



# The Odia Migrant Labourers in Pondicherry University: A Sociological Study

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**Abstract:** The paper examines the experiences of Odia migrant labourers employed at Pondicherry University, India. It investigates their socioeconomic conditions, migration patterns, challenges faced and coping mechanisms within the university environment. Employing qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews, participant observation and document analysis, this study explores the factors that motivate Odia individuals to migrate to Pondicherry. The findings of this research contribute to a deeper understanding of the experiences of the migrant laborers in academic institutions highlighting the complexities of their lives and the significance of addressing their needs and concerns for a more inclusive and equitable university environment.

## Introduction:

Human migration is an enduring global phenomenon, transcending borders and eras. In ancient times, it was spurred by the primal quest for sustenance and refuge, often fueled by the ravages of conflict and the lure of innovation. While the fundamental impetus behind migration remains rooted in these age-old motivations, its contemporary dynamics have evolved into a multifaceted tapestry.

Today, migration is a complex interplay of social, political, economic, cultural, demographic, and psychological forces. The relentless march of globalization has imbued migration with new dimensions, shaping its patterns and velocities within specific timeframes. Indeed, the magnitude and trajectory of migration are contingent upon a myriad of factors, ranging from socioeconomic disparities to cultural shifts and political upheavals.

Central to this narrative is the pivotal role of rural-to-urban migration in fostering developmental equilibrium across regions. This internal migration stream catalyzes societal transformation, bridging the gaps between rural and urban landscapes while propelling the wheels of progress. As migration continues to sculpt our global landscape, its intricate dance underscores the interconnectedness of our world and the enduring human quest for a better life. The timeless imperatives of seeking better shelter and sustenance that impelled ancient migrations persist as formidable catalysts for human movement in modern times. However, in today's interconnected world, the relentless march of global market integration emerges as a dominant economic driver propelling migrant flows. While the push and pull factors delineate migration patterns, the motivations transcend mere economic considerations.

In the contemporary landscape, the plight of refugees stands as a stark of suppression, persecution, and egregious human rights violations. As astutely threats. Thus, within the tapestry of global migration, the interplay of economic, social, movements of individuals across borders. Migration has emerged as a critical developmental concern in India, with the middle and upper classes migrating to fulfill their ambitions and secure better economic transformations within rural landscapes. A significant proportion of for employment, often leaving their families behind in their hometowns.

Rural migration patterns in India depict a spectrum ranging from movement distance relocation to metropolitan hubs. As articulated by Sarkar (1978), the allure of literate and illiterate migrants. Yet, it is crucial to eschew sweeping generalizations, as divergent conditions, impoverished communities might exhibit delayed migration tendencies. This underscores the contextual variability shaping the complex relationship between poverty and migration, as elucidated by Skeldon Ronald (2003).

In India, akin to numerous developing nations, a prevalent trend sees men from rural locales migrating to urban centers, chiefly cities, in pursuit of employment opportunities. Often, this migration takes on a seasonal character, with individuals relocating temporarily for a few months before returning home with accrued earnings. This demographic embodies India's future trajectory across socio-economic and political spheres and wields considerable influence in determining the nation's progress towards overarching goals of socioeconomic development, population stabilization, and leveraging its demographic dividend.

Migration, as a phenomenon, is by no means novel. Historical records abound with instances of people traversing district, state, or national borders in search of improved livelihoods and quality of life. This perpetual mobility of individuals within and beyond geographical confines has been a constant feature of human society, persisting through time. The ramifications of such migratory movements extend deeply into the social and economic fabric, profoundly impacting the lives of migrants and their families, as noted by De Haas (2007).

In India, the bulk of migrant populations gravitate towards metropolitan cities, forming the backbone of urban demographics. These migrants, driven primarily by the pursuit of enhanced earnings, wield a tangible influence on the economies of their rural places of origin. Their continued economic ties with households and communities left behind play a pivotal role, especially in contexts where market mechanisms exhibit deficiencies, as highlighted by Stark and Bloom (1985).

Labour Migration can greatly improve individuals' and families' income, education, and participation and enhance their children's prospects. There is a wide variety of migrants moving across the borders, starting from highly skilled professionals to political refugees. Employment opportunities are basically responsible for migration. The migration is beneficial to both the origin and destination countries. The diversity of these individuals and the rules that govern their movement make human mobility one of the most complex issues facing the world today, especially in the midst of the global recession. The migration process is a complex challenge regarding governance, migrant protection, developmental linkages, and international cooperation.

In the era of globalization, there are many challenges posed by labour migration. At the same time, the globalized world has many opportunities as migration means moving up the whole life of a human being, including skill, culture, families, etc. Though the primary motive of migration remains economic, this may not be the only factor influencing labor migration; the choice of destination is also sometimes influenced by non-economic factors.

The migration affects multiple aspects of livelihoods and identity rather than financial flows alone. In all job categories of trained manpower, such as skilled/professional, semi-skilled, and unskilled, and in business activities, India is considered a greater reservoir. In physiological terms migration means human movement of people from one place to another which is not of a casual nature as a visit or a tour. Migration is necessarily a pre-emptive move; it is the survival instinct that makes humans to seek better prospects.

Migration is an indication of basic social change. The migration process has tended to profoundly affect both the areas from which the migrants come and the areas in which they finally settle. He or she brings with him or her norms, values, and attitudes and, over the course of time, learns those of the people of the destination. If he or she visits his or her home quite frequently, he or she carries back many of the ideas from the new place. The migrants become an instrument of social and cultural diffusion. Migration is a process of normal population adjustment and equilibrium. In most nations there are areas of higher birth rates and of lower birth rates and also areas of expanding opportunities for employment and stationery or declined economic opportunities. A shift of population from declining economic opportunities to areas with expanding opportunities acts as a device for maintaining social and economic balance among communities. Migration results in a change in population structure. During a period of rapid industrial development, the volume of migration received in a community may be very substantial.

## Literature Review

Recent studies on migration have underscored the pivotal role of family strategies in shaping migration decisions (Stark, 1991). Families are conceptualized as cohesive units vis-à-vis the external world, with members collectively bearing the costs and reaping the rewards of migration. Migration is perceived as a means for families to diversify their income and assets, prompting investments from both sides – families in migrants and migrants in families

– with mutual expectations of returns. Notably, the involvement of adolescent children in these strategies is increasingly recognized, particularly in impoverished communities where prolonged childhoods are financially untenable. However, despite acknowledging the centrality of family dynamics, the prevailing "new economics of migration" framework often remains anchored in functionalist and individualistic paradigms. While it highlights contractual arrangements within households, there's a notable oversight regarding the influence of cultural factors and values in mediating migration-poverty linkages (Stark, 1991). This emphasis on

institutional roles occasionally intersects with debates on the preservation or erosion of traditional values, illustrating the complex interplay between migration and societal norms.

Chant and Redcliffe (1992) highlighted the crucial role of migrant networks in contextualizing the movement of people not only within the framework of migration traditions but also within broader processes of social and economic development. Their observations underscored the importance of integrating migration into cumulative migration theories, which consider the historical and ongoing influences shaping migration patterns. Additionally, gender analysis has emerged as a significant lens through which to understand the diverse motivations and impacts of migration. It also sheds light on the structural dynamics of migration processes, emphasizing power dynamics and exploitation. Indeed, gender analysis serves as an indispensable tool for unraveling the complexities inherent in the migration process.

Furthermore, Lee (1966) delineated two primary categories of migration: national migration and international migration. National migration refers to the movement of people within the confines of a single nation's boundaries, while international migration involves the movement of individuals across national borders. Lee's categorization not only distinguishes between different scales of migration but also underscores the multifaceted nature of migration as a key determinant of population dynamics. His insights into various aspects related to migration highlight its significance as a driver of population change and demographic shifts.

Migration costs to destinations in developing countries are often more affordable, making migration a viable option for many. Particularly in regions with porous borders and historical and cultural affinities, such as the borders between Bangladesh, India, and Nepal, or across much of West Africa, cross-border migration may entail even lower barriers for the economically disadvantaged. However, the impacts of migration are notably diverse, reflecting the varied patterns and motives underlying migration decisions. The assumption that rural development will inevitably decrease out-migration may be unfounded, as evidenced by instances where it coexists with high rates of both out-migration and in-migration. Indeed, as noted by Sorensen et al. (2002), poverty reduction alone does not necessarily deter migration. In Punjab, for instance, the advent of the Green Revolution coincided with significant levels of both out-migration and in-migration from impoverished Indian states. Similarly, in China, the emergence of rural enterprises appeared to spur out-migration, particularly among less educated peasants, during a period of rapid economic expansion (Liang and White, 1997).

Research suggests a strong link between migration and development. Skeldon (1997) argues that development and migration are intertwined, suggesting difficulty in envisioning one without the other. This notion is exemplified by Japan's experience. During its urbanization period, Japan also witnessed increasing emigration (Skeldon, 1997). Similarly, migration patterns in Punjab, India, reflect its development trajectory. Large-scale rural-to-urban migration coincided with continued investment from overseas Punjabi communities, changes in agricultural practices, and an influx of less affluent migrants from other Indian States. Looking beyond national borders, research suggests positive economic impacts of immigration in receiving countries.

Skiskandarajah et al. (2005) found evidence that immigration boosts economic well-being, including increased tax revenues. While international migration towards wealthier nations often dominates policy discussions, it's the internal migration within countries and to nations in the global South that holds greater significance for poverty alleviation, particularly impacting a larger number of children. Middle-

income countries often attract migrants from neighboring low-income nations, a trend well-documented by Hujo and Piper (2007). There is empirical evidence suggesting that immigration can influence wage dynamics in specific sectors, formalizing labor relations. Employers may seek migrants to diminish local workers' wages and bargaining power, a phenomenon extensively studied by Breman (1985) in western India.

Many of the refinements of neo classical migration theory mainly related to selectivity of migration. It was agreed that wage differentials do play an important role in emigration but the costs and risks of migration and individual human capital characteristics are also play an important role in deciding migration. The combination of such factors may explain the heterogeneity and dynamism of migration. In most of the developing countries, factor markets are typically far from perfect making access to financial services and capital difficult for marginalized groups. This makes actual migration pattern difficult to explain under the frame work of Neo classical theory. This theory fails to deal with constraints like government restrictions. Other main criticism of this theory is because of its euro centric nature. This has failed the theory to explain the contemporary migration in and from developing countries (Skeldon, 1997).

### Research Questions:

Based on review of the literature, few questions can be sited which are not taken up by the scholars.

1. What are the key factors driving labor migrants from Odisha to Pondicherry for construction work?
2. What are the prevailing migration patterns among labourers migrating from Odisha to Pondicherry for construction projects, and vice versa?
3. Are there any established associations or networks facilitating the migration of laborers from Odisha to Pondicherry for construction work?
4. How do young individuals from Odisha perceive the culture of migrating to Pondicherry for construction work, and how does this perception influence their migration decisions?

### METHODOLOGY

#### Locale of the Study:

Due to the presence of a large number of labour migrants from Odisha at Pondicherry University, the university campus has been chosen as the study area from Puducherry. The researcher had frequently visited the construction sites and interacted with the labourers within the campus and also conducted 10 in-depth interviews at their stay.

#### Objectives:

1. To explore the migration patterns among labor migrants, examining factors influencing their movement and destination choices.
2. To investigate the influence of social bonds and networks on the decision-making process of out-migration, including the role of family, community, and other social ties.

#### Data Collection and Analysis:

The type of research method that seems more suitable is the qualitative one. This study is primarily based on the primary sources. The researcher has used Ethnography, Focused Group Discussion (FGD) and Participant Observation method to gather data for the study. Secondary data has also been incorporated to substantiate the primary findings and make the research more meaningful. Secondary sources such as journal articles, unpublished thesis and Census data have been used.

Pondicherry, officially known as Puducherry, presents a unique blend of French colonial heritage and Tamil culture. Here is a breakdown of Pondicherry as a place and its socio-economic conditions, particularly for migrant labourers:

**French Influence:** Pondicherry boasts a charming French Quarter with cobbled streets, colonial architecture, and remnants of French administration. This creates a distinct tourist draw, but its influence on the wider economy is limited.

**Tamil Culture:** Tamil is the dominant language, and the overall culture reflects strong South Indian traditions. This can be a barrier for non-Tamil-speaking migrant labourers.

**Cost of Living:** Compared to bigger metros, Pondicherry offers a relatively moderate cost of living. However, for low-wage earners, essentials like housing and food can still be a significant expense.

**Economy:** Pondicherry's economy is driven by tourism, manufacturing (mainly textiles and

pharmaceuticals), and to a lesser extent, agriculture. While it offers some employment opportunities, these are often concentrated in specific sectors.

**Informal Sector:** A significant portion of the workforce is employed in the informal sector, including construction, domestic work, and street vending. This sector often attracts migrant labourers due to the ease of entry, but it comes with lower wages and fewer protections.

**Social Stratification:** Pondicherry has a stratified social hierarchy, with upper castes enjoying greater social mobility and access to resources. This can marginalize migrant labourers, who often come from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

### Pros and Cons For Migrant Labourers at Pondicherry University:

**Job Opportunities:** There is a demand for manual labour in construction, hospitality, and sanitation sectors. However, these jobs are often low-paying, physically demanding, and offer limited job security.

**Accommodation:** Finding affordable housing can be challenging, especially for single migrant workers. Many end up living in cramped, shared accommodations with poor sanitation facilities.

**Healthcare:** Accessing quality healthcare can be difficult for migrant labourers, particularly those without proper documentation. Language barriers also pose a challenge.

### Challenges and Considerations:

**Language Barrier:** Tamil is the primary language of communication. Migrant labourers who do not speak Tamil face difficulties interacting with locals, authorities, and even employers.

**Vulnerability to Exploitation:** The informal nature of recruitment and lack of awareness about labour rights make migrant labourers susceptible to exploitation by contractors or employers.

**Social Isolation:** Cultural differences and language barriers mostly lead to social isolation, impacting mental and emotional well-being.

Overall, Pondicherry offers a glimpse into the complexities of migration in India. While it provides some employment opportunities, the socio-economic realities for migrant labourers can be harsh. Addressing issues like language barriers, promoting fair labour practices, and facilitating social inclusion are crucial steps toward ensuring a more just and equitable environment for migrant workers in Pondicherry. Labour migration from Odisha to Pondicherry for construction work is driven by several key factors. Some of the major findings during my study are as follows:

### Limited employment opportunities in Odisha:

One of the primary reasons for migration is the limited employment opportunities. Despite being rich in natural resources, Odisha faces challenges in providing sufficient employment opportunities, especially in rural areas where many migrants originate from. This pushes individuals to seek work elsewhere, such as in Pondicherry's construction sector, where demand for labour is high due to ongoing infrastructure projects and urban development.

Social networks play a crucial role in facilitating migration between Odisha and Pondicherry. Many migrants rely on connections established by friends, relatives, or villagers who previously migrated for construction work. These networks provide valuable information, support, and job opportunities, making the migration process smoother and less daunting for newcomers. Younger individuals, particularly men, form a significant portion of the labour force migrating from Odisha to Pondicherry University especially for construction projects. They are often attracted by the prospect of higher wages and better employment opportunities in Pondicherry's construction sector compared to other sectors available in their home state.

While many labourers from Odisha migrate to Pondicherry temporarily for construction work in Pondicherry University and other places, some eventually return to their home state either due to the completion of projects, changes in economic conditions, or personal reasons. Return migration contributes to the cyclical nature of migration patterns between the two regions and influences labour market dynamics in both places. These prevailing migration patterns underscore the complex and dynamic nature of labour mobility between Odisha and Pondicherry's construction sectors. Understanding these patterns is essential for policymakers, employers, and other stakeholders to address the needs and challenges of migrant workers while harnessing the economic benefits of labour migration.

**Socio-Economic Conditions of Migrant Labourers:**

From a researcher's perspective, the socio-economic implications for the families of Odia migrant laborers in their home state following their migration to Pondicherry for construction work are multifaceted and evolve over time. Initially, the migration of a family member to Pondicherry for construction work can bring about positive economic impacts for the household, such as increased income through remittances. This additional income can potentially improve the family's standard of living, providing children with access to better nutrition, healthcare, and education. Moreover, remittances sent by migrant workers may contribute to local economic development in their home state, supporting small businesses and stimulating growth in rural areas. However, over time, there can be various socio-economic implications that emerge, both positive and negative. On the positive side, continued remittances from the migrant worker can help the family accumulate savings, invest in assets like land or housing, or even start small businesses, thereby enhancing their economic resilience and mobility. Additionally, exposure to different work environments and experiences gained by the migrant worker may lead to skill development and increased employability, benefiting the family in the long run.

On the other hand, there are also potential negative implications to consider. Prolonged separation due to migration can strain familial relationships and impact the emotional well-being of family members left behind, especially children and spouses. Furthermore, dependency on remittances may create vulnerabilities for the family if the migrant worker faces job loss, illness, or other setbacks. Additionally, there may be social implications, such as changes in gender roles or community dynamics, as a result of migration.

Overall, the socio-economic implications for the families of Odia migrant laborers in their home state following migration to Pondicherry for construction work are dynamic and complex, influenced by various factors including economic conditions, social networks, and government policies. Research in this area can help policymakers and stakeholders better understand these implications and develop targeted interventions to support migrant families and enhance their well-being.

**Conclusion:**

The plight of Odia migrant labourers in Pondicherry University exposes a microcosm of the larger challenges faced by migrant workers across India. This research has aimed to shed light on their working conditions, social realities, and the impact of migration on their lives. Here, the researcher synthesizes the key findings and discusses their broader implications.

**Recruitment Practices and Working Conditions:** Odia labourers are often recruited through informal networks, leading to exploitation and a lack of transparency regarding wages, working hours, and safety standards. The dominance of contractors creates a power imbalance, leaving workers vulnerable to wage theft, unfair deductions, and hazardous work environments.

**Social Marginalization and Discrimination:** The research highlights the social marginalization faced by Odia labourers. Language barriers, cultural differences, and social prejudices contribute to their exclusion from mainstream society within the university campus and the surrounding community. This isolation can lead to mental health issues and hinder their ability to access essential services.

**Impact on Families and Communities:** Migration has a significant impact on families left behind in Odisha. Fathers often act as the sole breadwinners, creating a strain on family structures and childcare responsibilities. Remittances can improve living standards at home, but the social and emotional cost of separation can be immense.

**Limited Upward Mobility:** The research suggests limited opportunities for upward mobility for Odia labourers within the university. Skill development programs are scarce, and their confined roles offer little chance for career progression. This reinforces a cycle of low-wage, precarious employment.

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