

Solidarity Committee for the Migrant Workers: An Effective Step in Addressing Human Rights Issues in West Odisha

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Abstract: This paper explores the distress-driven seasonal migration of over two lakh laborers from West Odisha to brick kilns in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, examining the underlying causes such as poverty, shrinking forest resources, and systemic exploitation. It details the severe human rights violations faced by migrant workers including physical abuse, bonded labour, and denial of education and healthcare and the exploitative role of Sardars (middlemen). In response, a group of concerned citizens formed the Solidarity Committee for Migrant Workers at both the destination and source regions in 2013. The paper evaluates the Committee's efforts to intervene, rescue victims, secure compensation, and advocate for systemic change through legal and grassroots action. Despite significant achievements, challenges such as breaking the entrenched middlemen nexus, securing legal protection, and ensuring sustainable alternatives persist. The study emphasizes the need for sustained, rights-based activism to combat forced labour and ensure dignity for migrant workers.

Keywords: Migrant Labour, Human Rights Violation, Brick Kilns, Solidarity Committee, Forced Labour, West Odisha Migration

Introduction

Every year between *November–December to May*, more than two lakh labourers from West Odisha are migrating to brick kilns of Telangana and Andhra under distress conditions. This may be arising out of various factors rapidly shrinking forest resources, non-availability of livelihood opportunities, recurrent droughts, high level of corruption, lack of education & awareness, industries etc. The problems arising out of this are numerous. Whatever the phenomenon is going on in Odisha is out of the formal system of Government rules and regulations. Middle men or the *Sardars* are playing a key role in this human trafficking. Their job is to go to villages in the lean season, meet the vulnerable, advance some money and make contract informally for the next season to work at the brick kilns. The *Sardars* not only violate the existing laws only but also venture to infringe basic human rights of the migrant workers in the process. Labourers are meted out inhuman treatment throughout the various layers of their movement and the rest when they settle for brick making at the brick kilns for months by compelling them to work from dawn to

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dusk, even more at times. Women workers are usually exploited, children are engaged in hazardous works depriving them from going to schools, providing poor and un-hygienic working conditions coupled with economic exploitation and mental and physical tortures. Number of cases of deaths, disappearances, physical assault even cutting hands are done by the goons and *goondas* of the brick kiln owners to create a fear psychosis among the brick kiln workers. Of late such cases are pouring in both print and electronic Medias and have become a regular and common phenomenon.

Under such circumstances that few concerned human loving people at the destination (Hyderabad) heard the suppressed and silenced voices of the migrant workers of the Western Odisha. They strongly felt the need of an organization that can work as the safety nets to safeguard their basic human rights interests and thus formed the Solidarity Committee for the Migrant Workers at the destination on *13 December 2013* aiming at securing minimum wage and healthy working conditions of the working class. Whatever violation of human rights cases propped up there, they tried their best to deal with and rescued number of victims and sent them to the source safely. However, dealing with such cases they faced lot of troubles as they did not have any agency to make contact and implement the rest at the source. Knowing this few

Members of the *Solidarity Committee* rushed to the *Kantabanji* – notoriously known as the *Dadsa Capital* and met likeminded people to work for the migrant workers at the source. Thus, *Solidarity Committee at the source* was formed to effectively deal with the violation of human rights cases by maintaining regular rapport with the destination.

In the above backdrop the paper shall make an attempt to study the working and working processes of the Solidarity Committee since 2013 to the present and how to some extent succeeded in tackling issues relating to human rights both at the source and the destination and safeguarding the interests of the working class and hopes so in near future.

The Background

There is a long history of migration in *West Odisha* that can be traced back to the *Great Famine of 1918-19 & 1965-66* where death tolls were 80 and 81 per mile respectively. People died like flies and insects¹. During 1918-19 people of this region had migrated to *Assam tea gardens* for their survival. The *Great Famine of 1965-66* forced people to leave their native places for *Raipur, Durg and Nagpur* for immediate livelihood opportunities to sustain their lives.

The causes of this can be ascribed to:

- a) to shun the wraths of starvation and
- b) to escape from the extreme practice of *untouchability*².

It shows that migration was earlier confined to the *dalits/SCs*, only being the most vulnerable. To add to this, the Western region inherited a *feudal system* which was *caste-ridden and highly exploitative*³.

In 2006-07, Government of Odisha implemented a revolutionary act called MGNREGA to provide 100 days of job to each rural BPL family. After years of its working, it was found to be an *86.66% failure* as none of the families got 100 days of jobs and whoever received were not without much delay³.

However, of late we are witnessing the people from other strata of this region migrating to neighbouring *Andhra and Telangana* to work in brick kilns. Since 1980s, it is on the rising curve and percolated to the other sections of the *OBCs, tribals, and Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG)* who were never before. Among the *STs*, it was largely confined to the *Gonds & Sabars* only.

Presently two *PVTGs*, known as *Bhunja and Paharia*, have started migrating under severe distress condition owing to *rapidly shrunken forest resources and scarce availability of livelihood opportunities*, that who once used to be very keen to preserve their distinct culture⁴ and tradition by maintaining distance from the caste people and withdrawing to interior pockets.

Now there are *horrible stories of gravest human rights violations*. A local NGO writes in its mouthpiece, *Makarkheda*, that in 2005, of the total migrant workers migrated to different destinations of the country:

- 14 persons (9 males & 5 females) died out of *severe physical torture* and other related incidents.
- 7 persons (5 males and 2 females) disappeared from the *SCs, STs and OBCs*⁵.

As per the study conducted by the *district administration*, it reveals that 88% people are migrating to far-off places under *distress condition* and 12% are *voluntary* and remain there for *six to seven months*. Out of this, 50% are *STs* and the rest from the *SCs & OBCs*⁶.

Yet Government has to confess that migration is occurring due to prevalent distress conditions. There are such innumerable instances of *gruesome inhuman stories* which we learn from the mass media. One such story is of two migrant workers of the *Kalahandi district*.



The Initiative

Numbers of studies have been conducted since then to highlight the issues of migrant workers in *Andhra and Telangana*. Students and teachers of the *Central University of Hyderabad* and certain concerned union leaders not just studied the entire exploitative system but engaged themselves in intervening in certain areas where the migrant workers' basic human rights are grossly violated. They took up the matter to the concerned authorities to bring out some redressal.

But hurdles cropped up as they lacked proper information of the migrants' whereabouts, their mode of contract, office information etc. Further, *language* was a big problem of communication for them. There was *no local understanding* of the workers' viewpoints on the part of the intervening agency. And there was *no reliable agency* to contact and exchange communication.

Thus, the need of an agency was felt to effectively deal with such causes. A team was constituted under the leadership of *Dr. T. Mahapatra Sengupta* and *A. Krishna*; these members travelled to West Odisha *Kantabanji*, a main *human trafficking junction*, from where vulnerable migrant workers start their survival journey to different destinations of the country.

This is why experts often describe *Kantabanji* as the *Dadan capital*, as everything of *Dadan* moves and stops here. When they reached at *Kantabanji*, on *13th December 2013*, a meeting was convened under the initiative of the *Zindabad Sanghathan* and *BP Sharma*, leading advocate at the *Veterinary Hospital, Kantabanji*. Local intellectuals and activists were invited. Our good friends from *Hyderabad* appraised everything to the people of *Odisha* and expressed severe concern as there was *no agency at the source* to deal with the infringement of inherent rights of the migrant workers.

They proposed for a committee to be set up and it was *unanimously accepted by all* by a voice vote. It was named as the:

Balangir-Nuapada District Solidarity Committee for the Migrant Workers to work at the source.

Objectives:

1. To deal with the cases of human rights violations of the migrant workers both at the source and the destination.
2. To work for the implementation of the Inter-State Migration Act, 1979 in letter and spirit;



3. To create awareness and educate on the existing labour laws of both the state of Odisha and Telangana;
4. Liaisoning between the officials, public representatives, brick kiln owners and the migrant workers to bring into the negotiating table to settle the issues arising out of the migration processes;
5. To interlink with such other organizations that are committed to the same objectives to put pressure on the government for policy change to suit and improve the socio-economic condition of the migrant workers;
6. To develop an alternative model to the existing exploitative system to break the present nexus of officials (police, railway officials, labour department), Sardars, and brick kiln owners.

The Organization

It is an informal committee of activists, academicians, legal professionals, media personalities, union leaders, and social workers. This is purely a non-political, non-profit and non-registered organization having specific goals as mentioned above. It mobilizes funds from within.

Interventions

It started with small interventions in the initial stage to address the immediate problems of the migrant workers at the railway station, by:

- Meeting with the Sardars
- Informing the police stations
- Going to the labour office
- Making contact with the villages
- Highlighting the issues related to distress labour, torture, exploitation of any kind, and violations of other human rights

When the Solidarity Committee was formed in the year 2013, its scope was broadened and its network was strengthened.

Areas of Human Rights Violations

The Committee in its study found the following areas of basic human rights violation:

1. No formal registration at the source while leaving home
2. Only verbal contract between the two parties
3. Engagement of middlemen/Sardars who siphoned off a major share of the...
4. Inhuman deportation in four-wheelers and in trains,
5. Physical torture by the police in the trains itself,
6. Willful concealment of working place,
7. 14 to 18 hours of uninterrupted work in unhygienic and unhealthy working environments,
8. No government fixed prices followed at the destination,
9. No social security measures,
10. Abuse of women and children at the workplace,
11. Sexual exploitation of young ladies,
12. No toilet facilities,
13. No first aid provision,
14. No contact with the outer world,
15. Unhealthy insufficient accommodation to a family (5x7 feet Width & Length),
16. Insufficient provision of water and light,
17. Schools are there but no Odia teachers,
18. *Kheri* (weekly fooding cost) ₹300/week to a family of four or five and many more behind the screen,
19. Excessive economic exploitation¹⁰.

Initial Encouraging Achievements

1. The Odisha Building & Other Construction Workers Welfare Board was formed for the first time on 3rd January 2004 under u/s 18 of the BOCW (RE & CS) Act, 1996.
 - It was reconstituted subsequently on 14.01.2008, 02.08.2011, 20.07.2013, and 14.01.2014 respectively and published in the Odisha Gazette No. 449, Cuttack, 1st March 2014 by the Labour & ESI Department.
 - In its chapter – I, of 2 B, D & E, it defines *beneficiary* as a building worker registered under section 12 and does not include migrant workers as construction & other workers—though it defines very comprehensively.
 - It was on the earnest effort of the Solidarity Committee that the Chairman of the Board S.J. Subash Singh, by accepting the demand, included migrant workers/Dadan construction & other workers in the list and they became eligible for all sorts of financial assistance.

Out of 6030 registered by the Solidarity Committee at the source, 3500 are migrant workers working in different parts of the country in brick kilns.

2. *There was no such organization to deal with such cases. It is the only of its kind at present having its network in Odisha and Telangana.*
3. Because of the regular and continuous petitions to the Brick Kilns Owners Association, Telangana by the Solidarity Committee, two ST families of the deceased Nabin Dharua & Hari Dharua (who died at the work place) of the village Sarmuhan of Belpada Block of the Balangir district got Rs. 3.5 Lakhs as compensation recently.
4. To draw the attention of the Government and the concerned stakeholders and to create awareness in the society, a one-day workshop was organized at the Lion's Public School, the Dadan capital town Kantabanji, in association with the Odisha Gabesana Chakra.
5. In the last four years, as many as 500 migrant workers who were being meted out physical and mental torture by the agents of the brick kiln owners in Andhra & Telangana and kept under bondage were rescued by the constituent members of the Solidarity Committee.

- Moreover, around 200 migrant workers were helped in being issued Bonded Labor Certificates by the Mandal Revenue Officers (MRO) at the destination.
 - On this basis, certificate holders were entitled to receive Rs. 20,000/- from both the Governments of Telangana and Odisha, along with Indira Awas and were linked to livelihood opportunities.
6. A three-day Sampark Yatra was organized in Telangana state from March 15 to 17, 2017 to undertake a socio-economic study of the migrant workers and their work conditions, and to understand and assess onsite living conditions and minimum wages prevailing there.
- This was done jointly by the:
 - Solidarity Committee for Brick-Kiln Workers of Telangana State
 - Solidarity Committee for Brick-Kiln Workers of West Odisha
 - Telangana Vyavasaya Vruthidarulu Union, Hyderabad
 - Members visited various worksites, took on-the-spot reports, and found all those far from satisfaction.
 - The brick kiln owners, district administration, and middlemen were apprised and requested to improve the socio-economic lot of workers.
 - As a result, a consensus emerged to have a tripartite dialogue and agreement to end the middlemen system and stop all forms of exploitation.
 - A bi-lateral meeting was held at Kantabanji on 02.10.2017 at 11 AM between owners and migrant workers, organized and facilitated by the Solidarity Committee, to establish a labour exchange centre on Maharashtra's Mathadi Model.
 - If materialized in letter and spirit, this would lead to:
 - Provident fund,
 - Bonus,
 - Gratuity,



- Employee compensation,
 - Leave with wages,
 - Worker's HRA & LTA,
 - Free medical treatment,
 - Paid holidays, and
 - Corpus fund for the overall welfare of migrant workers.
- For the first time, brick kiln owners' association with its President, Secretary, Treasurer, and other members attended the Kantabanji conference to explore the above model.
 - Meanwhile, a new development has taken place: a Sardars/middlemen association has been formed.
7. Since the Committee started intervening in 2013 by adopting different measures in this human trafficking especially in Balangir and Nuapada districts—there is a decline in the total scenario of human rights violations of the migrant workers.

Challenges Ahead

The big challenge before the Solidarity Committee is to replace or break the ongoing middlemen system.

- It is not easy as there is a strong nexus among the owners, middlemen, officials, and politicians—who are very powerful, and their lobby is strong in the power corridors.
- Meanwhile, there are life threats to the members of the Committee who work day in and day out.
- Cases were registered in the police station against Trilochan Punji and Raghu (active members).
- However, on public pressure, cases were withdrawn, but members still face danger.

Another problem is the scarce fund to deal with legal complications and organizational matters. It is always managed by the members and its constituents.



Conclusion

Whatever challenges may come, in its path to safeguard the basic human rights of the migrant workers of West Odisha, the Solidarity Committee will not stop working on its objectives in the coming days—within the constitutional framework of India.

- The strength of the Committee lies in its noble objectives to provide:
 - Social justice
 - Overall welfare to the labourers of the unorganized sector (as enshrined in Chapter III of the Constitution).
- Another area of its strength is that it is non-dependent on outside funds and works through networking with other people's movements.

However, the Committee requires to broaden its base to end modern-day slavery of the marginalized persons.

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