

The Grass Is Not Greener on the Other Side; Are Migrant Workers Happy? A Case Study of Construction Workers in Nainital



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Abstract

The tourism industry in Nainital is on an uphill trend leading to building of new structures and renovation of old ones to attract the tourists. This grants an opportunity for employment as construction workers in Nainital. Globalisation and Urbanisation have given rise to a copious amount of migrant laborers abandoning their forefathers' abodes and migrating to bustling urban towns in search of greener pastures only to be swindled by the contractor, faced with inhuman working conditions topped by wrath and skepticism of local population. The objectives of the study were- 1. To find out if migrant workers in Nainital are satisfied with their work and working conditions. 2. To explore their extent of Happiness and 3. To delve into life histories of migrants and find out the causes and consequences of migration. The sample for study were 100 construction workers who were working in different construction sites in Nainital. Findings reveal that most of the migrants belong to socially deprived sections of society with less or no education at all. Often trapped in a situation of debt and bondage, their family conditions are impoverished and they seek refuge in their work which grants them self worth and dignity. Separation from dear ones is a major cause of their unhappiness.

Keywords: Migrant Workers, Happiness.

Introduction

Migration is an important feature of human civilization. It reflects, human endeavor to survive in the most testing conditions both natural and man made. Migration in India is mostly influenced by Social Structures and pattern of development. The development policies by all the governments since Independence have accelerated the process of migration. Uneven development is the main cause of Migration. Added to it, are the disparities, Inter regional and amongst different socio-economic classes. The landless poor who mostly belong to lower castes, indigenous communities and economically backward regions constitute the major portion of Migrants. In the very large Tribal Regions of India intrusion of outsiders, settlements by the outsiders displacing the local tribal people and deforestation also played a major role in Migration.

The tourism industry in Nainital is on an uphill trend leading to building of new structures and renovation of old ones to attract the tourists. This grants an opportunity for employment as construction workers in Nainital. Globalisation and Urbanisation have given rise to a copious amount of migrant laborers abandoning their forefathers' abodes and migrating to bustling urban towns in search of greener pastures only to be swindled by the contractor, faced with inhuman working conditions topped by wrath and skepticism of local population. These workers are ubiquitous-clinging to some concrete mess at 10th floor's height or carrying bricks or mortar in the steel-container on their head in each of the developing towns of India. Nainital is home to many such migrants.

Research on happiness casts doubt on the notion that increases in income generally bring greater happiness. This finding can be taken to imply that economic migration might fail to result in increased happiness for the migrants: migration as a means of increasing one's income might be no more effective in raising happiness than other means of increasing one's income. This implication is counterintuitive: it suggests that migrants are mistaken in believing that economic migration is a path to improving one's

well-being, at least to the extent that well-being means (or includes) happiness. One strand of the literature compares the subjective well-being of immigrants with natives. For example, Bartram (2011) found that the life satisfaction of immigrants is relatively lower than natives. He also states that migration is probably a path to improve economic welfare, but a rise in income does not necessary lead to greater happiness. Because migrant direction is towards places where income is higher, from rural to urban or from developing countries to developed countries, and it could be the case that less happy people choose to migrate. Another strand attempts to observe the change in happiness for individuals after migration. Nowok et al. (2011) investigated the question of "Does migration make you happy?" by analyzing how happiness changes with time are associated with migration. They find that people who migrate within the UK will experience a decline in happiness just after the time of migration. Stillman et al. (2012). investigated the impact of migration from Tonga to New Zealand and tried to find more reliable evidence to examine how happiness changes after migration. The research results confirm a decreasing trend in happiness, but an increasing trend in mental health. However, there are not many studies on the subject of happiness that talk about migrants. The increasing influx of migrants in Nainital lead to the following research questions-Are the migrants happy ? Are they satisfied with their work? Why do people migrate? What are the problems faced by them? What are their expectations?

Aim of the Study

1. To find out if migrant workers in Nainital are satisfied with their work and working conditions.
2. To explore their extent of Happiness.
3. To delve into life histories of migrants and find out the causes and consequences of migration

Methodology of The Study

The sample for study were 100 construction workers who were working in different construction sites in Nainital. The investigator observed their activities on a regular basis and established a rapport with them. She asked them questions related to

different variables of the study. Some questions were common to all. Two detailed narrations were recorded and worded by the investigator.

The following questions were asked to all the respondents

A. Questions related to satisfaction-

1. Are you satisfied with your living conditions?
2. Do you think you earn enough to meet the needs of your family?
3. Are you satisfied with your working conditions?
4. Do you know that this work involves risk to life?
5. Are you aware that there is no medical aid provided by the contractor in case you meet an accident?

B. Questions related to happiness-

1. Taken all things together, how happy you think you are?
2. All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?
3. How happy were you five years back?
4. How happy you think you will be five years from now?
5. How happy do you think you will be fifteen years after?

Findings of the Study

Table 1
Percentage Analysis of Findings based on questions on work satisfaction

S. No	Item	%Response	
		Yes	No
1	Are you satisfied with your living conditions?	20	80
2	Do you think you earn enough to meet the needs of your family?	0	100
3	Are you satisfied with your working conditions?	60	40
4	Do you know that this work involves risk to life ?	100	0
5	Are you aware that there is no medical aid provided by the contractor in case you meet an accident?	80	20

Table 2
Percentage Analysis of Findings based on questions on Happiness

S. No	Item	% Response			
		Unhappy	Undecided	Happy	Very happy
1	Taken all things together, how happy you think you are?	70	10	20	-
2	All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?	60	10	30	-
3	How happy were you five years back?	30	-	60	10
4	How happy you think you will be five years from now?	-	60	40	-
5	How happy do you think you will be fifteen years after?	-	70	20	10

Two Detailed Cases

1. Heera Singh is a 36 year old construction worker working in Nainital since last 8 years..Being the eldest son of a family of 12 persons and children of his own, he was forced to migrate to Nainital in search of employment. The Crop having failed there was no other source of income.When asked whether he was suffering from any illness due to

the adverse weather conditions in Nainital, he replied that he suffers from gastric and indigestion problems and breadth problems due to their nature of work. There is no fixed place to stay and you have to cook your own food. Their only source of entertainment is smoking a bidi after lunch and dinner and listening to songs on the mobile phone. He proudly proclaims that his

children go to the best school in the village but he hasn't seen them since last winter. His wife is illiterate but takes good care of his parents and younger brothers and sisters.

"I miss my family most when I see people celebrating festivals ,says Heera with wet eyes...."My father was sick last week and admitted in hospital but I couldn't visit him.....sent money for his cure....It is a curse to stay away from home. I see people come to Nainital to spend time with their spouse and family. But... I am very lonely. I hope I was educated enough to understand that my uncle was doing us wrong in selling of our land to the landlord...I was too young then and from then onwards our saga of poverty and debt began. Perhaps, this is what we call fate. No, I have not thought about my future...It may continue to be the same till I grow old"

2. Vinod is a boy aged about 15 years who recently joined the group of construction workers. He didn't like going to school so he dropped out of school at the age of 10. He is the youngest of the family of five sisters. They could hardly make two ends meet by farming on the land owned by them. As his father was unable to work in the fields due to old age his brother-in-law settled with them and began to manage their affairs. In the beginning all was fine, they were a happy family but when he took all control of their land...Vinod became his target of abuse. He compelled Vinod to work in the fields and abused him..."Getting thrashed for no reason by my sister's husband was a part of my daily routine . Whenever he was drunk he would abuse my parents, scold and shout at everyone....asking us all to move out of the house as we were all burden on him. Once, when I retaliated...that was the last time..he banged my sister's head against the wall ----(cries).He said that he would kill her if I wouldn't leave the house...I fled home to live with my Uncle...who was a construction worker and who brought me here to Nainital"

"We don't make him do the work which is difficult..That is , climbing up the ladder in the hilly areas" said his Uncle. "He only holds the ladder for us..Today Vinod is happy as he has sent a money order for Rs. 5000 to his parents." added his uncle. They are nice to Vinod after knowing the tough circumstances he has gone through in this tender age.

"Amma makes very good chutney...She used to pat my back and fondle my hair when I used to sleep. Baba plays the dholak during religious ceremonies and festivals in the temple. I will miss my sisters on Rakshabandhan. They make kheer for me." Asked whether his family used to celebrate his birthday, he said,"Amma used to make halwa ..I would wear new clothes and we would all go to the village fair"

As for now, he has no plans to return to his village. "I have to earn money.I feel it better to die falling from top of the hill working rather than be trashed and flogged by my sister's husband...I can still see the tears in my mother's eyes."I am happy to

be with my uncle and prepared to face all the adversities here"

Analysis of the Findings

Migrant workers are temporary workers and the most general reason for their movement is poverty. The relief of domestic unemployment pressure and earning of cash income serve two main objectives. With increasing demand for labour and awareness in the local market in recent years, labor has become a source of local economy and a safety valve for domestic unemployment. In terms of employment, Construction is the largest sector in India after agriculture.

Most of the employment in construction is migrant labour. The working hours are from sunrise to sunset. The working day often stretches from 14 to 16 hours, combining house work and work at site. On the site, men are paid Rs.100-175. Masons earn up to Rs.175-250 a day. The work place is unsafe. The workers have no social security, compensation to injuries, access to drinking water, and health care.

Migrant labour, is an outcome of the demand for cheap labour. So, the contractors pay them a pittance and suck their blood making them work in inhuman conditions. The slums where they reside are unhygienic and 10-15 people live in a single room.

India has the world's highest accident rate among construction workers. These labourers often work in very difficult and dangerous positions and terrains. The construction workers have to work at high altitudes, falling from which may cause ultimate death. The industrial workers have to operate gigantic machines mishandling of which might result in loss of life. No safety standards are maintained wherever such labourers are engaged. No or just a petty insurance is paid for the loss of life at work. A recent study by the International Labor Organization shows that 165 out of every 1,000 workers are injured on the job.

Most of the migrants belong to socially deprived sections of society with less or no education at all. Often trapped in a situation of debt and bondage, their family conditions are impoverished and they seek refuge in their work which grants them self worth and dignity. Separation from dear ones is a major cause of their unhappiness. The Indian daily Hindustan Times on 14th October 2007, revealed that according to a study by a Government Institute, 77% of the population i.e. nearly 840 million 2 Indians live on less than Rs.20 (40 cents) a day. Indian agriculture became non remunerative, taking the lives of 100,000 peasants during the period from 1996 to 2003, i.e. a suicide of an Indian peasant every 45 minutes. Hence, the rural people from the downtrodden and backward communities and backward regions such as Bihar, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh travel to far distances seeking employment at the lowest rungs in construction of roads, irrigation projects, commercial and residential complexes.

Uncertainty about their future is evident from their responses, however, they are hopeful that they will not be unhappy in the days to come.

Conclusion

The challenge is that migrants usually form a class of invisible workers. They work in poor conditions, with no access to government services and schemes, which are usually available to other workers. There are different risks in source and destination areas. Needs of family members, including infants, children, adolescents and elderly who accompany migrant workers or are left behind in source areas also need to be addressed.

Potentially negative costs and risks for migrant workers that need to be mitigated include:

1. Lack of awareness among migrants about their rights as 'workers' and as 'migrant workers'
2. Unscrupulous labour agents who coerce workers and do not pay minimum wages as stipulated by law
3. Enforcement of laws and protection of rights of workers during migration and at worksites
4. Poor and unsafe working and living conditions, lack of occupational health and safety
5. Greater threat of nutritional diseases, occupational illnesses, communicable diseases, alcoholism, HIV and AIDS amongst migrant populations.

Challenges

Trade unions with their organisational structures, organizing skills can take on the employers, Policy makers and governments for a better deal to the Migrant Workers and contribute for social harmony and sustainable growth. Trade Unions have been working for defending and promoting Trade Union Rights and Human Rights, but it is high time, that, they take up the Migrant Workers Rights and address the causal aspects of the "cause and effect relationship" of migration, so that, the conditions which create migrant labour are addressed and necessary policy shifts and alternatives are created.

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