the pre-colonial era, the adivasis had cleared Jungles and prepared agricultural lands on large scale. They had developed a good understanding with their Rajas regarding land revenue settlements and enjoyed surplus productions. As Manbhum was thickly covered by forests, adivasis used its resources freely for their livelihood and thus, created a self-sufficient economy. While the Nawabs of Bengal exercised nominal control over the region, due to the inaccessibility of the area little attempt had been made to collect revenue or exert political authority.⁶

Causes of Labour Migration:

After the British obtaining the grant of dewani in 1765, the primary objective of their land policy was to maximize the land revenue collection.⁷ Revenue demand in the Jungle Mahal increased through a permanent settlement (1793). Local chiefs or Rajas were turned into zamindars and the adivasi peasants into rayats or tenants. Failure to pay the fixed amount of revenue both the Rajas and peasants were dispossessed from their lands. Through this process, many new zamindars came to the region and they raised the level of exploitation over adivasi people. The latter increasingly lost land to the former and became land labourers in their own land. Hunter's Statistical Account tells us about the complex relationship between the peasants and the new zamindars:

The Deputy Commissioner of Manbhum reports that the relations between zamindars and their rayats in the district are in a very unsatisfactory state. Whatever feeling of mutual dependence and sympathy may have existed formerly has now passed away, and has not as yet given place to ordinary commercial relation of landlord and tenant. At present, the question between the two parties is simply the enhancement of rent. On the other, hand the landlords are attempting to raise rent all around, while the tenants,... refuse to hear of any adjustment...⁸

The result was, the peasants increasingly lost land to the new zamindars and became land labourers on their own land. Added to this, poverty and overburdened of taxes brought the adivasis into the debt trap of the moneylenders. And ultimately on account of

fraudulent deals, moneylenders captured their land.⁹ The whole State Machinery - the courts, police and civil administration were kept beyond the reach of the adivasi people. Dispossessed from their land, the adivasis had no choice left but to Migrate.

Migration of labour from the colonial Manbhum district has a deep environmental perspective as well. The adivasis were not only deprived of their ancestral agricultural land but also denied age-old access to forests. They considered the use of forest resources as their traditional customary right. In the early phase of colonial rule forests were projected as 'an obstruction to agriculture and consequently a bar to the prosperity of the Empire'. Therefore, the dominant thrust of the colonial land policy was to extend agricultural land at the expense of forest tracts.¹⁰ In order to meet their tax obligations, zamindars were keenly focusing on clearing the Jungles and converting them into agricultural land with the help of the adivasi people.¹¹ As a result, this led to massive deforestation and extermination of wild animals in the region.¹²

This process was further intensified in the Jungle Mahal area from the 1860s with the expansion of the railway network. Local sal trees were extensively used to provide sleepers for the rail bed.¹³ The construction of Bengal-Nagpur (1898) and Ranchi- Purulia (1908) railway lines stimulated commercial forest cutting.¹⁴ As the demand for timber increased, large forest tracts began to be leased or sold to contractors to ensure a smooth supply of wooden sleepers. These contractors were mainly responsible for the destruction of forests in the region. They had restricted or eliminated the traditional rights of the adivasis over forest resources.¹⁵ In the second half of the 19th century, in the name of conservation a vast area of forest tracts had been brought under state control and a wide range of customary rights of the forest dwellers either abrogated or restricted. The forest acts of 1865 and 1878 played an instrumental role in this regard. State control was extended to fresh-water fisheries and access was restricted of marginal communities over once common property resources.¹⁶ On the one hand, large scale deforestation had sweeping ecological implications. Environmental degradation in the form of topsoil erosion, inconsistent rainfall, and mismanagement of water bodies paved the way for frequent droughts, famines and epidemics in Manbhum . On the other hand, restrictions on the use of forest resources deprived the adivasi people of the land of their livelihood and consequently made migration inexorable.

The Flow of Migrant Labourers:

In the 19th century, the expansion and strengthening of colonial rule together with the steady growth of capitalism brought about new opportunities to work for the people of Manbhum . The adivasis, denied from their traditional livelihood and seeing new employment opportunities in the far-off areas, began to migrate in large numbers. In the early phase, the construction of roads and railway networks absorbed a minor proportion of migrants.¹⁷ The newly opened tea plantations and coalfields in northeastern and eastern India were the main destinations of this migration.

Table – 1

The Number of Migrants as a Proportion of the Total Population of Manbhum

Year	Actual Population	Migrants	% of Actual Population
1891	11,93,328	1,18,893	9.96
1901	13,01,364	1,35,972	10.45
1911	15,47,576	1,15,492	7.46
1921	15,48,777	1,17,665	7.60

(Source: Mahapatra 249)

The figures in the table – I indicate that a large section of the population (from 7.46 to 10.45 per cent during 1891–1921) of Manbhum migrated from their home in search of jobs. The data also shows that the number of migrants was not increased over time, but at the same time, it didn't decrease emphatically too. In fact, the steady flow of migrant coolies was always there to meet the demand for labour.

A major portion of the migration from the Manbhum district was directed towards Assam tea plantations. The demand for labour in the Assam tea gardens was huge. As local people were generally unwilling to work in the 'low profile' jobs of tea gardens, the shortage of labour became a constant headache for the planters. There were mainly two types of labour procurement systems in operation, the 'contractor system' and later (1870 onwards) the 'sardari system'.¹⁸ Contractors or sardars used to work on a commission basis as agents of the planters. The strong labour procurement network developed by them over time extended to the remote villages of Manbhum. They recruited labourers via a combination of advances and sheer trickery (i.e. assurance of good working and living conditions, better wages etc.).

Table – 2

Persons Born in Manbhum and Migrated to Assam.

Year	Migrants	% of the Total Population	% of Total Migrants from Manbhum
1891	53,417	4.5	44.92
1901	69,728	5.35	51.3
1911	55,000	3.55	47.62
1921	63,606	4.1	54.06

(Source: Mohapatra 251)

The above-mentioned data suggests that during the colonial period Manbhum emerged as one of the important labour catchment areas in the Chotanagpur plateau. It is also noticeable that almost half of the total migrants of the region moved to Assam tea plantations.

The migration of labour to the Assam tea plantations was permanent in nature. This is evidenced by the high percentage of women (on average 45%) among the total

migrants.¹⁹ Assam tea plantations were considered as epidemic-prone areas. This associated with overwork, unhygienic living and working conditions, and malnutrition - aggravated the misery of the migrants. Deaths of migrant labourers recorded in thousands every year. Women migrants were often subjected to sexual violence.²⁰ But plantation authorities often turned a deaf ear to their grievances. Through legal provisions (acts of 1859, 1863, 1865, 1882) migrant labourers' mobility was strictly restricted. The migrants were not allowed to renegotiate the terms of the contract or withdraw their services. Instances of breach of contract dealt with prosecution and imprisonment.²¹

In contrast to the permanent migration to the tea plantations, the nature of labour migration to the Jharia-Raniganj coalfields was mostly seasonal. After Assam plantations, the coalfields of eastern India had drawn a maximum number of migrants from the district of Manbhum. C.P. Simmons points out that in 1921, 38 per cent of the workforce in the Jharia coalfield originated from Manbhum and adjoining areas.²²

The core labour supply areas of the Manbhum district were Barabhum, Patkum, Baghmundi, Hesla, Kassipur and Jhalda.²³ There were three types of recruitment systems in the coalfields, (I) zamindari system (II) contract system (III) the government agency system. In the zamindari system coal companies owning zamindari gave agricultural lands to the workers on condition that they would work in their mines. Through the contract systematically, commission-based agents brought labour gangs into coalmines by giving them false promises. And in the third system, government agencies (like Central Recruiting Organization) supplied labour.²⁴ Labour availability in the coalfields normally fluctuated throughout the year. The peak of labour supply was reached in January-February – when the rice cultivation season ended.²⁵ The migrant labourers had to live in the overcrowded 'dhawras'. They were forced to work for hours in an unhealthy environment. Scarcity of drinking water, unhygienic sanitation, inadequate food, and infectious diseases were common to them.²⁶

Theoretical Perspective:

Tirthankar Roy argues that labour supply in colonial India incorporates elements of 'rational choice'. Although wage rates were initially low for labour, wage incentives were not absent. For example, through seasonal migration, Indian peasants were able to utilize their idle time better and increase family incomes. 'Rational Choice' also exists in the decision of the families to allocate men to mills, plantations and mines and women to agriculture.²⁷ Our study hasn't found any suitable 'rational choice' behind the large scale labour migration from Manbhum to Assam tea plantations. Secondly, there was a high percentage of women (nearly 45%) among the migrants – which also denies the 'rational choice' theory.

Lalita Chakravarty, focusing on the Bihar-U.P. region, correlates labour migration with certain ecological characteristics of the labour catchment areas. These areas situated at the margin of wet rice zones typically combined rice with inferior crops like millet as subsistence for the poorer inhabitants. Commercialization of agriculture in these areas tended to produce 'involution' and made poor peasants vulnerable. Hence, labour migration was inevitable.²⁸ Prabhu Prasad Mahapatra extended Chakravarty's argument with some modifications. He suggests that the conversion of uplands (suitable for inferior crops) into rice cultivation lands in line with the population growth threw the poor peasants into a 'high-risk' ecosystem. Because cultivation of superior crops like rice

required more water than inferior crops.²⁹ W. W. Hunter said, 'Irrigation of some sort is essential to almost every crop in Manbhum , as the surface drainage is Rapid and the soil consequently very dry'.³⁰ And yet fluctuation in crop production was very much prevalent. This resulted in lowering down the labour wage rates comprehensively and often compelled even landholding people to migrate.³¹

Conclusion:

In conclusion, we can draw a general picture of the out-migration of labour from the colonial Manbhum district on the basis of this study. This study shows during the colonial period Manbhum emerged as an important labour catchment area in the region. It had sent continuously a large section of its population, either seasonally or permanently, to the Assam tea plantations and eastern Indian coalfields. The institutional factors, i.e., rent, land alienation, indebtedness, together with ecological drivers like deforestation, restrictions on the use of forest resources, environmental degradation, and fluctuations in agricultural production due to erratic monsoons triggered this labour migration. The discussion also suggests that the indentured recruitment of labour is nothing short of a 'new slavery system'. It was not merely a coincidence that just when the British capitalist firms opening up tea plantations and coalmines in north-eastern and eastern India, poor inhabitants of Manbhum were pushed off from their homes by an organized system of recruitment in collaboration with the British government. The migrants were aware of this exploitation, but they were helpless. Many tribal folk songs of the region are giving evidence of the enormous pains of migration.

References :

1. International Organization for Migration, 'World Migration 2003: Managing Migration Challenges and Responses for People on the Move', IOM World Migration Report Series, Geneva, 2003.
2. Kok, Pieter, 'The Definition of Migration and Its Application: Making Sense of Recent South African Census and Survey Data', *South African Journal of Demography*, Vol.-7, No. 1, 1997, pp. 19-30
3. Banerjee, Tarasankar, *Internal Market of India (1834-1900)*, Kolkata: Academic Publishers, 1966, p. xiv
4. Coupland, H., *Bengal District Gazetteers: Manbhum* , Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1911, p. 61
5. Hunter, W. W., *A Statistical Account of Bengal, vol. III, part I*, London: Trubner & Co., 1876, p. 37
6. Firminger, W. K., *Bengal District Records, Midnapur (1763 – 1767)*, Calcutta: Catholic Orphan Press, 1914, p. 157
7. Sur, A. K., *History and Culture of Bengal*, Calcutta: Chuckerverti & Chatterjee, 1963, pp. 176-177
8. Hunter, W. W., *A Statistical Account of Bengal, vol- XVII*, London: Trubner & Co., 1876, p. 337
9. Hunter, W. W., *The Annals of Rural Bengal*, London: Smith Elder and Co., 1868, p. 122
10. Guha Ramchandra, and Gadgil, Madhav, *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India*, New Delhi: OUP, 1992, p. 105

11. Poffenberger, Mark, 'The Resurgence of Community Forest Management in the Jungle Mahals of West Bengal', In D. Arnold, & R. Guha (ed.), *Nature, Culture, Imperialism*, New Delhi: OUP, 1995, p. 344
12. Damodaran, Vinita, 'Gender, Forests and Famine in 19th Century Chotanagpur, India', *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol, 9, No. 2, 2002, p. 143
13. Poffenberger, Mark, *op. cit.* p. 345
14. Damodaran, Vinita, *op. cit.* p. 145
15. Poffenberger, Mark, *op. cit.* p. 346
16. *Ibid.* p. 348
17. Sinha, S. S., *Restless Mothers Turbulent Daughters: Situating Tribes in Gender Study*, Kolkata: Bhatkal & Sen, 2005, pp. 104-105
18. Kamiampady, Elizabeth, *Status of Women Working in the Tea Plantations*, New Delhi: Akansha Publishers, 2003, p. 31
19. Mohapatra, P. P., 'Coolies and Colliers: A Study of the Agrarian Context of Labour Migration from Chotanagpur (1880– 1920)', *Studies in History*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1985, p. 259
20. Sinha, S. S., *op. cit.* p. 107
21. Guha, Amalendu, *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam*, Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, 1977, pp. 18-19
22. Simmons, C. P., 'Recruiting and Organizing an Industrial Labour Force in Colonial India: The case of the Coal Mining Industry (C. 1800 – 1939)', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. XIII, No. 4, 1976, p. 456
23. Mohapatra, P. P., *op. cit.* p. 262
24. Roychowdhary, Rakhi, *Gender and Labour in India*, Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1996, pp. 33-37
25. Mohapatra, P. P., *op. cit.* p. 256
26. Roychowdhary, Rakhi, *op. cit.* p. 99
27. Roy, Tirthankar, *Rethinking Economic Change in India: Labour and Livelihood*, London: Routledge, 2005, pp. 211-228
28. Chakravarty, Lalita, 'Emergence of a Labour Force in a Dual Economy', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. XV, No. 3, 1978, pp. 249-328
29. Mohapatra, P. P., *op. cit.* p. 295
30. Hunter, W. W., *op. cit.* p. 339
31. Mohapatra, P. P., *op. cit.* p. 295