

Migration among the Madia of Bastar: Assessing its Worth

SHASHANK DEORA

Describing the risks in migration and the burden it places on those left behind as well as the changes it has brought about in the people and their lives, this article explores options for generating a similar income within the village itself while acknowledging the lure of migration

Illo Mandavi from Dondarguda was working in a stone quarry near Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh with her husband, Sahibo, when she fell ill and was hospitalized for a few days. She succumbed to her illness, which was not diagnosed. Her mother-in-law, Sukti, now regrets having quarrelled with Illo last month, making her flee to Andhra Pradesh, just a month before her death.

Sukti lives in a small house at one end of the hamlet. Her husband died ten years ago when her two sons were still very young. Their entire land-holding was snatched by relatives, and with nothing left, even for shelter, Sukti was forced to ask for help. Her sons had to stop going to school and, instead, spent their childhood helping her herd the cattle of the hamlet in exchange for food. Sukti raised her two sons and her orphaned nephew, who stayed with the family.

When they grew up, Sukti's sons, Sahibo and Maso started working as seasonal migrant labourers in Andhra Pradesh, to supplement the family income from cattle herding and the local wage labour. Just two years ago, they managed to save enough through their seasonal migration work to acquire an agriculture plot on lease and buy a pair of bulls to plough that plot.

It was then that Sahibo met and fell in love with Illo, who worked in the same stone quarry as he did and lived in a hamlet near his own in Bastar. Sahibo brought Illo home with him to Dondarguda to meet his mother. Illo's relatives and other people of her hamlet had several rounds of discussions and negotiations with the people of Dondarguda, and they came to an agreement about a bride price of Rs 25,000.

Paying of bride price is a norm in this tribal community; it is paid by the groom's family to the bride's family. Earlier it used to be paid in terms of rice grain and cattle, now it is paid in cash—and is distributed among the hamlet priest, relatively older people chosen as the panchs for negotiation, and the rest is kept by the family of bride.

After the marriage, Illo continued to migrate for work to various stone quarries near Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh with Sahibo and Maso, providing financial support to Sukti back home. In the meanwhile, the *panchayat sarpanch* sanctioned a house for Sukti, to be completed under the Indira Awas Yojana. The family's financial status began to improve. All was not well, however, at home with frequent quarrels erupting between Sukti and Illo, mainly because Illo was not able to help in the agricultural field due to her migration in the agricultural season.

Illo would frequently go to her parents' home after a quarrel. This last time, however, she joined her husband to go to another stone quarry. She had left with her husband, but soon the villagers heard of her death and he brought back her body.

This incident was similar to that of Subari's husband from the same hamlet. He had left

In the last couple of years, six young women from nearby hamlets have died, either while staying in the stone quarries in Andhra Pradesh or soon after coming back

the previous year for a stone mining site in Andhra Pradesh and the villagers had heard of the news of his mysterious death, possibly murder, a few weeks later. Nobody knows what had caused his death.

In the last couple of years, six young women from nearby hamlets have died, either while staying in the stone quarries in Andhra Pradesh or soon after coming back. Of those having died away from home, not much is known, except that they suffered from fever. But among those coming back, malaria and filariasis have been seen in many cases by the Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANM) working in the area. Most of the cases are attributed, by the locals, to black magic.

Illo, Subari and all the others named here, belong to the Primitive Tribal Group Madia Gond (they also call themselves Koitor), like everyone else in Dondarguda, a hamlet of Kurenga village. Dondarguda comes under the Kurenga *panchayat* of Tokapal block in Bastar district. This hamlet is about 10 km away from Tokapal and around 30 km from Jagdalpur, the headquarters of Bastar district. The new road connectivity to Dondarguda has facilitated easy movement of the villagers for daily wage labour works. In recent years, people have also started migrating seasonally to Andhra Pradesh for labour works. Of a total population of around 250 in Dondarguda (from some 75 households), almost half the youth migrate to Andhra Pradesh every year during the agricultural season, after the sowing of paddy in April-May. They stay away from home for a period ranging from three months to one year.

There are as many more Illos, as there are places like Dondarguda within the entire Bastar region, where migrating for work is part of life now. The places and the people

may be different but their issues are essentially the same. And to understand these issues, it is important to have a basic understanding of the Madia tribe of Bastar. It is also important to have an idea about the livelihoods available to them across the region before talking about their migration.

MADIA TRIBES OF BASTAR

In Chhattisgarh, the Gond tribals constitute the highest segment of the population at about 55 per cent among the Scheduled Tribes (ST) in the state. Their highest population is in Bastar Division as per the 2001 Census of India—the Bastar Administrative Division comprises seven districts of southern Chhattisgarh, namely, Bastar, Bijapur, Dantewada, Kanker, Kondagaon, Narayanpur and Sukma, carved out from the erstwhile Bastar district.

Among the Gond tribes, the Madia Gonds of Bastar have been studied in detail by W.V. Grigson, who highlighted the two divisions of the tribe existing in Bastar, namely, the Hill Madia (Abhuj Madia) and the Bison-horn Madia (Dandami Madia). The Abhuj Madia reside on the Abhujmad mountain, mostly in Abhujmad (Orchha) block of Narayanpur

district whereas the Bison-horn Madia, with a much larger population, occupies the districts of Bastar, Bijapur, Dantewada, Kondagaon and Sukma.

The Bison-horn Madia derives its name from the famous head-dress of bison horns, cowrie shells and a plume of feathers worn by the drummers at the dancing festivals. The Madia, like the other Gond tribes, are a Proto-Australoid people, speaking several Dravidian dialects.

The Abhuj Madia are known for the *ghotul* system in every village—a youth dormitory for training of youth from both sexes (though this is rarely seen now), extensively studied by Verrier Elwin. *Ghotul* is a type of dormitory, comprising a large hut or group of huts enclosed in a compound, where unmarried boys and girls interact with each other. It has an elder facilitator, with young, unmarried boys and girls as its members. Girl members of the *ghotul* are called *motiaris* whereas boy members are called *cheliks*; their leaders are called the *belosa* and *siredar*, respectively. The members are taught lessons of cleanliness, discipline, and hard work. They are taught to take pride in their appearance and to respect



Fig 1: Bison-horn Madia dancing in Bastar Didi Mandai (SHG Maha-adhiveshan)

themselves and their elders. They are also taught the idea of public service.

Another distinctive feature of the Madia tribes in Bastar is that the women also plough the agricultural fields, a practice forbidden for women in most of the societies in India. This may also be attributed to a lower impact of Hinduism on these societies of Bastar.

LIVELIHOODS AVAILABLE

The Madia people, along with contributing to one of the highest populations in Bastar, are considered among the most backward tribes of the region, receiving very few benefits from government schemes. Like the other tribes of the region, they are dependent on forest-based resources, agriculture and wage labour for livelihood generation. For forest-based livelihood sources such as non-timber forest product (NTFP) collection, a good forest cover is a pre-condition, and Bastar has traditionally been home to dense forests of sal, teak, and bamboo, among others. With the current forest cover of around 57 per cent over the Bastar plateau (comprising all seven districts) fast depleting—having depleted by 38 sq km in a span of just two years between 2011 and 2013, owing to reasons such as developmental activities, mining and encroachment on forest land (mentioned in the Indian State of Forests Report 2013)—forest-based livelihoods have been impacted adversely. The reducing groundwater level is making rain-fed agriculture the only viable agriculture-based livelihood option today. As per a Human Development Report prepared by the UNDP and the Planning Commission for the Government of Chhattisgarh, in 2005, it has been indicated that the Bailadila mines

With a poor agricultural scenario and the lowering forest cover reducing forest-based livelihoods, people are forced to search for other livelihood options to provide for the basic necessities of their households

in Dantewada district have affected almost a third of the forest area in the district; 40 per cent of the livelihoods in the district was forest-based—the biggest livelihood source. The report also highlights that more than 80 per cent of the people from Bastar district have been unable to find employment in their area round the year.

In Bastar district, agriculture in most of the villages is confined to a single crop of paddy. The poor condition of agriculture can be gauged from its Agriculture Contingency Plan for 2009, which shows that, of the total land under paddy cultivation, only a fourth is cultivable and not even four per cent of the land is irrigated.

In Dondarguda also, people plant only a single crop of paddy per year in their agricultural plots and supplement it with subsistent farming of maize and a few other crops in their home gardens, locally called the *badi*. The agricultural produce is hardly sufficient to provide food through the year to the local community; they are able to survive only due to the 35 kg of rice distribution through the public distribution system (PDS) to below the poverty line (BPL) families. In the past, before the implementation of this scheme, there were several cases of rice theft from the fields, quarrels over rice, even leading to a death in one case.

With a poor agricultural scenario and the lowering forest cover reducing forest-based livelihoods, people are forced to search for other livelihood options to provide for the basic necessities of their households. Another source of livelihood earning is the daily wage labour in and around the village, either under a government project or on private land. In

Dondarguda, the schemes of PDS and the Indira Awas Yojana are working well; however, other government schemes meant to benefit the community have been few and far between.

Under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), in the last five years, people from the hamlet can only remember working on the two ponds that have been dug in the hamlet. Some of the labourers are yet to receive payment for the work they did on these. Therefore, not many people are interested in working for MGNREGA now. The people from the village get some work from the Forest department—such as digging of cattle proof trenches, weeding and plantation of saplings in the forest area near the hamlet. But these works are sporadic and cannot be relied upon for steady income generation. Therefore, people resort to private wage labour works, which are mostly on agricultural lands owned by big landlords, who harvest two or three crops a year, paying wages at a rate ranging from Rs 60 to Rs 150, varying as per the market demand. These works too are not available round the year.

While looking for alternative livelihoods, the people of Dondarguda and a few other villages around have found an enterprise in the quarrying of stones from the land in and around these villages. Dondarguda also has several small stone quarries, some of which are on the private lands and some on the village land, whereas the rest of the stone is excavated illegally from the forest lands. Quarries on the community land have been distributed among the groups of households by the hamlet priest and the hamlet headman, who is also the Ward *panch*. These quarries help people earn an income ranging from to Rs

With so many different sources of livelihood available, one may be tempted to portray a rosy picture of the area; on closer analysis, however, it turns out that the situation is not as good as it seems to be

2,000 to 10,000 per household in a season, which is the time between a year's harvesting to the next year's sowing.

Yet another alternative livelihood practised by the youth from Dondarguda and many other villages in Bastar is the staging of drama. These dramas are whole night performances and

with around 20–30 performances per season, starting just after harvesting and lasting until before the next sowing. The net income per person comes to be around Rs 3000 to 4,000, not making it a lucrative livelihood option.

MIGRATION FROM BASTAR

With so many different sources of livelihood available, one may be tempted to portray a rosy picture of the area; on closer analysis, however, it turns out that the situation is not as good as it seems to be. On doing a cash flow analysis of Sukti's house, if the income from migration is excluded, there was a shortfall of around Rs 6,000 in the total cash inflow, as compared to the total cash outflows. It is this shortfall in the disposable income which pushes people to migrate, initially to nearby towns and, later, to places outside Bastar. The Bastar Plateau borders the states of Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Odisha, and migration is higher to the cities in Andhra Pradesh. The Bison-horn Madia community in Bastar has a lingual advantage when it comes to migrating as wage labourers to Andhra Pradesh. Their mother tongue, called Koya Mata, is a Dravidian dialect and resembles the Telugu language, spoken in Andhra Pradesh, which makes it easier for them to be understood.

When it comes to understanding migration out of the Bastar Plateau, studies on the subject are few. One thing that becomes easily

evident, however, on interacting with the Madia community of Dondarguda, is that a significant proportion of their population is migrating every year. There was a PRADAN-supported study on migration conducted in Darbha block of Bastar district in 2011. The study was conducted in three villages, and it was found that, of the 121 households surveyed, around 80 per cent were affected by migration. And the situation does not seem to have changed much since then.

The study found that, among the migrating households, men were migrating from two-thirds of the households whereas the women were migrating from the remaining one-third. Twice as many unmarried youth were migrating than married people. The places of migration outside Bastar were found to be around the cities of Hyderabad, Tirupati and Bangalore, along with a small number migrating to places in Odisha. Around one-fifth of the households were seen migrating within the Bastar region. Migration to places in Andhra Pradesh, at just less than 50 per cent of the total migration, was the highest. The types of jobs that the migrating population was engaged in were either in factories, companies, stone quarries or brick-making works. Of these, half worked in stone quarries, followed by those in factories and brick-making works.

Issues Involved

This out-migration of the Madia from the Bastar region has many facets, a few of which have been mentioned earlier. Death and illness are not the only things to be worried about for the people migrating from Dondarguda and the other villages around. Four young men of

People live and work in highly unhygienic conditions when they migrate. Being an unorganized sector, there are no facilities for medical treatment, or insurance against accidents or illnesses happening at the site of migration

Dondarguda returned from yet another stone quarry in Andhra Pradesh, after having worked there for a year or so, but having earned only between Rs 3,000 and 4,000. When joining work, they were promised a daily wage of Rs 200–250 a day but were given only the bare minimum to cover their daily expenses and were assured that they would be given their wages in full after six months. Once the six months

had passed, they were told that they would get their full wages after another six months. When they got the same answer after having worked for one full year, they realized that they were being exploited. They had no option but to leave. This is no less than slavery.

What if the promised wages were paid on time? Would migration then be a good livelihood option? A group of 10–12 young men from Dondarguda returned after having worked for a month in a stone quarry near Tirupati and discussed their work and their working conditions. Apparently, they worked on a wage rate of Rs 200 per trip—a trip includes breaking or crushing of stones and loading those onto a trolley. They would start working after midnight, by about 2 or 3 a.m., and make two or three trips by 10 or 11 a.m., when the heat would become unbearable. When it rained, they would, at times, work in chest-high water. Tired and exhausted after the night's work, they would huddle together in their cramped living spaces for a nap—some 25 people stayed in one hall with not even a mat to sleep on. People live and work in highly unhygienic conditions when they migrate. Being an unorganized sector, there are no facilities for medical treatment, or insurance against accidents or illnesses happening at the site of migration.

Migration and Women

For the women, the situation is no different. What is different is the wage rate which is Rs 20 to Rs 40 less than that for men. Women migrate both before and after marriage, though the migration is less after marriage. Most of them load the trolleys with stones excavated from the stone quarries. Working in similar living conditions as that of the men, they are no less prone to diseases. In fact, there are greater incidences of diseases among the migrating women. According to the local Auxiliary Nurse Midwife, a major reason for this is the absence of early diagnosis, which was available to them in the *aanganwadis* in Bastar. There are many incidences of young women and men eloping for marriage from the migration sites and, although unstated, one cannot rule out the possibility of instances of molestation and harassment.

Hidme, a mother of a ten-year-old daughter, is married to a migrant worker in Dondarguda. Her husband spends most of his migration remittance on alcohol whereas Hidme, in addition to the household chores, tries to earn wages to meet the needs of the household. She and her daughter work as daily wage labourers in the agricultural fields of big landowners, about 8–10 km away, near Jagdalpur. With no one else to help, she has to find the time to work in the family field, visit the PDS shop some 6 km away, and walk to the weekly *haats* with her meagre savings so that she can purchase something to sustain the family for the week. Her husband's migration has only increased her burden and work, rather than being of assistance to her.

Another woman, Maso, in Dondarguda, used to migrate before her marriage. After she was married, she continued migrating with her

There are greater incidences of diseases among the migrating women. According to the local Auxiliary Nurse Midwife, a major reason for this is the absence of early diagnosis, which was available to them in the aanganwadis in Bastar

husband until she had a baby. She has stayed home since then. Her husband continues to work at a stone quarry in Andhra Pradesh and she takes care of everything at home. While her husband is home, he helps Maso in most of the work. But while he is away, Maso is stressed with the agricultural work, daily wage labour, fuel wood collection and arranging for the

rations, among others things, for which she has to leave her child in the custody of others. At times, she is unable to visit the *aanganwadi* centre on Tuesdays (the stipulated day for vaccination and the distribution of Take Home Ration packets), and is at risk of missing the vaccination schedule for her baby.

There are many such cases in the village, wherein the husbands have gone to Andhra Pradesh, leaving their wives back at home, either pregnant or with an infant. With no one else at home to bear the responsibility, women are working in their agricultural fields and also tending to daily household chores. Financially, migration is proving to be a more promising option than doing labour works nearer home; however, the earnings are not always available when and where needed. There are times when urgent money is required at home, and with one or more of the earning members having no means to send the money immediately, it becomes difficult for the remaining members of the household to make up for their absence, no matter how hard they work.

The Pull Factor for Migration

These narratives are not the end. There are many more. Despite all the drawbacks, large numbers of Madia youths are migrating from Bastar every year. One reason seems to be the bulk sum of money they get as

remittance when it is time to come back—amounts to the tune of Rs 10,000 to 15,000. Yet, perhaps, that is not the only reason. Migration wage work gives girls and young women the opportunity to explore areas beyond their village. They are able to earn and spend relatively large amounts of money, which they would not be able to all their lives when staying in the village. The youth now follow fashion in the cities, and are buying articles of luxury for their homes in the village.

With the assurance of consistent cash inflow from migration, some people have planned what they want to do with that cash next—purchase motorbikes, build a brick and mortar room in their homes for their daughter's or son's marriage. Migration is changing people's lives in small but significant ways. Some of the migrating households have started eating vegetables and pulses they were not eating earlier; their food is now richer in nutrients than it used to be. In some of the households where the men migrate, women are getting a major say in household affairs when the men are away, and their self image vis-à-vis men is slowly being enhanced.

Weighing Migration

The pro and cons of these aspects of migration need to be weighed to assess its value. Several questions arise. Is migration worth it? Migration brings with it a reasonably good remittance, sufficient to support many of the needs of the families; it helps them realize their wants to a certain extent. However, there is constant risk of physical injury and illness due

Migration is changing people's lives in small but significant ways. Some of the migrating households have started eating vegetables and pulses they were not eating earlier; their food is now richer in nutrients than it used to be. In some of the households where the men migrate, women are getting a major say in household affairs when the men are away, and their self image vis-à-vis men is slowly being enhanced

to the poor living conditions. If not migration, what could be the alternative sources of livelihood for Sukti and other landless people, so that they can acquire comparable wealth? Are government policies, programmes and schemes capable of meeting these needs? Can these programmes provide an income level that is enough for a landless labourer to purchase or lease land or cattle? Would these programmes allow people to afford the lifestyle that migration remittance can support, discounting the risks involved with migration? And given such an option, would

people prefer to stay back rather than migrate? There is a possibility that they will. If people were to get a sustainable and consistent income, they might want to stay for MGNREGA work, especially if they are guaranteed timely payments or they might want to stay if their agricultural produce could give them more than just enough for warding off their hunger. They would be more likely to stay if they had access to money in times of need, for example, at the time of marriages, deaths, illnesses, and also for major agricultural operations. Are they asking for too much?

There are many such questions that need to be answered. And it is time the answers were found. There is a need for a more comprehensive study on Madia Gond migration from Bastar. Understanding of the issues involved may prove instrumental in devising important development strategies related to agriculture, natural resource management, health and nutrition among others because the reasons, as well as the impact, of migration are cutting across different sectors.

PRADAN's Role

It has been five years now since PRADAN started working with the SHGs in the region for livelihoods promotion. Migration has been on the team's radar for some time now and it has been viewed as a repercussion—a situation caused as a consequence of the prevailing issues of poverty and unemployment—rather than an issue itself. The PRADAN team is of the view that SHGs and its livelihoods promotion activities can address these issues, with the SHGs facilitating credit availability in times of need and livelihood activities help in income generation for the households. Currently, the team has an outreach of around 4,000 households and it is striving towards an objective of community mobilization, to facilitate better implementation of various government programmes and schemes.

PRADAN has direct engagement with more than 1,000 households through different livelihood interventions, and the various projects taken up by the team have led to some changes in the overall scenario related to migration. Works on the System of Rice Intensification (SRI) and other interventions in the farming sector have helped ensure year-round food sufficiency and have been a source of income generation in agriculture while keeping the land productivity intact. During a project with the Jehangir Ratanji Dadabhoy Tata Trust (JRDTT), implemented over a two-year time period, modelled around that time's MGNREGA norms and having community based wage disbursement mechanism, the

percentage of migrating population was seen to have reduced drastically in Mangalpur hamlet of Teerathgarh village in Darbha block. Of a total of 99 households, only two had members migrating whereas it used to be around half the total households prior to implementation of the project.

The team has now been selected as part of the Cluster Facilitation Team (CFT) for MGNREGA implementation through the Intensive Participatory Planning Exercise (IPPE) in Darbha block, to facilitate better planning and execution of the scheme. As part of the engagement of the team for 2015–16, the team had planned to double the number of human days of work with the help of the community in some *gram panchayats*. If wages are paid on time, the percentage of the migrating population may reduce significantly.

However, for now, hundreds of Madia people are migrating undeterred from the Bastar region—aware of the issues involved and the problems they might face. Sahibo, Illo's husband, has completed all the required ceremonies to pacify the gods, purportedly responsible for Illo's death. And to make up for the expenditure for her funeral and other ceremonies, he has started working in a stone quarry near Jagdalpur. Although he is not sure when, he has plans to go again to Andhra Pradesh maybe to a different stone quarry this time. Migration still beckons him and others from his hamlet.