



Migrant Labourers: A Study of Mental Stress

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Abstract

Health is always considered as wealth. "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity: it is a fundamental human right and ... the attainment of the highest possible level of health is a worldwide social goal whose realization requires the action of many other socio-economic and political sectors in addition to the health sector." All dimensions of socio-economic, political and cultural conditions such as food, water supply, education, housing, employment, reasonable wage and circumstances of creativity etc. play a vital role in maintaining health. This paper highlights the push factors as the fabricated trap to exploit the migrants physically, socially and mentally for surplus production with cheap labour. The intoxicants are the only medium for the migrants to leave the sufferings behind them for a time being.

Keywords: Health, labour, exploitation, employment, fundamental rights

Introduction

Migrant workers, who constitute a major work force, in the unorganized sector, face various psychological stresses and arrive in an aggravated mental position due to their habit of using different varieties of intoxicants. The researcher's attempt in this paper is to find out the connection of addiction-related stress and social disintegration of the migrant workers with the wide web of exploitation of labour through an empirical analysis. This paper highlights the push factors as the fabricated trap to exploit the migrants physically, socially and mentally for surplus production with cheap labour. The intoxicants are the only medium for the migrants to leave the sufferings behind them for a time being.

Definition of 'Mental Stress'

Mental health is a physical condition of well-being in relation to one's self and one's relation with others characterized by qualities such as "(a) positive self-acceptance, (b) accurate perception of others, (c) stability and appropriateness in mood, (d) balance and purposiveness in behaviour, (e) dependable sense of identity and values, (f) adaptability to one's environment, (g) ability to engage in productive

work and fulfilling love, and (h) commitment to a source of devotion beyond oneself.”¹ Any thought which moves to block the above qualities of one’s life, can be classified as stress.

The concept of stress was firstly used by Hans Selye, who opined the stress always results from the prolonged activation of the body’s defensive “fight or flight’ mechanism.² There are physical or environmental, organizational, interpersonal and intrapersonal stressors. The organizational stress includes demands and expectations imposed upon an individual from a collective space, whether it is the work site or family background; the interpersonal stress consists of demanding and aggressive situations, where fear of disapproval and rejection prevail.³ The behavioral symptoms of stress include high use of alcohol and social withdrawal. Social disintegration simply means the lack of connectivity with self and each other as well as with the society in which s/he belongs.

Demographical Details of Migrant Labourers

For an accurate understanding of the existing interconnectedness of labour and addicted related health issues, an empirical study was conducted in the five labour crowded areas of Kolkata of West Bengal, India. A questionnaire was prepared and was personally handed over to and answered by the Bihari migrant workers of that area. The Hindi version of the English questionnaire was disturbed. 108 samples were taken along with a few interviews with workers, religious leaders and representatives of the Government.

Stress Symptoms among Migrant Workers

Stress can be accessed primarily from the behavioral pattern of a person.⁴ To the question of how the labourers spend time after their work, most of them responded that they want to sit alone, a kind of withdrawal and are less interested in recreational activities. Present study shows that from 8 (7.40%) out of 108 respondents have no recreations as such. Close to half prefer to sit alone or sit and think (32.40% +6.48%). At the same time the majority of them are interested in using drugs. The study shows the percentage of drug users among migrant labourers of Bihar.

Present study also reveals that 65 (60.20%) migrant workers use drugs such as pan masala, cigarettes, and liquor to relax. When a person is suffering from with stress s/he wants to come quickly from it, and so may opt for drugs as a channel.

In table 3, 4 (6.50%) respondents said they use drugs for some confidence in work. 38 (35.20%) of them said they use them to evade tiredness, 5 (4.60%) answered to avoid severity of labour and 15 (13.90%) said they use drugs to evade loneliness. Tiredness and severity of labour are very much connected with continuous rigorous labour and extra hours of work. The loneliness indicates a mental position to adjust to all the above said situations. Reduced confidence is also another strain of mind to be tackled.

Moreover, Present study claims that 37 (34.25%) get in touch with these items through friends, 23 (21.30%) of them said they became acquainted with it through shops, 4 (3.70%) said it was through agents and one person said it was because of favourable chances or opportunities. The most commonly abused drugs are tobacco and alcohol. The over dosage of opiate drugs such as marijuana, morphine and heroin; psychostimulants, including thermine, cocain and so on; hallucination-causing drugs, enhancers like pan parag etc.⁵ will lead to withdrawal, tiredness and more mental strain in life.

This analysis proves how the absence of family support, the influence of the friends and the migrant’s immediate need of forgetting tiredness and severity of labour lead to dependency on drugs. At the same time we cannot negate 43 respondents (39.80%) who said “No” to drugs in the midst of these circumstances (refer table: 2). The nature of sitting alone and thinking shows their immense pressure from both family and work place. “The addicted people reach to the ‘rock bottom’. It is when they are finished physically,

mentally, emotionally and financially.”⁶This can be seen in the following tables. Out of 108 respondents all of them have one or more kinds of problems haunting them physically.

Table: 1 Impact of drug on health

Problems:	Dental	Behavioral	Mental	Injuries	Lazy	Tiredness
Respondents:	46	20	42	38	4	39

Table: 2 Percentage of salary is spent on drugs

Percentage of Spending:	0%	25%	35%	45%	55%
Respondents:	43	51	14	Nil	Nil

Table: 3 Working days lapse due to stress and sluggishness

Number of Days:	Up to Five Days	Up to Ten Days
Respondents:	52	13

Table: 4 Number of working days

Days of Work	Respondents	20 Days	25 days	26 Above
No to Drugs	43	—	13	30

According to Table 1, 65 drug use respondents have multi health issues. 46 have dental problems, 20 have behavioural issues, 42 have mental stress, 38 had accidents due to drug usage, 4 felt laziness and 39 have Tiredness in their life. Table 2 says out of 65 answers 51 spend up to 25% and 14 spend up to 35% of the total income for drug usage. In Table: 3, we understand that out of 65, 52 workers lose up to 5 days, 13 workers miss up to 10 days as an average every month. At the same time those who do not use drugs are 43 and out of these, 30 people have 26 days of work per month. This clearly denotes those who are under addiction are losing workable days drastically, their income side is deteriorating largely and it affects them mentally and emotionally.

The study mentioned the involvement of friends, shop and agents in welcoming new workers to drugs. As per Pan masala and other drugs, petty shop owner, Mohammed Huck said that even though the Government banned these items, we are protected by the locals. Many shops like this can be seen in different corners of Kolkata to make available drugs.⁷ He added that this is only way for migrant workers to relax from all their burdens and feel happy after a day’s hard work, to forget all exploitation and cheating that they faced.

Thus addiction related mental stress cannot be limited to drugs alone but it has a wide background of labour exploitation, which finally leads one to total social disintegration.

Social Disintegration and Its connectivity to Stress

Mental stress of the drug-addicted migrant workers is the most aggravated version of the organizational stress surrounding her/him. A labourer is ultimately a human, and survives in his/her connectivity with the society. Once he/she feels alienated from the supportive system of the society, where regulations are weak and inadequate to sustain the equilibrium of the society, then the personhood ends up in complete vacuum, a kind of social disintegration, which Emile Durkheim calls ‘anomie suicide’.⁸ Anomic refers to the absence of law, deregulation or the failure of regulating norms.⁹ Since individualism rules in the very existence of society, Durkheim finds suicide an inevitable accompaniment of modern society.

Various socialist doctrines and movements of the nineteenth century are linked primarily as symptoms of a serious social disturbance in the field of economic activity of a society. Through a materialistic

conception of history, Marx also realizes different spheres of labour exploitation within the frame of economy as the base structure and other stratum as per super structures.¹⁵ For Durkheim, “the breakdown in social regulations of economic life has resulted in the anomic division of labour,”¹⁰ where there are groups who develop rules and regulations, to deregulate all existing ways of justice, in order to govern all aspects of life of the worker including working conditions, wages, and hours to extract more with cheap labour. This anomic situation is the state of stress of the migrant workers, in which they want alternative ways to forget their sufferings.¹¹

Material Base: Social and Economic Spheres

The stress that causes addiction and related problems of the migrants labourers is very much related with the social disintegration that they face in day life activities. So there are numerous social and economic factors which contribute to this social disturbance.

Family and Gender Issues

Family plays a vital role in deciding one’s behaviour. Family can be an organizational stressor to a member of it. There homelessness, landlessness, and lack of job opportunities give immense mental pressure. The gender-biased nature of the family compels men alone to leave their home town to find money, thus the burden of the housework falls completely on women. The following diagram will explain this further.

As per segment 1, out of 108 respondents 44 (40.75%) are aged between 15-20, 38 (35.20%) in between 21-25, 12 (11.10%) in between 26-30, 4 (3.70%) in between 31-35, 5(4.60%) in between 36-40 and 5 (4.60%) above 40 respectively. Thus the workers below 20 years of age is alarming high, showing how the youngsters who are supposed to be educated, carry the load of responsibility. When we add together they are group of 15-20, which constitute 76% we see how vulnerable the situation of youth is in Kolkata, due to their unemployment and low wages. There is a clear division of labour among the youth and in the matter of labour outside.

Secondly, all respondents (100%) belong to the male category (Segment 2). The researcher failed to find even a single female migrant worker in Kolkata, therefore sensed a general tendency of clear gender division of labour practice in the periphery of Kolkata migrant workers. They normally might to work outside the native area. The Segment 3 delineates that 56 people (51.85%) are married and 52 persons (48.15%) are unmarried. But out of 56 married workers there are 27 (25%) respondents below 25 years old, and particularly 5 of them are below the age of 20. In case studied, Jahangeer, a 25 year old, is has four children and Rehman, 20 years old has two, denoting early age marriage practice to reduce the responsibility of the parents. Away from home they get neither the warmth of family relationship nor control or guidance from the family. In the midst of wage disparities, extra hours of work and alienation from production, they need to monitor their family matters too from far distances. Moreover they have no recreation activity other than to sit and think.

Derivation of Cheap Labour

In every society, the economy plays a major role in shaping life. In the words of C.T. Kurian, “an economy is a structure of relationships among a group of people in terms of the manner in which they exercise control over resources, use resources and labour in production of goods and services, and define and the claims of the members over what is produced.”¹² But today’s economic interactions are for the benefit of a minority by using the resources for accumulation, where labour is extracted for surplus value. Here it is necessary to see how the cheap labour derives.

Loss of Livelihood

Every human being depends on land for survival. Sustainable interaction with nature is the basic mode of production. But modern industrialization started with the green revolution in India, culminating in neo-economic policies, and resulting in the negation of livelihood for many in the villages.

The study constituted by four different questions which posit Bihari migrants' native mode of production and their standard of living. In indicator 1, we see that out of 108 respondents 26 people (24.08%) said they were working on their own lands, 51 persons (47.22%) depended on daily wage work and 31 workers (28.07%) were in construction. In indicator 2, when 76 persons (70.37%) gave property as the reason for migration, 25 persons (23.14%) underscored unemployment as the reason. In the indicator 3, out of 108 respondents, 81 (75%) workers confessed that they have no land or home under their own title, while 28 (29.16%) say that have. But all of them have homes. As per the indicator 4, 91 (84.25%) members said they have mud walled and thatched roof huts and 17 (15.75%) bemoaned they have only tent type huts. They work for concrete buildings but they don't have the same for their own homes.

Usthadu K.M. Isha Maulavi¹³ described that in Bengal, particularly in Kolkata, people are mostly peasant working for other land owners in daily wage. A few youngsters depend on the newly blooming construction field. The daily wagers and those who work on their own field constitute 71.27%, revealing that they are primarily an agrarian community. "But the new policies affected their severely," Isha Maulavi value for their production." From the two case studies, we hear the complaints of both Jahangir and Rehman, that they are forced to migrate due to the lack of opportunities, production nil farming, less wages etc. this is otherwise an alienation from their own land.

Property relations and Alienation

Property relations deal with who owns and who controls the means of production, and who has benefited from it. It characterizes and proves what type of society we live in. As we have seen how the unemployment and financial crises drove people out of their own land, we need to search how does in the newly arrived place, their labour and life schedules are manifested.

In the first case study Mr. Jahangeer has complained that the suppliers used to collect Rs 50-60 from them every day and after deducting all other expenses he was able to send only Rs 6000 to his family. How the remaining amount vaporizes, is a critical question, which reveals the exploitation of agents, companies and middle men. To the question, what type of work are migrants engaging in, they all, 108 respondents, agree that they do mainly concrete building construction. Labour of the workers on their premises is owned by agents, suppliers or the contractors.

Figure 8 proves how much would be the estimated cost of the building construction in which the migrant labourers are presently involved.

These surveys show that the suppliers are using the workers for mega constructions. 27 (25%) workers said they are involved in a construction estimated up to 25 lakhs, another 47 (43.51%) members noted that their work site construction estimation is up to 50 lakhs. 33 (30.55%) workers are involved in buildings estimated at up to one crore and only one reported at present working in a construction project above one crore rupees. Thus we realize that almost all migrants are toiling hard to construct huge mansions for rich in and around Kolkata and do not have a fine hut or legal title to their land for them to lay their heads in Malda. They are here fully alienated from the production they have made. As soon as they finish work, they move to other locations to erect the new, but are not allowed to experience what they have been constructed before.

Division of Labour

This survey is basically to know how the work is being distributed among the workers and in what categories. The survey shows that migrant in Kolkata are fully male, which shows a sexual division of labour. F. Aboobacker, the Panchayathu member of Kolkata, said that the Bengali migrant workers are not so skilled people and they do not have proper training in any field of work. They come, join with others and learn things. They are not fit for any job other than concrete work. Hence, the speculation of skilled and unskilled division of labour is also visible.

Wage Disparities

Wage disparity and exploitation of extra human labour are another reality in the economic structure. Statistics on their hours of work and wages will reveal this fact.

Segment 1 shows the response from the workers as to whether they are getting genuine wage. The diagram shows clearly 90.74% (98 persons) report they never get wages according to their work, but there are 10 persons (9.25%), who have the opposite opinion too. This enquiry should be read along with the hours of migrant worker's labour. Segment 2 portrays that 49 (45.37%) of them work usually 8 hours, 56 (51.85%) of them work 10 hours daily, and there are 3 (2.77%) who work beyond 12 hours.

Jahangeer, in his narration of life, says about their wages, they always get a little less than the wage of the local people. He also said that the agents charge a percentage from the wage. In the words of Rehman, there is no time schedule for him as such. More than that he is willing to do any other related job along with the one has. Saji Varghese,¹⁴ one of the locals said that these migrants never bother about the time and type of their work. But they get very little rest time. To the question, how many hours do you rest? 43 (39.81%) of them said they get 8 hours per day, but 65 (60.18%) persons responded that they have only 6 hours of rest in the night. This will really affect their physical strength. The 10 hours work points to clear labour exploitation, while the state norms permit only 8 hours.

Labour Marketized

In the neo-economic reality, the market has grown as a strong institution. The labour is also widely marketized: but do the labourers have a say, do they receive protection or are their basic needs taken care of: these are the central question to clarify. F. Aboobacker says¹⁵ except on Sundays, by 8 am Kolkata town will be crowded with migrant workers. They wait for their agent to be allotted; at the time there are a few, willing to go for separate individual person's work. Sometimes there will be huge negotiations with agents regarding wages. But most of the time the workers yield to the supplier's requests. The labour becomes cheap and they are hired or marketed as surplus value for the companies, but they have no voice to argue for their rights.

Collective Base: The State and Civil Society

In the collective base we concentrate on the elements pertaining to the State, people's organization and civil society that contribute in building up stress and social disintegration of the migrant workers.

The state has a role to play to uplift its citizens, wherever they are being neglected. In the case of migrants from Malda, Bengal, there is no Government support as such for agricultural activities, and no water supply and electricity. Usthadu, Isha Maulavi reported¹⁶ that in Malda mostly Muslims are pushed back to the periphery, where there is still no water connection and power supply. On the other side, in Kolkata also they have no governmental assistance as such. The labour department in the country today does not have any infrastructure to open booths on railway stations, bus stands, maintain registers in Gram Panchayats or keep a census of people going in and out.¹⁷ In certain areas they place offices to

register their names, but the agents or the migrants themselves are not interested in it. "Migrants everywhere are employed in difficult and low paid jobs on temporary basis. They cannot expect social security and protection from labour laws, though they toil for the progress of the society"¹⁸ is the attitude of the Government. At the same time there are certain State Governments that provide them with basic relief activities.

The health condition of the migrant workers is not properly taken care of. Segment 1 shows 87 (80.55%) respondents living in dormitories, whereas 17 (15.74%) are in rented rooms and a mere 4 (4.32%) said they have no permanent place. Segment 2 reveals a crucial fact that out of 108, 63 (58.33%) face the absence of basic amenities to their accommodation; whereas 45 (48.6%) receive amenities along with this stay. As per segment 3, 89 (82.40%) workers remarked they themselves are responsible to find their accommodation, whereas 19 (17.60%) explained that the agents provide accommodation facilities for them.

In case studies both Jahangeer and Rehman bemoaned that the lack of bathrooms, latrines and the absence of water are their primary issues in life. This leads to unhygienic cooking and to uncleanness in the surroundings. "The local community treats them as uncultured and unmannered groups and wanted to push ¹ down always", says Aboobacker. "The workers are deprived of basic amenities and softly measures. They are exposed to unsafe working conditions unhygienic living places, poor sanitation and impure drinking water"²⁴ Their answer to another question of where they go if there are latrines for the daily ablutions: out of 63, 45 people said they used vacant lands, 15 use public utilities and another 3 confessed, they use common lands.

This leads to serve health among migrants as well as local people, so in a way all these made the workers to consider themselves as aliens, not worthy and someone in the lowest strata. Findings comprises two segments: the first denotes those who said 'Yes' (11 workers 10.18%) to whether they get protection in the work place, but 97 (89.81%) replied that they have no protection in any of the work sites. Then for the question who takes care of them, then, (Segment 2) 14 migrants (12.96%) said their company, for 1 person it is the agent and for 2 the owner of the work site; but the vast majority (91 workers) say they themselves take care if there is some emergency. This shows the additional burden and the threat always against their life in the work site. Most of them work in dangerous positions and with hazardous materials.

When the migrants were asked, who do they approach if there is some emergency 102 (94.44%) opined they have no place to complain, but rather withdraw into themselves if such moments come in their life. Only 6 replied that they will approach the Police. There are no political parties, trade unions, or people's movement as such to stand for them in Kolkata.²⁵ Lack of education is also another cause. The following table shows this.

Table: 5

Education	Up to std 5	Std 6-10	Plus 1-2	Graduate
Respondents	52	51	5	Nil
Percentage	48.14%	47.22%	4.62%	Nil

There are only 5 (0.4%) of them who are able to study above tenth standard. More than half of them have below fifth grade education. In the second case study, Rehman sharply pointed out that it is because of the literacy that the Keralites get good job opportunities. So he added that he wants to give good education to his children so that they never go through the hurdles that Rehman had so. Suresh Kumar remarked that due to lack of awareness only the Bengali migrants get addicted to drugs.²⁶ The researcher also attended one of the awareness programmes of health issues of drug usage, conducted by Global Cancer Concern India, at Kolkata.²⁷

Symbolic Representation: Religion and Language

This area of study into the religious and linguistic layers, which finally direct one to addiction. As Aboobacker, the Panchayathu member of Kolkata explained, almost all migrants who come for work in this region are from Malda in Bengal. They came through their friends from the same religious worship and festivals. All 108 respondents to the questionnaires were from the Muslims religious community. Thus migrants have some support and connectivity in this regard, but at the same time it is also a fact that on the basis of their religion and religious practices, other religious groups will never get an opportunity to be supported. Language is another issue which makes them fools on certain occasions. "In the buses they were cheated without giving proper balances, without understanding the name board of the bus, they travel to somewhere, in buses as well as public spaces, they were ridiculed by unfamiliar language to them and," Haffiz said. "we came back home in the night with hurtful mind."²⁸ So they need name boards in their own language.

Interconnectedness of Labour Exploitation and Stress

Migration whether it is international or internal has some kind of impact upon the psychological health of a person. The process of migration itself is not simple and straightforward. Migration and its accompanying stressors induce a certain amount of psychological change among the migrating individuals and their families.²⁹ The analysis brought out that the addiction related health issues of migrant workers are not confined within it but it have a strong bond with the exploitation of labour, which ultimately leads to the social disintegration of a person. The push factors alienate the migrant workers from their own land, family, subsistence economy, and traditional way of production. On the contrary in the land where they labour, they undergo super extraction by receiving has made them socially disintegrated, by adding physical and mental stress, which ends up in addiction.

Conclusion

This analytical study sheds light on the fight and plight of the migrants from own land. Addiction is shown as an outward sign of the inward struggles. The influences of friends, agents, shops and other networks are visible elements for their addiction and social disintegration. But the 'migrants' dependency on these networks is due to their excessive burdens and heavy responsibilities from both family and work place. This analysis will seek to find out the real fetters which will need to be negated in order to have life affirming labour, for theory and practice have to be correlated. This paper has dealt with traditional, fundamental, and collective approaches to formulate certain proposals to shape a life affirming labour community. The alternative approaches invite a reversal form present economic policies to give more emphasize on agricultural and traditional life styles. A popular movement with the support of a strong civil society is the need of the hour to resist human rights violations in the area of labour. Since the workers expect communitarian respect and, recognition of the service they render, the challenge for the pastoral community is to prepare situations for a wider ecumenical approach. The state has a role to play to uplift its citizens, wherever they are being neglected.¹

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