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## Patterns and causes of labour migration among the Santal Tribe of Mayurbhanj District in Odisha: A socio-economic study

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### Abstract

Labour migration has become a defining feature of tribal livelihoods in India, especially in states like Odisha, where recurring agrarian distress, limited employment opportunities, and uneven development push marginalised communities into seasonal and circular migration. This paper explores various aspects, including the patterns and causes of tribal labour migration among the Santal tribe in Mayurbhanj District, Odisha, placing the phenomenon within broader socio-economic, cultural, and political contexts. It examines the trends, causes, and effects of labour migration among the Santals in Mayurbhanj. The study uses a mixed-methods approach, including surveys, focus groups, and interviews. It finds that migration is mainly seasonal and non-permanent. Economic hardship, land scarcity, a rapid decline in agricultural productivity, and ineffective rural development and welfare programmes chiefly drive migration. Social networks such as family, community, friends, and labour contractors play a key role in encouraging and facilitating migration. While migration can provide short-term relief for those facing financial difficulties and issues, it also causes long-term problems by disrupting families, risking health, and diluting or eroding cultural identity and sanctity. The paper suggests initiatives across multiple sectors to tackle the structural causes of tribal migration, including local employment opportunities, portable welfare services, skill development, and policies sensitive to tribal needs.

**Keywords:** Labour migration, Santal tribe, Mayurbhanj, Odisha, tribal livelihoods, socio-economic impact

### Introduction

Migration is one of the oldest and most persistent human phenomena. It reflects the movement of people and communities across geographical spaces in search of better livelihoods, social and economic security, social mobility, or cultural belonging. In India, migration has historically been shaped by a combination of agrarian changes, caste-class hierarchies, economic inequalities, and colonial and post-colonial development paths. Seasonal labour migration, in particular, has become a vital survival strategy for millions of rural households lacking stable and well-paid local employment opportunities in their rural hometowns. According to the Census of India (2011), over 450 million people were migrants, accounting for nearly 37% of the total population. While marriage remains a significant and most prominent reason for female migration, employment-driven migration is common among marginalised men and youth, especially those belonging to the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and the Scheduled Tribes (STs).

In the Indian context, tribal migration is a significant socio-economic challenge. Tribals, who make up about 8.6% of India's population, have historically been marginalised through land dispossession, deforestation, and social-political exclusion. Many tribal groups are situated in forested, resource-rich, yet economically underdeveloped areas. Despite constitutional protections, their livelihoods remain insecure, making migration one of the few options to escape poverty.

### Odisha and Tribal Migration

Odisha boasts a rich tribal diversity, comprising approximately 62 tribal communities and 13 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), which account for around 22.8% of the state's total population.

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The state's tribal belt, with most of the tribal population, including districts such as Mayurbhanj, Sundargarh, Keonjhar, Koraput, and Malkangiri, has witnessed massive seasonal and distress migration. Studies conducted by the Government of Odisha and various independent research organisations, such as SCSTRTI (2016) <sup>[15]</sup>, reveal that tribal migration in Odisha, especially in this region, is largely informal, unregulated, and exploitative.

Labour contractors often facilitate the migration process, profiting by recruiting entire families or groups of young men from villages to work in distant brick kilns, road construction sites, and various agricultural farms across states like Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Kerala. These movements tend to be cyclical, mainly during the non-agricultural off-season, as migrants typically leave after harvest and return before the crucial sowing period. Despite its regularity, this migration is marked by vulnerability, a lack of labour rights, and the erosion of traditional tribal institutions.

### **The Santal Tribe and Mayurbhanj District**

The Santal tribe is a significant tribal community, as it is the third-largest in India, with members spread across various regions of Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, and Assam. In Odisha, most of the population is mainly concentrated in the northern part of the state, with Mayurbhanj district having the largest Santal population in Odisha. They are known for their rich and distinctive cultural traditions, strong community bonds, and agricultural self-reliance. The Santals have traditionally depended on subsistence farming, forest gathering, and occasional wage labour as their primary sources of livelihood. However, rapid deforestation, limited and poor access to irrigation, and fragmentation of landholdings have significantly weakened their agrarian base.

Mayurbhanj is one of the largest districts in Odisha in terms of area, and it has a substantial tribal population, with the Santals forming a dominant group in various blocks of Mayurbhanj, including Bahalda, Jamda, Tiring, Bijatala, and Rairangpur. These blocks of the district are endowed with forests and possess an abundance of minerals, yet the benefits of development have not substantially reached the underdeveloped tribal communities. As a result, labour migration has emerged as one of the most notable features of Santal livelihood strategies. For many households, migration is not just a choice or preference but a necessity dictated by socio-economic realities and the needs of their household.

### **Reasons for Labour Migration among the Santal Tribe in Mayurbhanj District, Odisha**

The labour migration of the Santal tribe in Mayurbhanj district is a complex social and economic phenomenon shaped by various historical, structural, and contemporary factors. However, shifting economic conditions and socio-political influences have forced many Santals to migrate in search of wage employment both within and outside the state.

- **Economic Push Factors:** The main driver of Santal labour migration is economic hardship. Most farming in Mayurbhanj is done manually, and the land is small and fragmented, so the farmers do not achieve much. They also lack many irrigation systems and rely on outdated tools and methods. Droughts that happen too often,

monsoons that fail to arrive regularly, and soil becoming less fertile make life more difficult for people in rural areas. Many Santal families still do not own land or only own a small amount, so they need to seek work elsewhere. During the months between the harvest and agricultural failures, people are often forced to move to cities or industrial areas temporarily in search of work and to earn a living to support their families.

- **Shift in Traditional Occupational Patterns:** Due to deforestation, environmental degradation, and forest laws that restrict people's activities in the forest, the Santals' reliance on forests for food, fuel, fodder, and small forest products has decreased significantly. They used to access these resources, but now they cannot, which has damaged their traditional economy. Now they have to seek work in places like brick kilns, construction sites, and factories.
- **Wide-spread Poverty and Indebtedness among Peasants:** High poverty levels and ongoing indebtedness remain major causes of migration. Many Santal families borrow money from local moneylenders at high interest rates for agricultural supplies, social events, or health emergencies. Failure to repay these loans locally often leads to agreements with labour contractors, resulting in out-migration as a way of clearing debts.
- **Social networks and Contractual Hiring as promoters of Migration:** Long-standing social networks play a vital role in supporting migration. Family, friends, and neighbours who are already employed in cities or factories often assist new immigrants in finding jobs and accommodation. Labour contractors (intermediaries) support people in moving by providing them with money upfront and arranging transportation. States such as Jharkhand, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Gujarat have experienced industrial expansion, leading to a consistent demand for workers with limited skills. Santal workers are attracted to these areas because they offer better pay, reliable work, and cash income. Migrants frequently share their positive experiences with their communities back home, which encourages more individuals to consider migrating.
- **Aspirations leading to Shifting Lifestyles:** Younger Santals have higher aspirations because they have been exposed to urban lifestyles through migration or the media. Many believe that relocating to another city is a way to earn money, buy items, cover educational expenses, and improve their housing, thereby enhancing their living standards.
- **Poor Execution of Government Programs:** Although employment-driven programmes like MGNREGA and tribal welfare initiatives aim to generate job opportunities locally, they are not effectively carried out due to issues with implementation, delayed wage payments, and entrenched corruption. Because they cannot earn a livelihood in their own area, Santals are forced to relocate to find work.

### **Labour migration as a big problem, especially among Santals in Mayurbhanj**

Labour migration has become a major socio-economic challenge in India, particularly affecting tribal communities such as the Santals. The Santals have historically depended on subsistence farming, gathering forest resources, and

community-based labour systems. However, problems like displacement caused by deforestation, environmental degradation, decreasing landholdings among the Santals, and the decline of traditional crafts and jobs have made their livelihoods less sustainable and more uncertain. These structural issues have driven many Santals to migrate to other states for shorter or longer periods in search of better-paying opportunities, working in construction sites, brick kilns, and industries.

Push factors, including widespread poverty, inadequate access to basic education and healthcare, high unemployment, debt stress, and the flawed implementation of rural employment development programmes, are compounded by pull factors such as higher wages in urban or industrial jobs, which inspire people to seek better living conditions and a higher quality of life. This motivates migration to cities and metropolitan areas. While migration can provide temporary relief through increased income, it often exposes tribal workers to exploitative contracts, dangerous and inhumane working conditions, inadequate social protections, and cultural dilution and discrimination.

For the Santals, migration also has significant adverse and long-lasting effects on society and tribal communities, such as an impact on children's education, weakening of community bonds, and the gradual disappearance of cultural practices and language due to interactions with various cultures in cities, as well as from a lack of regular contact with their native land. The outflow of working-age adults also alters the demographics of tribal areas, leaving behind only older people and children, who receive less economic support.

Therefore, labour migration among the Santals is not just an economic trend; it is a complex issue that involves poverty, development gaps, and the survival of their culture. It requires policies that address both livelihood security and the protection of tribal identity.

### Shift in the patterns of migration in recent times

Over the past few decades, migration patterns have experienced significant shifts. In the past, many people moved from rural areas to cities, usually on a seasonal basis and driven by males, often linked to seasonal farming cycles, a lack of job opportunities, and the decline of various cottage industries. However, with the introduction of rural employment programmes, a growing trend of long-term and circular employment is now emerging. The rise of technological connectivity and labour networks has

transformed migration into a more organised process; however, it remains risky due to informal contracts and vulnerability. This change results from broader societal and economic shifts, as well as the impacts of urbanisation and globalisation on worker movement.

Migration has shifted from mainly irregular, seasonal, and male-dominated patterns to more diverse and intricate ones. In the past, most movements were short-term and unpredictable, often caused by agricultural off-seasons. Men would migrate alone while women remained behind. Migration is becoming more regular and circular, with more predictable work cycles in the construction, manufacturing, and service sectors.

More women are relocating to the area for work, either independently or with their spouses. This is particularly true in domestic work, brick kilns, and the service sector. Additionally, family-oriented migration is increasing, with entire families moving together. This is especially evident among tribal groups like the Santals, which alters how people live and interact within their home communities.

### Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods approach with a descriptive and exploratory design. Structured household surveys were conducted to gather quantitative data on demographics, income levels, landholdings, education, and the frequency of residential mobility. The reason for adopting a mixed-methods approach is that we recognise that migration, particularly among tribal cultures like the Santals, cannot be fully understood through numbers alone. Structural limitations and personal experiences influence people's decisions to relocate. The research took place in the Mayurbhanj district of Odisha, one of the largest districts in the state, which has a significant population of Scheduled Tribes, mainly consisting of Santals. The selected study blocks were Bijatala, Rairangpur, and Tiring. A stratified random sampling method was used to ensure that migrant households were represented in villages within each block. The total number of households surveyed was 100.

We entered the data from the household surveys into Microsoft Excel and used SPSS to analyse it. Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages, like the number of households that do not own land, were employed. Cross-tabulations, such as those between gender and frequency of moving, were utilised. Graphs and pie charts, such as those displaying destination states and job categories, were generated.

**Table 1:** The information collected from the samples (N=100)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	83	83.0%
	Female	17	17.0%
Age Group	18–30 years	46	46.0%
	30–45 years	38	38.0%
	More than 45 years	16	16.0%
Education	Primary Education	59	59.0%
	Secondary Education	23	23.0%
	Higher Education	18	18.0%
Reason for Migration	Lack of Job Opportunity	53	53.0%
	Due to Agriculture Failure	28	28.0%
	For Better Income and Lifestyle	19	19.0%
Type of Migration	Seasonal Migration	42	42.0%
	Permanent Migration	24	24.0%
	Temporary Migration	34	34.0%
Type of work undertaken during Migration	Construction work	42	42.0%

	Brick Kiln	16	16.0%
	Agriculture and Domestic Work	8	8.0%
	Factory	34	34.0%
Annual Wage Bracket	Less than 1,00,000	38	38.0%
	1,00,000–1,20,000	52	52.0%
	More than 1,20,000	10	10.0%
Hours Worked/Day	Less than 10 hours	36	36.0%
	More than 10 hours	64	64.0%
Land Ownership	Less than 1 acre	65	65.0%
	More than 1 acre	18	18.0%
	Landless	17	17.0%
Use of Remittances	Household Expenses	40	40.0%
	House Renovation	18	18.0%
	Health	15	15.0%
	Festival/Ceremony	15	15.0%
	Education	12	12.0%

### Findings of the study

This paper aimed to explore the underlying reasons, socio-economic conditions, and patterns of labour migration in the Mayurbhanj district. The analysis of primary data collected from migrant households offers a clear understanding of the migrating population, their causes for migration, the types of employment they engage in, the income they generate, and how remittances are utilised. The findings expose deep-rooted structural issues within the local economy and rural livelihood systems, prompting individuals and families to seek employment opportunities outside their native area.

### Profile of Migrant Workers from Mayurbhanj

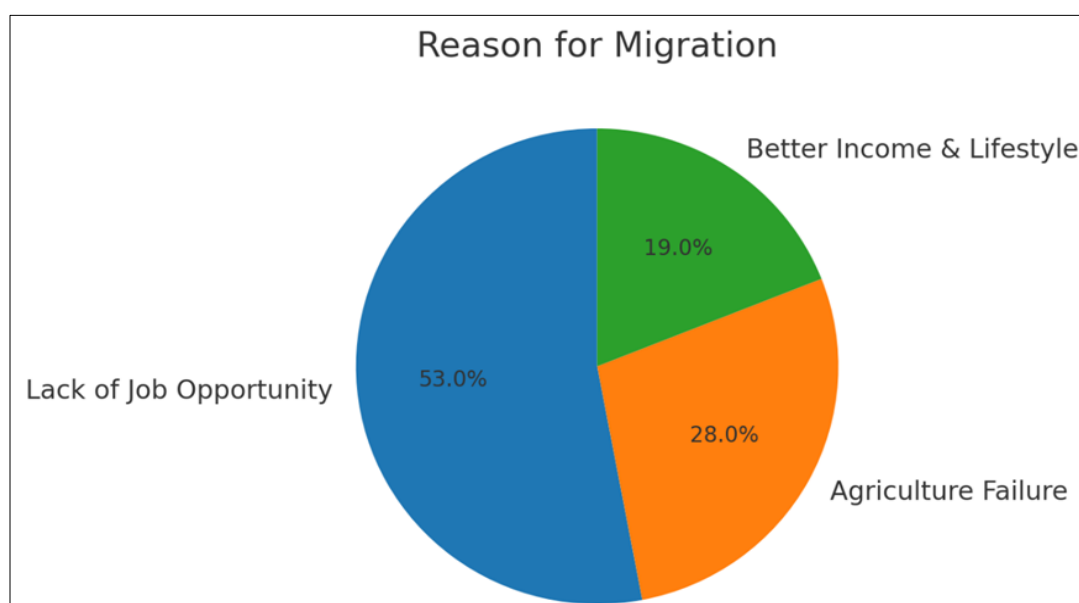
The demographic data clearly show that migration from Mayurbhanj is predominantly male-dominated. Nearly 83 per cent of migrants are men, while only 17 per cent are women, indicating that the responsibility of migration primarily falls on men within the household economy. Women are often left behind in the villages, where they focus on managing households, raising children, and sometimes engaging in small-scale agricultural activities. In terms of age, migration is mainly concentrated among the young and working-age groups. A significant 46 per cent of migrants fall within the 18-30 years category, followed by 38 per cent between 30-45 years, with only 16 per cent

above 45 years. This suggests that migration is driven mainly by the young population seeking stable employment and income.

The educational background of migrants unveils another aspect of an important pattern. The majority, that is 59 per cent, have only primary education, while 23 per cent have secondary-level education and a mere 18 per cent have pursued higher education. The lack of higher education and technical skills has led to migrants being employed in the informal sector and casual labour markets, which limits their employment opportunities to low-skilled and physically demanding work.

### Primary reasons for the rise of migration

The study shows that migration is mainly forced by circumstances, driven more by compulsion than by aspiration or desire. The most common reason cited is the lack of job opportunities in the native district (53 per cent). This highlights the harsh reality of unemployment caused by a scarcity of non-farm employment options. As a result, workers in Mayurbhanj often cannot pursue other careers due to limited education and human capital. Consequently, they are forced to migrate to survive and earn a livelihood to support their families back home.



**Pie Chart 1:** Distribution of population as per various reasons for migration

The second major factor is agricultural failure (28 per cent), mainly caused by a lack of irrigation facilities. Mayurbhanj, a district reliant on farming, has experienced frequent crop losses due to irregular rainfall, poor irrigation, and a sharp decline in soil fertility. For families dependent on agriculture, repeated crop failures make migration the only feasible option to support their families and households. Meanwhile, 19 per cent of migrants who left their home countries say they migrated to seek better income, jobs, and lifestyle opportunities. This part of the population views migration not merely as a desire or aspiration, but as a means to enhance their standard of living, achieve their household objectives, and invest in critical areas such as education, housing, and health. Therefore, migration acts as both a survival tool and a mobility strategy.

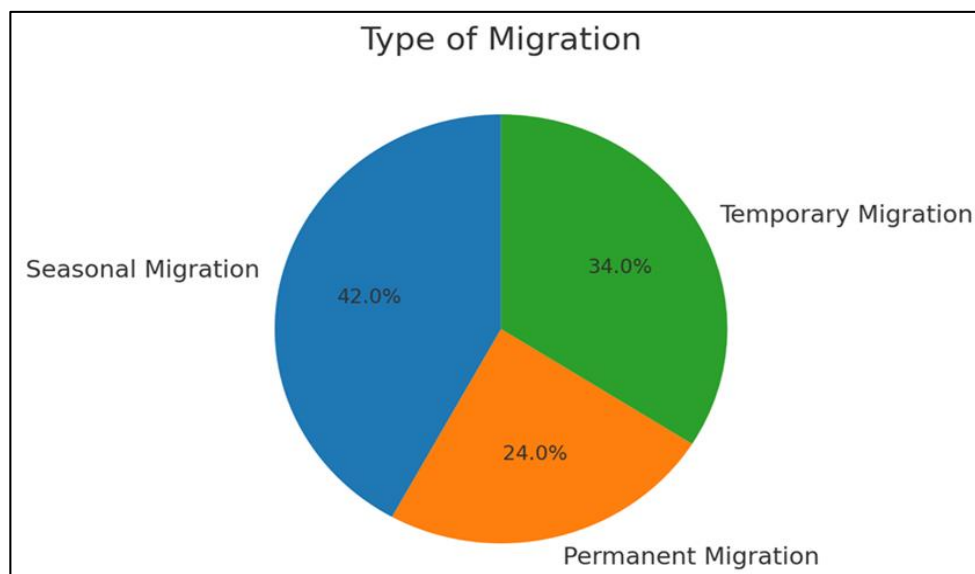
#### **Employment opportunities undertaken during migration**

The data reveal that migrants are extensively involved in low-skilled, labour-intensive sectors outside their districts. Construction work is the largest employer, engaging 42 per cent of migrants. This includes work at building sites, roads, bridges, and other infrastructure projects, which require large numbers of casual labourers. The second primary sector employing most migrants is factory work, accounting for around 34 per cent, reflecting the rising demand for cheap labour in industrial zones, especially in states like Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu. Other professions

migrants participate in include brick kiln work (16 per cent), a sector notorious for its exploitative conditions, and many also work in agriculture or domestic roles (8 per cent). These findings indicate a pattern where migrants are concentrated in some of the lowest-skilled and unregulated sectors of the economy, characterised by low wages and hazardous working conditions. The lack of educational and vocational training limits their bargaining and negotiating power against employers and contractors.

#### **Nature and Type of Migration**

Migration from Mayurbhanj is mainly seasonal and non-permanent in nature. According to the available data, about 42 per cent are seasonal migrants who travel for a few months during lean agricultural periods and then return to their villages, while 34 per cent migrate temporarily, staying away for more extended periods but not relocating permanently. Only 24 per cent of the total migrants are permanent, indicating that complete relocation is rare and not feasible. This reflects migrants' strong emotional ties and cultural connections to their native villages, as well as community solidarity, combined with their limited financial ability to settle elsewhere permanently. Seasonal migration typically aligns with gaps in the agricultural cycle's harvesting period. Workers leave after the harvest when local work is scarce and return before the next sowing season.

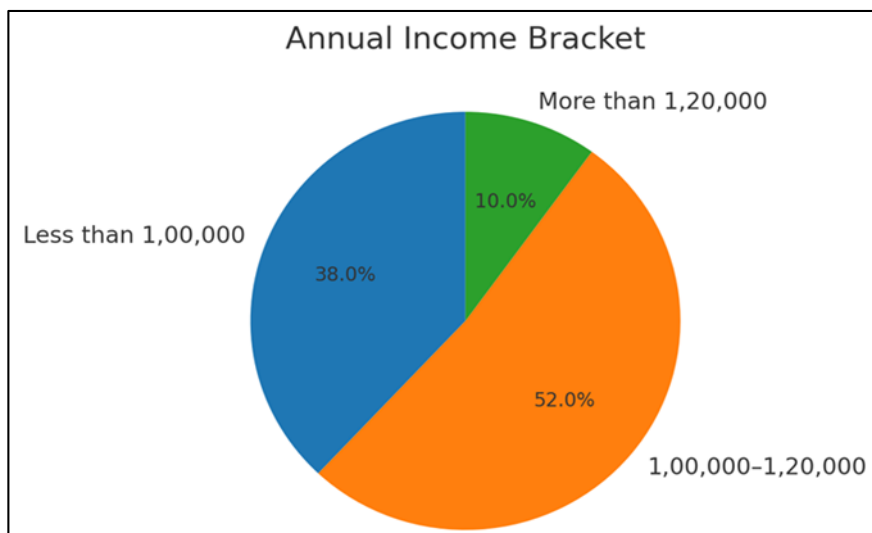


**Pie Chart 2:** Distribution of population into various types of migration

#### **The challenge of low wage rates and lower annual income**

The wages of migrants emphasise the demand for low-cost labour in the job market. Most people live in lower-income brackets. Fifty-two per cent (52%) earn between ₹1,00,000 and ₹1,20,000 a year, and around thirty-eight per cent (38%) earn less than ₹1,00,000 a year. Only 10% of migrants are engaged in better-paid jobs, allowing them to earn more than ₹1,20,000 a year, which indicates that income mobility

remains limited, and most migrants are employed in low-rewarding jobs. The data also shows that most migrants (64%) work more than 10 hours a day but still receive low pay. This highlights the unfairness of informal work arrangements, where long hours often come without fair wages or benefits. These income levels are insufficient to significantly lift migrant families above the poverty line or improve their quality of life.



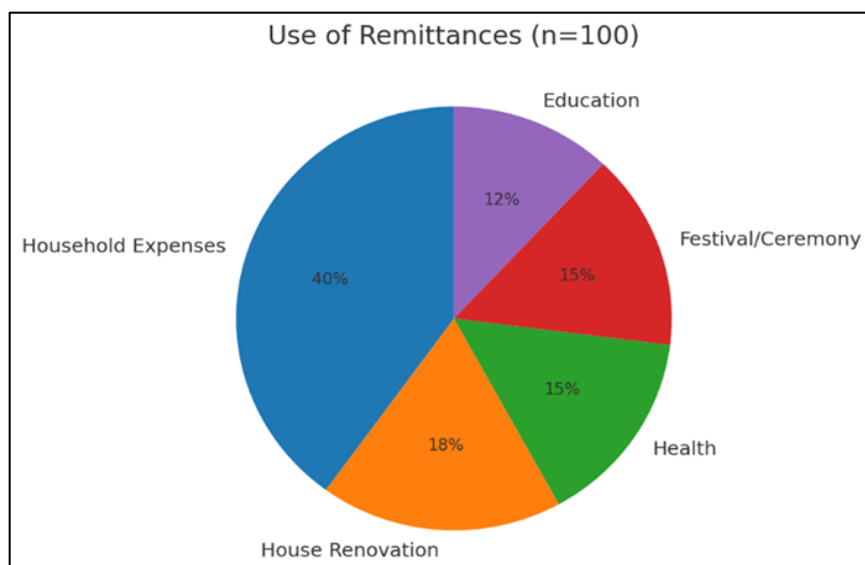
**Pie Chart 3:** Distribution of population as per their annual income

### Land ownership as a push factor that promotes migration

Patterns of land ownership also help us understand why people migrate. Seventeen per cent of migrant households do not own any land, while 65 per cent own less than one acre. Only 18 per cent of people own more than one acre. This uneven and peculiar distribution shows that most migrants are still engaged in traditional occupations, mainly as marginal farmers and landless households, who cannot support themselves solely through their agricultural income. The pressure of homelessness, combined with frequent crop failures, high-interest informal debts, and the need to move to survive, makes migration a clear choice.

### Different expenses from Remittances earned by

**Migrants:** The research showed that a significant portion of their hard-earned money, specifically 40 per cent, goes towards household expenses, indicating that migration serves as a key survival strategy to meet needs such as food, clothing, and daily household requirements. Other significant costs include home improvements (18%), healthcare (15%), festivals and ceremonies (15%), and children's education (12%). Some remittances are spent on essentials like housing and education, which will benefit them in the future. However, the overall trend reveals that most of the money sent home is used for basic needs rather than long-term investments. This suggests that migration in Mayurbhanj is "consumptive," meaning people have limited financial resources after covering their basic needs, which reduces their ability to save or invest in starting a business.



**Pie Chart 4:** Distribution of population as per their use of remittances

### Discussion

The findings from Mayurbhanj strongly resonate with established migration theories but also reveal their limitations.

- **Push-Pull Dynamics:** The dominant influence of push factors such as agrarian distress, widespread poverty, high debt levels, and lack of local job opportunities supports the assumptions of Lee's model. However, the

pull factors, like higher wages in factory work, are less significant because the push factors are so strong. Migration is more driven by necessity and household needs than by choice.

- **Livelihood Framework:** Migration emerges as a livelihood diversification strategy, but rather than improving the lifestyle, it often deepens vulnerability in the long run. Migrants frequently return to their native

homes with little asset creation and savings, as the cost of living in urban areas is significantly higher compared to rural areas. This suggests that migration here is more “distress-driven” rather than “opportunity-driven” in terms of livelihood options.

- **Cultural Frameworks:** Migration transforms identity. Family structures shift towards nuclearisation, leading to the weakening of community solidarity. Participation in rituals declines, resulting in cultural dilution and, ultimately, erosion. However, new cultural elements such as urban consumerism and aspirations for better educational facilities have also emerged, demonstrating how migration both disrupts and reshapes tribal culture.

The socio-cultural impact of migration is deeply felt within tribal communities. Traditional institutions, such as village councils (Manjhi Pargana), gradually lose their authority as younger generations spend extended periods away from home looking for work. Cultural practices also weaken, with collective celebrations of festivals like Sonrai and Baha becoming less frequent or less elaborate. At the same time, exposure to urban life introduces new habits and consumer practices, such as using mobile phones, wearing modern clothing, and eating processed foods, which slowly change traditional ways of life. These changes create hybrid cultural forms and raise serious concerns about the long-term survival of tribal identity, as migration becomes not only an economic necessity but also a driver of cultural transformation.

### Conclusion

This study aims to demonstrate that labour migration among the Santal tribe of Mayurbhanj is not merely an aspirational move or a voluntary pursuit of better life opportunities; rather, it is a forced structural compulsion rooted in issues such as agrarian crisis, ecological degradation, and policy failure due to poor implementation. Migration may provide short-term support that sustains households but undermines long-term well-being by eroding education, traditional culture, and unique identity. It perpetuates a cycle where poverty leads to migration, migration leads to exploitation, and exploitation leads to further poverty.

At the same time, migration is not solely negative. It provides much-needed cash incomes, exposes young people to new opportunities, and fosters aspirations for education and social mobility. The challenge is to harness the positive aspects while minimising the exploitative and disintegrative effects.

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