

Migrant agricultural labour in Punjab: A sociological analysis

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of structural transformation of agrarian Punjab, labour has assumed a greater significance. In spite of the fast mechanization, demand for labour went up due to expansion of agriculture. To fill the vacuum, labour from other states migrated to Punjab. The increasing inflow of migrant workforce in Punjab has far reaching consequences. With the objective of analyzing the impact of agricultural migrant labour on rural social set up, three districts of the Punjab state namely Patiala, Sangrur and Hoshiarpur were selected randomly from districts with maximum, less and least concentration of migrant labour, respectively. 300 migrant labourers were personally interviewed. This paper examines the socio-economic and cultural factors that forced labour from other states to Punjab. As a result of long stay and employment in rural Punjab, a significant change in style and life chances of the migrants was also observed.

KEY WORDS : Labour, Migrant, Agriculture, Punjab

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INTRODUCTION

Agriculture in Punjab has undergone a significant structural change since the advent of green revolution in the mid sixties. Traditional agriculture had progressively given way to modern and commercial agriculture. It was the adoption of dwarf wheat varieties in the mid sixties and rice-varieties in the early seventies, which completely transformed the scene in the agriculture sector. Therefore, substantial increase in the production of these two crops was witnessed for over three decades. In the wake of structural transformation of agrarian Punjab, labour assumed a greater significance. In spite of fast mechanization demand for labour went up due to expansion of agriculture. To fill the vacuum, the labour from other states migrated to Punjab. Initially, it was only in the season of transplanting and harvesting of paddy crop but later on, they started setting with a small trickle to the rural areas of Punjab which soon took the form of a flood during the next decades. Estimated 37 lakh labourers (21 lakh main workers plus 16 lakh dependents) migrated into Punjab in 2001 accounted for 15 per cent of the State's population and about 22 per cent of total working force out of 91

lakh workers in Punjab. They migrated from Bihar (60 per cent), Uttar Pradesh (21 per cent), Nepal (9 per cent) and other States (10 per cent). The total annual earnings were estimated to Rs.3500 crores of which about Rs.2000 crores were transmitted back to their native place.

The literature on migration in developing countries has been extensively surveyed in recent past (Sjaastad, 1962; Myrdal, 1968; Todaro, 1976; Oberoi and Singh, 1980; Breman, 1985). Based on the insight provided by this literature, a general theoretical background of the factors of migration and impact of migration was formulated. In this context, a number of issues are raised, and these need empirical verification. Some of these are examined in the subsequent section of this paper.

All theories of migration concede that migration occurs when the region of origin lacks the opportunities which the destination promises. It is inherently a combination of pull and push factors. Variation in economic development across the regions is a primary motive for migration to greener pastures. The rural poor are concentrated in eastern India, and in the rainfall dependent parts of central and western India, which continue to have low agricultural productivity, while the bulk of the jobs are being created

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in northern, western and southern India.

While migration enables workers from underdeveloped regions to find employment, its impacts have been evaluated variably by academics. Sjaastad's (1962) human investment theory treats the decision to migrate as an investment involving costs and returns distributed over time. A model that takes this explicitly into account is the one provided by Todaro. Todaro's neo-classical model regards migration as a product of rational economic decision-making. The migrant makes a rational free choice to improve his economic condition by seeking more favourable employment conditions, even if the decision is being taken under distress. The policy recommendations of this theory are, therefore, in favour of migration and suggest reducing the cost of migration *i.e.* improve the bargaining power of migrants, improve information and conditions of work etc.

In contrast, the theories on structuralism view the personal choice to migrate not as a product of individual freedom but rather as structured by the larger mechanisms of capitalistic production. In case of the poor, their choice to migrate is often the only option that they possess for survival, and their decision is a reflection of lack of choice rather than freedom of opportunity. Breman (1985) views the creation of migrant 'wage hunters' as representative symptoms of the larger processes of global capitalistic development resulting in a race to the bottom. Given that capitalistic production is motivated by profit as the only determining factor, it would invariably lead to regional imbalances and employers would hire labour at the lowest available cost. Myrdal (1968) also observed that a plentiful supply of cheap, docile and disciplined labour is in the public interest contributing towards additional "national wealth". Main purposes of the regulations of labour conditions by state too favour employers and assure them of an adequate labour force available on favourable terms.

Employers prefer to hire migrant labour as they are considered to be cheaper and more docile than local labour. Migrants are willing to accept any distress wages that are offered as long as they have access to employment. In the bargain they undercut the employment prospects of local labour. Their excess supply also contributes to reducing the wage rate. Consequently, local labour needs to migrate in search of jobs, which they are denied in their native region. This perpetuates a vicious cycle of migration. Also, the reality of migrants at micro-level ensures that their constant motion and inherent insecurity of employment reduces their ability and inclination to unionize or enhance their bargaining position for fear of instant dismissal. The policy recommendations of this school of academics would therefore be in favor of strict implementation of programs

to reduce regional development imbalances, minimum wage regulation and right to work e.g. employment assurance schemes like NREGA.

METHODOLOGY

The study was based on the primary data collected in year 2007 from three districts of the Punjab state namely, Patiala, Sangrur and Hoshiarpur selected randomly from districts with maximum, less and least concentration of migrant labour, respectively (Based on study conducted by Sidhu *et al.*, 1997). Two blocks from each selected district were randomly chosen. Nabha and Rajpura were randomly selected from Patiala, Sangrur-I and Malerkotla from Sangrur and Garhshankar and Bhunga were randomly selected from Hoshiarpur district. From each block cluster of 4 to 8 villages were randomly selected depending upon the availability of migrant labour. One hundred eighty six permanent and one hundred fourteen seasonal labourers were randomly selected in 60:40 ratio based on the proportional availability of the labour. Twenty local labourers and twenty farmers were randomly chosen from each district making a total of sixty local labourer and sixty farmers in all. Three different sets of interview schedules were administered personally on migrant labourers, local labourers and farmers for data collection. Statistical tools like percentages and mean score were analyzed for the study. The results obtained were tabulated and appropriate inferences were drawn.

District	Blocks
Patiala	Nabha and Rajpura
Sangrur	Sangrur I and Malerkotal
Hoshiarpur	Garhshankar and Bhunga

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Findings of the study have been discussed under the following headings:

Socio-economic profile of the migrants:

The socio-economic characteristics of the migrant labour were appraised for greater comprehension and deeper insight of sociological implications of migration on the social-milieu of Punjab. Socio-economic profile of the migrants will highlight characteristics like age, castes, religion, education, income, marital status and indebtedness. As far socio-economic variables of seasonal and permanent migrant labourers were concerned, district wise differences were not observed hence discussed as a whole here.

Study (Table 1) reveals that 70.7 per cent of migrants

were between 21 to 40 years of age where as just 4 per cent were above 40 years. More than half of the seasonal migrants were even less than 20 years of age where as permanent were few (6 per cent) in this category. This was the testimony of the fact that employers find diminishing use for migrants who were beyond 40 years of age.

It had been reported by different studies that majority of the labourers belonged to lower castes. This trend was also quite obvious in Punjab (Sidhu *et al.*, 1997). Contrary to the presumptions, the present study found that majority of the migrant labourers belonged to either medium or high castes. Compared to years 1983-84, percentage of high caste migrants declined in 1995-96, partly due to long spell of militancy. Higher representative of medium (46.33 per cent) and high (36.3 per cent) castes in the study area may be accorded to the peace and political stability in the state during the last decade. Majority (95.3 per cent) of the respondents were Hindu by religion. Two permanent migrants reported themselves as Sikhs; they later on revealed that they had converted to Sikhism few years

back. 97 per cent of the respondents were either illiterate or Primary passed. Just one per cent was Matriculate. Majority (94.1 per cent) of the permanent labourers were married and three fourth (73.7 per cent) of seasonal labourers being young unmarried. Permanent migrants had better economic standing than seasonal migrants as 71.1 per cent of seasonal migrants earned up to Rs.1500 per month against 88.2 per cent of permanent who had monthly income between 1500 to 2500 and even more.

Indebtedness scenario:

Study further explored the debt position of the migrants which revealed amount of loan, source of loan and purpose of loan. Table 2 shows that 22.7 per cent of the migrants were indebted. Seasonal labourers (SL) were more indebted compared to permanent labourers (PL). Majority from Patiala (85% of S.L. and all the P.L.) and Sangrur (69.2% S.L. and 75% P.L.) had taken loan upto Rs.10,000. About one fifth from Hoshiarpur also had taken loan up to Rs.10, 000.

Majority had taken loan from landlords followed by

Table 1: Distribution of the respondents according to their social background (Percentages)

Variables	Patiala		Sangrur		Hoshiarpur		Total	
	SL (44)	PL (56)	SL (38)	PL (62)	SL (32)	PL (68)	SL (114)	PL (186)
Age								
>20	72.50	6.67	71.05	8.06	28.13	2.94	57.02	5.91
21-40	35.0	83.33	28.95	88.71	68.75	88.24	41.23	88.71
<40	2.50	3.33	-	3.23	3.13	8.82	1.75	5.83
Caste								
General	47.73	58.93	34.21	45.16	21.88	10.29	35.96	36.56
Backward	52.27	26.79	36.84	32.26	53.13	73.53	47.37	45.70
Scheduled	-	14.29	28.95	22.58	25.0	16.18	16.67	17.74
Religion								
Hindu	90.91	100.00	100.00	100.00	81.25	94.12	91.23	97.85
Sikh	-	-	-	-	-	2.94	-	1.08
Muslim	9.09	-	-	-	18.75	2.94	8.77	1.08
Education								
Illiterate	79.55	78.57	65.79	64.52	75.0	73.53	73.68	72.04
Primary	20.45	21.43	34.21	35.48	18.75	16.18	24.56	24.19
Middle	-	-	-	-	6.25	8.62	1.75	3.23
Metric	-	-	-	-	-	1.47	-	0.54
Income (Rs./month)								
> 1000	38.64	3.57	26.32	4.84	9.38	1.47	26.32	3.23
1000 – 1500	50.00	10.71	42.11	6.45	40.63	8.82	44.74	8.60
1501 – 2000	11.36	73.21	31.58	83.87	31.25	55.88	23.68	70.43
2001 – 2500	-	12.50	-	3.23	12.50	25.00	3.51	13.98
< 2500	-	-	-	1.61	6.25	8.82	1.75	3.76

SL = Seasonal Labour

PL = Permanent Labour

Figures in parenthesis are numbers

Table 2: Distribution of the respondents according to their debt position (Percentages)

Variables	Patiala		Sangrur		Hoshiarpur		Total	
	SL	PL	SL	PL	SL	PL	SL	PL
	(20)	(4)	(13)	(4)	(11)	(16)	(44)	(24)
Amount of loan (Rs)								
5000 – 10,000	85.00	100.00	69.23	75.00	27.27	18.75	65.91	41.67
10,000 – 15,000	15.00	-	30.77	25.00	36.36	31.25	25.00	25.00
15,000 – 20,000	-	-	-	-	18.18	12.50	4.55	8.33
< 20,000	-	-	-	-	18.18	37.50	4.55	25.00
Source of loan*								
Banks	-	-	-	-	-	25.00	-	16.67-
Money lender	-	-	-	-	36.36	-	9.09	-
Trader	-	-	53.85	25.00	9.09	43.75	18.18	33.33
Land lord	85.00	100.00	53.85	100.00	72.73	18.75	72.73	45.83
Relatives	30.00	-	7.69	-	27.27	25.00	22.73	16.67
Duration of loan								
> three years	30.00	100.00	61.54	75.00	18.18	12.50	36.36	37.50
Three years	70.00	-	38.46	25.00	27.27	56.25	50.00	41.67
Five years	-	-	-	-	54.55	18.75	13.64	12.50
< 5 years	-	-	-	-	-	12.50	-	8.33
Purpose of loan								
Crop loan	-	-	-	-	9.09	-	2.27	-
Household								
Consumption	10.00	25.00	15.38	-	18.18	25.00	13.64	20.83
Social obligations	90.00	75.00	84.62	100.00	72.73	75.00	84.09	79.17
Amount of loan repaid								
Not yet	15.00	25.00	-	-	-	12.50	6.82	12.50
One third	55.00	25.00	30.77	75.00	54.55	25.00	65.91	41.67
Half amount	30.00	-	69.23	25.00	27.27	62.50	25.00	25.00
Total	-	50.00	7.69	-	18.18	-	4.55	8.33

* Multiple response

Arthiyas/traders and relatives. Only 5.9 per cent had taken loan from Bank. Only one seasonal labour from Hoshiarpur had taken loan for crop purpose. Majority (82.4%) of the migrants had taken loan for fulfilling social obligations and 16.2 per cent had taken loan for household consumption.

Remittance sent to the native place:

The study further tried to explore the percentage share of total income sent as remittances (Table 3). It was surprising to note that about half of the seasonal labourers were sending more than 75 per cent of their total income back to their native places. Average remittances per month were highest at Hoshiarpur district followed by Sangrur

and least at Patiala. Compared to permanent labourers, seasonal were remitting greater share of their earning to their native place.

Factors behind migration:

The major factors which had caused migration were categorized into four groups *i.e.* economic, social, psychological and environmental. The results of data (Table 4) indicated that unemployment, low wages and poverty were the most important economic factors which had pushed the migrants from their native place to Punjab (with little variation in rank order at Patiala, Sangrur and Hoshiarpur districts) Small size of landholdings,

Table 3: Distribution of the respondents according to the percentage of remittance sent of the total income

% remittance sent of the total income	Patiala		Sangrur		Hoshiarpur	
	SL	PL	SL	PL	SL	PL
>65	14.29	6.82	19.35	-	11.76	15.63
65 – 75	7.14	22.73	3.23	36.84	19.12	28.13
< 75	-	45.45	-	55.26	-	56.25

Table 4: Factors associated with migration of agriculture labourers

Factors	Patiala				Sangrur				Hoshiarpur			
	PL		SL		PL		SL		PL		SL	
	WS	% WS	WS	% WS	WS	% WS	WS	% WS	WS	% WS	WS	% WS
Economic												
Low wages	130	22.8	59	13.6	169	27.6	97	30.8	180	26.7	74	24.1
Unemployment	209	36.6	161	37.2	186	30.3	98	31.2	147	21.8	71	23.2
Under employment	45	7.8	37	8.5	-	-	3	0.9	50	7.4	13	4.3
Poverty	167	29.3	120	27.7	202	33.0	91	28.9	201	29.8	93	30.4
Indebtedness	3	0.5	25	5.7	1	0.1	3	0.9	10	1.4	9	2.9
Small holdings	13	2.2	28	6.4	42	6.8	20	6.3	52	7.7	32	10.5
Lack of irrigation	3	0.5	2	0.4	12	1.9	2	0.6	33	4.9	14	4.6
Social												
Less civic amenities	129	23.04	96	21.82	116	18.71	64	16.84	148	22.16	75	23.44
Poor living condition	186	33.21	130	29.55	189	30.48	109	28.68	184	27.54	87	27.19
Improper quality of food	99	17.68	117	26.59	143	23.06	88	23.16	138	20.66	65	20.31
Work offers from relatives/ friends	146	26.07	97	22.05	172	27.74	119	31.32	198	29.64	93	29.06
Psychological												
Fed up with poor life	204	40.80	151	34.32	195	31.86	110	28.08	226	33.24	104	32.50
Away from relatives	97	19.40	91	20.68	144	23.53	107	28.01	157	23.09	80	25.00
To see new place	119	23.80	81	18.41	103	16.83	71	18.59	107	15.74	47	14.69

WS = Weighed score

% WS = Percentage Weighed

Weights of 4,3,3,1 have been assigned to first, second, third, and fourth major factors, respectively to compute the weighed scores (WS)

indebtedness and lack of irrigation facilities were other economic factors for their migration. Poor living conditions (mainly in sanitary conditions and *kutch* houses) at native place and work offers from friends and relatives (already employed at Punjab) were the major social factors behind their migration. Lack of civic amenities (including drinking water, irrigation, medical, roads and educational facilities) and improper quality and quantity of food were other social factors reported by migrants which had compelled them to leave their native places in search of better quality of life.

By and large all the migrants in the sample felt 'fed up' with poor life (ranked first) at native place before migrating to Punjab. Attraction to see new place and feeling of being away from friends and relatives (working in Punjab) were another psychological reason for their migration.

Average daily wages:

The study (Table 5) revealed that there was a significant difference in the average daily wages of migrants and locals. Local labour received higher wages due to better bargaining power and efficient handling of certain farm operations and absence of contractors (in case of migrants, contractor kept a share for himself). Wages were higher at Hoshiarpur district than Patiala and Sangrur.

It was about Rs.60 for migrants and Rs.70 for local labour at Patiala and Sangrur and Rs.70 for migrant and about Rs.85 for local labour at Hoshiarpur district. The study revealed that because of better implementation of NREGA at Hoshiarpur district and shortage of labour there, local as well as migrants had better bargaining capacity and hence were paid more.

Table 5: Comparison of average daily wages of migrant and local labourers

Sr. No.	District	Average daily wages of ML in Rs.	Average daily wages of LL in Rs.	t-value
1.	Patiala	82.75±10.62	113.25±9.33	6.26*
2.	Sangrur	82.57±11.82	112.02±10.46	4.81*
3.	Hoshiarpur	107.40±23.19	137.48±13.17	4.29*

* Average daily wages were revised in the year 2009

M.L.=Migrated labour; L.L. = Local labour

Table 6: Benefits received from Government

Districts	Permanent		Seasonal	
	At native place	At local place	At native place	At local place
Patiala				
Ration card	33.93	7.14	27.27	-
Voter card	35.71	41.07	31.82	11.36
Yellow card	12.50	8.93	-	-
Toilet construction	-	1.79	-	-
Sangrur				
Ration card	45.16	11.29	50.00	-
Voter card	67.74	19.35	65.79	5.26
Yellow card	8.06	3.23	-	-
Toilet construction	-	3.23	-	-
Hoshiarpur				
Ration card	80.88	-	68.75	-
Voter card	69.12	-	87.50	-
Yellow card	4.41	-	-	-
Toilet construction	4.41	-	-	-

Benefits received from government:

Table 6 highlights the extent of benefits received by the migrants from different welfare schemes. Migrants were asked to mention the scheme or policy sponsored by state or central government from which they had ever received any benefits. They were also told about number of welfare schemes funded by State by the research workers.

By and large all the migrants could recognize only four welfare scheme *viz.*, ration card, voter's card, yellow card and public toilet facility. Not even a single migrant of Hoshiarpur had availed any benefit from any scheme

which otherwise they availed at their native place though under different heads. Seven per cent of permanent labourers at Patiala and 11.3 per cent at Sangrur had ration cards while 41 per cent and 19 per cent, respectively had voter's cards too. Surprisingly 11.4 per cent of seasonal labour at Patiala and 2 per cent at Sangrur too had voter cards.(though they weren't having ration cards). One could go deeper into the context to point towards political exploitation.

Satisfaction level and future plans:

Study further tried to investigate the satisfaction level

Table 7: Distribution of the migrants according to their satisfaction level

Satisfaction level	Patiala				Sangrur				Hoshiarpur			
	PL		SL		PL		SL		PL		SL	
Economic aspect												
Most satisfied	10	17.86	15	34.09	12	19.35	8	21.05	18	26.47	10	31.25
Satisfied	46	82.14	29	65.91	50	80.65	30	78.95	50	73.53	22	68.75
Dissatisfied	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Religious aspect												
Most satisfied	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Satisfied	52	92.86	14	31.8	53	85.4	11	28.9	14	20.5	9	28.12
Dissatisfied	4	7.14	30	68.1	9	14.52	27	71.0	54	79.4	23	71.87
Social Aspect												
Most satisfied	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Satisfied	49	87.50	24	54.55	57	91.94	15	39.47	32	47.06	22	68.75
Dissatisfied	7	12.50	20	45.45	5	8.06	23	60.53	36	52.94	10	31.25
Psychological aspect												
Most satisfied	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Satisfied	52	92.86	37	84.09	56	90.32	23	60.53	48	70.59	28	87.5
Dissatisfied	4	7.14	7	15.91	6	9.68	15	39.47	20	29.41	4	12.5

on three point scale of the respondents from economic, religious, social and psychological aspects (Table 7). Majority (nearly 80%) was most satisfied from economic point of view. None was most satisfied from religion, social and psychological aspects. Nearly 70 per cent of the seasonal labourers were dissatisfied from religion point of view. About half of them felt dissatisfied from social point of view too. Permanent labourers were comparatively more satisfied than seasonal labourers. Labourers from Patiala and Sangrur were observed to be more satisfied compared to Hoshiarpur district.

Seasonal labourers though were mostly in groups of 10-15 moved together, were getting employment opportunities too, were mostly not accompanied by their families felt lonely and disassociated. They were not found interacting much with local labourers or even employers and they had their own strong groups. This way they almost had formed their 'ghettos' and were not willing much to interact with outsiders and in process were found dissatisfied psychologically and socially too.

Study reveals that all the permanent labourers wanted and had actually permanently immigrated to Punjab. Permanent labourers who had families, kiths and kins wished to visit their native place preferably every 3-4th year and those who didn't have much alliance did not wish so. Majority of the seasonal labourers did not reveal any willingness to permanently settle here in the near future as was revealed by them at Patiala (90%) Sangrur (92.1%) and Hoshiarpur (75%) districts.

Conclusion:

The study brought out that three-fourth migrants were between 21 to 40 years of age testifying that employers found diminishing use of migrants who were beyond 40 years. Majority (92%) was illiterate or Primary passed. Majority of permanent labourers were married and seasonal labour being young unmarried. Permanent migrants had better economic standing than seasonal migrants. Study revealed that 22.7 per cent of the migrants were indebted. Landlords and village traders were main source of the loan and only 5 per cent had taken it from bank. Small size of landholding, indebtedness and lack of irrigation facilities were economic factors for their migration. Poor living conditions and lack of civic amenities, poor quality and insufficient quantity of food and recurrent crop failure due to floods or draught were the other social, psychological and environmental factors, respectively. A significant difference in wages of migrants and locals were found. About half of the seasonal labourers were remitting more than 75 per cent of their total income. By and large migrants could recognize only four state

sponsored schemes viz., ration card, voter's card, yellow card and public toilet facility. Migrants came across with the problems of communication, psychological adjustment, social acceptance, disliking of social atmosphere, home sickness and housing, etc. Migrants were most satisfied from economic aspect but none was satisfied from religion, social and psychological aspects. Seasonal felt more dissatisfied and felt lonely and disassociated and had made their own 'ghettos' strong enough not willing to interact with locals much.

Policy recommendations:

On the basis of above study the following measures are suggested to tackle the situation:

- Under the democratic set up of the country, it is not advisable to stop the migration phenomenon. Hence, it is suggested that the socio-economic status of the migrants need to be improved at their native place by their state government welfare measures, in order to curtail large scale out-migration especially from the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.
- To minimize conflicts between locals and migrant labourers unemployed local labour need to be gainfully employed in the off-farm sector. The rural industrialization has great scope of offering employment to local youth.
- Occupational diversification for local youth is the need of the hour. For that government institutes of vocational training need to be re-vamped so that local youth could be made capable of self-employment after acquiring necessary skills.
- Registration of migrant labourers at police stations should be earnestly followed by the employer in order to keep the proper track and record of migrant labour. This will help to check the entry of unscrupulous migrant labourers in Punjab.

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