



FROM FOREST TO FACTORY : LIFE HISTORY NARRATIVES OF TRIBAL MIGRANT LABOURERS IN PENNAGARAM BLOCK, DHARMAPURI DISTRICT OF TAMIL NADU

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ABSTRACT Tribal migration in India is mostly driven by living insecurity, loss of land, unemployment and rough regional growth. This study discovers the life history narratives of tribal migrant labourers in Pennagaram block of Dharmapuri district, Tamil Nadu, to comprehend migration as an endurance process rather than a voluntary choice. The study follows a descriptive qualitative research design as well as uses purposive sampling to select tribal migrants at work in informal areas. Data collected from end to end life history interviews, semi-structured in-depth interviews also field observations. The results show that migration frequently initiates at an early age due to poverty, food insecurity, and the weakening of traditional forest-based livings. Migrants face long working hours, low wages, addition job insecurity, incomplete access to welfare schemes, and poor healthcare. Familiarities of discrimination and social segregation were common, tribal women in addition the take challenges such as early marriage, free domestic work, and water insufficiency. Despite migration, solid emotional and cultural ties with native villages endure. By foregrounding migrants' own stories, the study challenges leading views of migration as improvement and highlights the essential for inclusive labour protections and migrant-friendly welfare policies for tribal groups.

KEYWORDS : Tribal Migration, Life History Narratives, Informal Labour, Dispossession.

INTRODUCTION

Tribal groups in India have conventionally depended on forests, land, and nature-based livings such as shifting farming, collection of slight forest produce, pastoral doings, and agricultural wage labour. These living systems were intensely entrenched in collective social relations, cultural practices, and indigenous ecological facts [22]. Though, in recent years, rapid socio-economic initiatives have meaningfully disrupted these traditional ways of life. Procedures such as land estrangement, declining agricultural output, restrictive forest rules, uneven improvement, and climate-related worries have weakened living security among tribal populations [2, 19]. In this background, migration has progressively emerged as a survival plan rather than a voluntary economic choice [7]. Studies on internal migration in India reliably prove that tribal groups constitute one of the most susceptible migrant groups. Study shows that tribal migrants are mostly engrossed into informal labour markets noticeable by insecure employment, low wages, and the lack of legal protection [3]. More studies show that migrant labourers experience continued insecurity with minimal chances for economic development, in that way reinforcing cycles of poverty rather than allowing upward mobility [4, 10].

In the Pennagaram block at Dharmapuri district recurring droughts, insufficient irrigation facilities, decreasing agricultural opportunities and regional underdevelopment have contributed to extensive distress-driven migration since this area. Census and survey-based studies expose that migration rates are significantly higher among tribal and marginal rural families affected by agrarian pressure [9, 20]. Due to lack of monsoon the Irular people began to migrate to the nearby urban areas in search of better and continuous employment [14]. Migrants from Dharmapuri are mostly engaged in construction labour, brick kilns, factories also plantation labour, where work remains informal and working environments are often risky [6,1]. Apart from economic weakness, scholars have emphasized the social and cultural challenges encountered through tribal migrant labourers. A study mentioned that a significant portion of the Irula community in Dharmapuri is trapped in cycles of indebtedness due to low income and lack of financial literacy [18]. Studies propose that migrants often experience discrimination, social marginalization as well as identity-based stigma in urban than industrial settings [6, 11]. The Irula tribe in Dharmapuri District, Tamil Nadu, faces significant challenges regarding human rights awareness due to deep-rooted poverty, illiteracy, and social isolation and also they experience exploitation, landlessness, and exclusion from mainstream society [16]. Language barriers, small levels of formal education, and inexperience with urban social norms additional marginalize migrants, execution them socially unseen despite their crucial influence to urban economies. Gender-focused study shows that tribal women migrants aspect multiple and interconnecting difficulties, including wage unfairness, job insecurity, and the double problem of paid labour and unpaid domestic household tasks [13, 21]. Health-related studies

similarly point to migrants' partial access to public healthcare facilities and welfare schemes, thus intensifying their weakness [8]. Though the remaining literature offers significant insights into tribal migration, much of it relies on macro-level data, policy-oriented studies, as long as limited understanding of migrants' lived skills. There remains an important gap in micro-level, narrative-based studies concentrating on tribal migrant labourers from exact regions such as the Pennagaram block in Dharmapuri district. Addressing this gap, the present study adopt a life history narrative approach to see the sights the migration experiences of tribal labourers in Pennagaram block, abstracting migration as an incessant and lived process formed by everyday challenges, structural constraints, and flexibility.

Theoretical Framework

This study accepts a multi-theoretical framework representation on Marxist political economy, Bourdieu's theory of capital and habitus, and Subaltern Studies to comprehend the involvements of tribal migrant labourers. Since a Marxist perspective, tribal migration is observed as an importance of lack and proletarianization below capitalist development, where loss of land and forest-based livings pushes tribal groups into informal too insecure labour markets considered by misuse and surplus removal. Bourdieu's thoughts of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital assistance clarify how migrants' partial access to known forms of capital and the disparity among inherited habitus and urban labour regimes lead to discrimination and symbolic relegation. Subaltern Studies focal point the voices of factually marginalized groups, stimulating dominant narratives of growth and migration. Through life history narratives, this study improves subaltern views, highlighting migration as a lived practice shaped by loss, adaptation, and spirit.

Research Method

The present study employs a descriptive qualitative research design to look at the lived experiences of tribal migrant labourers in Pennagaram block, Dharmapuri district, Tamil Nadu. A purposive sampling method was used to select respondents by migration experience in familiar sectors such as construction labour, stone quarries, factories, plantations as well as petty urban shops. Primary data were collected through life history interviews, semi-structured in-depth interviews and field observation to capture together personal narratives and everyday work environments. A life history grounded interview guide was developed to elicit information on migration histories, labour skills, family relations, health, and character. Interviews were audio-recorded by informed consent and enhanced with field notes detailing observations, non-verbal expressions, and workplace settings. The collected data stood systematically organized and analysed by narrative and thematic investigation.

Socio-Economic Profile of Respondents

The respondents of the tribal migrant labourers residing from various villages in Pennagaram block, Dharmapuri district, Tamil Nadu. Together male and female migrants were involved to capture gendered dimensions of migration and work. The majority of inadequate respondents fitted to the working-age group, by migration start at an early stage of adulthood due to living opportunities in their native villages. Educational accomplishment between respondents was usually low, with most completed either primary-level schooling or no proper education, which limited access to skilled work. Land ownership was marginal; many respondents were landless or marginal proprietors, depending mainly on wage labour. Traditional forest-based livings had declined, increasing requirement on migrant work. Migration was mainly seasonal or circular, by respondents frequently among migrating villages and destination places. Employment was mostly found in construction, stone quarries, factories and plantations also small shops, considered by low wages, job insecurity then long working hours. Family income remained unbalanced, and access to welfare systems, healthcare and social security was incomplete, reinforcing socio-economic weakness between the respondents.

Results: Life History Narratives of Tribal Migrant Labourers

The life history narratives collected from tribal migrant labourers in Pennagaram block disclose that access into wage labour frequently begins at a very early age. Most respondents stated that they were working during their teen years due to poverty, food insecurity, and absence of living opportunities in their native villages. Schooling was obsolete not by choice but by pressure. As one respondent clarified, "I stopped school when I was around fourteen. There was no food at home, so working turn into more important than studying" (R1, male, 42). Respondents reliably described working long hours frequently between ten and twelve hours per day in physically difficult jobs such as construction work, stone quarries, plantations, factories, and small shops. Wages were defined as marginal and inadequate for long-term safety. Daily wages were primarily spent on food and basic requirements, by no scope for savings. One respondent specified, "We work the entire day, but the money only covers food and after that, nothing remains" (R3, male, 35). Migration, consequently, did not carry economic stability but performed as a means of daily existence. Narratives too exposed extensive connections of discrimination and social barring. Respondents felt that their labour was underestimated and that they were preserved with insolence due to their tribal identity, lack of education, and migrant position. Language barriers and newness with urban norms additional deepened exclusion. A woman respondent well-known, "They look down on us since we don't know how to speak properly or behave in the city" (R5, female, 30). Awareness about education, labour rights, welfare schemes, and government programs was extremely limited. Most respondents had never retrieved any schemes and lacked information on how to apply for them. Several women were married at a young age, frequently soon after puberty, deprived of awareness of health, family planning, or family management. One respondent shared, "I was married at young age. I didn't know marriage or health matters at that time" (R7, female, 28). Along with wage labour, women accepted the burden of unpaid domestic work. In drought-prone villages, women walked two to three kilometres daily to get drinking water, adding to physical strain and tiredness. Health arose as a major worry across narratives. Continuous physical labour caused in chronic body pain, exhaustion, and crude illnesses. Some men stated alcohol consumption as a coping mechanism for physical pain then stress. A respondent specified, "The body pain always experienced and consuming alcohol beverages helps to relax from body pain" (R9, male, 40). Despite long migration, durable emotional and cultural ties to native villages persevered. Respondents reliably returned to their villages for festivals, rituals, and death ceremonies, emphasising collective identity. Though, many expressed worry over the decline of traditional livings due to forest limits, wildlife rules, and reduced access to forest resources. One respondent witnessed, "Earlier, we lived through forest work. Now we are not allowed inside, and animals also create problems" (R11, male, 50). Though some families now live in small pucca houses, respondents viewed this as minimal development. Overall, migration appeared as a routine survival plan rather than a path to social flexibility, shaped by structural disparity, limited choices, and ordinary resilience.

DISCUSSION

The life history narratives of tribal migrant labourers from Pennagaram block show that migration is less a substance of choice and more a structural force produced by long-standing lack and

livelihood insecurity. From a political economy viewpoint, respondents' early entry into wage labour imitates processes of proletarianization, wherein the corrosion of access to land, forests, and traditional survival practices compels tribal families to depend on informal wage labour. Long working hours, low wages, and unconfident employment in construction, quarries, factories, and shops prove how migrant labour is engrossed into informal markets primarily for surplus removal, reproducing vulnerability slightly than facilitating social movement. These involvements align carefully with Bourdieu's concepts of capital and habitus. Migrant workers controlled limited economic and cultural capital appreciated in urban labour regimes, while their indigenous knowledge and ecological abilities were undervalued. The disjunction among their inherited habitus and industrial work environments caused in discrimination, symbolic barring, and internalized eccentricity. Narratives of disregard at worksites and low social status disclose the operation of symbolic strength. Gendered involvements further depiction intersecting disparities. Women tackled early marriage, heavy workloads, water scarcity, and partial health awareness, increasing embodied forms of misuse. Through a subaltern lens, these narratives challenge leading development dissertations that frame migration as opportunity, in its place giving it as a survival plan marked by fortitude, loss, and resilience. Collectively, the findings situate tribal migration in broader structures of historical barring and socio-economic relegation.

CONCLUSION

This study discovered the life history narratives of tribal migrant labourers in Pennagaram block, Dharmapuri district, emphasizing migration as a survival strategy formed by structural inequality. The findings demonstration that early entry into labour, long working hours, marginal wages, and unconfident employment describe migrant lives, strengthening economic and social vulnerability. A study found that the absence of migrant parental supervision affects their children's emotional, educational, and physical comfort (12). Partial education, discrimination, lack of welfare awareness, and poor access to healthcare additional marginalize tribal migrants, mainly women. Another study found that despite moving towards urban areas, these women often retain a low socio-economic status and face persistent challenges in education, health, and employment, alongside shifts away from traditional practices due to increased contact with non-tribal populations (17). Similarly another study revealed that the Irular women are facing lot of difficulties in getting employment in their native place and for search of employment they have migrate neighbouring districts as well as neighbouring states (16). Despite migration, strong cultural links with native villages persevere, while forest restrictions and living loss weaken traditional systems. Through foregrounding subaltern voices, the study challenges growth narratives and highlights the need for inclusive labour defences and migrant-sensitive welfare programmes.

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