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Migration, Representations and Social Relations: Experiences of Jharkhand Labour to Western Uttar Pradesh

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ABSTRACT *Studying a stream of migration from Jharkhand to western Uttar Pradesh (UP), this article focuses on the work and life experiences of migrant labour from tribal India. Based on an in-depth study of a Jharkhand village, alongside a briefer stint at the destination village in UP, it examines the micro-level nuances and complexity of migrant labour movements and their often unexpected and unrecognised social consequences, particularly, the renegotiation of class and gender relations at home and the destination. Apart from pointing to the deep interconnections between the relations of production and reproduction, it demonstrates how the use of distinct representations of work and life due to spatial distanciation contribute to renegotiating both labour relations and social identities.*

Introduction

‘Who can like this work? We work from dawn to dusk, day in and out. Peeling the sugarcane is not easy: the spines make your hands bleed. My employer does not beat me like many others do, but there is no dearth of prods and insults. I don’t think I will come next year’, says Manjhi Tudu,¹ a Santal migrant farm servant working in the fields of Ram Chaudhry, a Jat farmer of Kalsi.

Every year hundreds of Manjhis from Jharkhand travel to the irrigated high productivity agricultural areas of North West India, the so-called Green Revolution belt, working arduously long hours to earn what they can. Circular migration, much of it seasonal, comprises an integral part of the livelihood strategies of a large number of poor people living in agriculturally marginal areas (Deshingkar & Farrington, 2009, p. 1). Some households barely manage to survive, while a few with some resources accumulate wealth over time (Mosse et al., 2002). It is contended that most would be worse off if they depended solely on local employment (Kothari, 2003; Rogaly & Rafique, 2003), yet the progression from survival to security of livelihoods cannot be taken for granted. Households and individuals are not unified entities. Earnings and savings from migration vary by ethnic group, gender, occupation, wage rates, living costs, contracting arrangements and debts. In addition to the access to material resources and social networks, individual aspirations and perceptions of work and leisure, time horizons and rates of time preference, and strategies for ensuring future security are central to the experience and outcomes of migration.

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Important in shaping livelihood opportunities, choices and outcomes are the nature and role of the democratic state in India. While claiming to be responsible and accountable to the people, especially the poor and vulnerable, it is far from this in its 'everyday practice' (Fuller & Beneri, 2001). Notwithstanding processes of liberalisation and democratic decentralisation, the Indian state continues to be driven by elite interests and patronage ties (Corbridge & Harriss, 2000; Corbridge, Williams, Srivastava & Véron, 2005), with informal structures of caste dominance, patronage and brokerage influencing the nature and terms of inclusion in the migration process (Mosse, 2007), especially in a context where spatial, regional, caste and gender inequalities have intensified over the last two decades, as admitted by the Approach Paper to the 11th Plan (Rao, 2010b).

Meillasoux (1981), theorising the relationship between persistent low wages and migration patterns of rural labour, notes that the implication of permanent migration for capitalism would be the need to pay for both the immediate labour time of the worker and the costs of biological and social reproduction of the labour force. Circular migrants can be exploited by drawing their labour during the long duration when they have no work at home, in a context of mono-cropping, yet have the back-up of their domestic production to meet the costs of family maintenance and reproduction. Such rotating migration establishes a double labour market, where the labour is divided between self-production at home and production for the employer, while also supporting a discriminatory ideology based on notions of skills, ethnicity and poverty (Meillasoux, 1981, p. 115).

The Indian National Sample Survey data show that a very high proportion of agricultural labour households actually own land, close to 76–87 per cent in the tribal concentration pockets of Chattisgarh, Jharkhand and Rajasthan (Shah, 2009). Their seasonal migration and low wages are assured by a failure of state policy to support largely rain fed, low-productivity agriculture, to ensure alternate local employment opportunities and basic services, or to implement existing legislation. Laws such as the Minimum Wages Act, 1948, and the Inter-state Migrant Workmen Act, 1979,² can potentially protect migrant labour, but mechanisms for putting them into practice, especially in dispersed, rural areas, hardly exist (Bremner, 1985, 1996).

This article's focus is not on state policy per se, but in conceptualising migration experiences and returns it is important to locate the debate within the local political economy contexts, as the interaction between local factors and a range of political, economic and social institutions at different levels (macro, meso and micro) shape migrant agency and ultimately their experiences and outcomes within particular contexts (Collinson, 2009). Recent developments in theorising migration and social change have delineated the complexity, contextuality and multi-level mediations of migratory processes with rapid global changes on the one hand and relations of class, gender, ethnicity and other social cleavages that embody hierarchies of power and social status on the other (Van Hear, 2010; Castles & Miller, 1998). In particular, they have focused on the mutual interactions between human agency and structural factors and called for a re-embedding of studies of migration in wider social theory (Bakewell, 2010; Castles, 2010).

These developments, while important, remain largely materialistic in their scope. The ways in which migration shapes the identities and self-representations of both the migrant workers and the employers, and the implications of these symbolic constructions for contesting and renegotiating hierarchical social relations at home and the destination, remain under-studied. Issues of dignity, surveillance and control over work are as important in accounts of oppression as conditions of work and compensation, calling attention not just to the non-economic drivers of migration, but equally to the potential gap between real-life experience and its representation. Using the idea of public and hidden transcripts (Scott, 1990), that point to elements of performance as a strategy to resist structures of domination and subordination, we examine how migrant workers use spatial distancing³ to represent their work and life in ways that uphold a sense of dignity and self-respect. The effects of this can be seen in both the material and symbolic-normative domains.

Studies of transnational migration have over the last two decades increasingly emphasised the need to understand migrant agency, social relations and economic patterns across source, destination and transit locations (Massey et al., 1998, Collinson, 2009), yet such studies are more limited in the context of internal migration.⁴ This article seeks to compare the economic processes and labour

relations at home and the destination, through the lens of the migrant workers' experiences. Apart from working conditions and labour regimes, examining the strategies of control used by the Jat employers and resistance by the Santal labour highlights the deep interconnections between the economic and social relations of production and reproduction and its gendered subtext, within and across three domains – the dominant group of the Jats, the subordinate Santals and the interaction between the two societies.⁵ Work and earning is ultimately linked to people's aspirations and hopes for a better life, not just through materially secure livelihoods, but in the social relations shaping their lives, the expansion of choices and opportunities and the public recognition of their personal dignity and identities.

The research primarily involved studying a village in-depth, here called Mahari, in Jharkhand's Sahebganj district. A village census was conducted between August 2006 and March 2007 to understand local livelihoods and the context of migration. Based on a preliminary analysis of this data, a second round of fieldwork was conducted in June–July 2008. Through in-depth interviews with a small group of migrants and non-migrants, mainly Santals (16), but also a few Muslims (4) and Hindus (4), insights into micro-level experiences of migration and the variables that influence the decisions to migrate were gained. A major stream of migration, in the words of the migrants, was to 'work in' or 'cut' sugarcane in Uttar Pradesh (UP). This migration stream has grown in the last two decades, though lack of official data on such internal migration makes it difficult to estimate the total number of migrants.

A highly developed large village, Kalsi, in Muzaffarnagar district, UP, was identified as the main destination by a large number of the migrants (Figure 1). A briefer visit was made to Kalsi in January–February 2009 to understand better the dynamics of migration and the role it plays in the social and political processes of the region. In-depth interviews with four Jat employers, alongside interactions with their wives and other family members, and one Jat jobber were conducted. This last meeting was arranged by a Mahari jobber, who met us in Kalsi.

The Context

Jharkhand lags behind UP, especially its western districts, which form a prosperous agrarian belt, in its levels of development, communication and provision of basic services and civic amenities, with rural poverty estimates of 52 per cent and 43 per cent respectively in 2004–2005 against a national average of 42 per cent (GOI, 2009). Sahibganj district, with a poverty rate of 55 per cent, literacy rate of 38 per cent and immunisation rate of 7 per cent, is amongst India's 50 worst districts in terms of human development and the ninth most 'backward' district overall (Borooah & Dubey, 2007). Muzaffarnagar district, one of India's most prosperous, does better across all these indicators. However, it is amongst the 100 districts with the highest infant mortality rates and lowest female to male sex ratios in India (Borooah & Dubey, 2007). Significant gaps and differences exist between and within groups in both areas, with the Hindus in Jharkhand and the Jats in western UP doing better than the other groups across education and development indicators, though worse in gender equality as seen in lower sex ratios.

Mahari, with 330 households, divided into three hamlets, occupied respectively by the Hindus⁶ (94 households), Muslims (60 households) and Santals (176 households), reveals a clear distinctiveness of livelihood profiles and well-being indicators according to ethnicity and religious identity. The Santals, classified as Scheduled Tribes in the Indian Constitution, constitute 9 per cent of Jharkhand's total population, but 42 per cent in Sahibganj district. Over 95 per cent of the Santals in Mahari own land and report agriculture as their main occupation. The land is undulating, rainfed and with little technical support for water management or enhancing yields, the area is largely mono-cropped with paddy during the monsoons. Productivity is low, about 1.5 tons per hectare, against an all-India average of three tons per hectare, ensuring food for just a few months after the harvest (Rao, 2008, p. 149). Irrigated acreage in the Santal Parganas has stagnated at around 15 per cent post Independence (Bhalla & Singh, 2001). Migration is hence a virtual necessity and an integral part of the livelihood strategies for the Santals, with at least one migrant from every three households.⁷

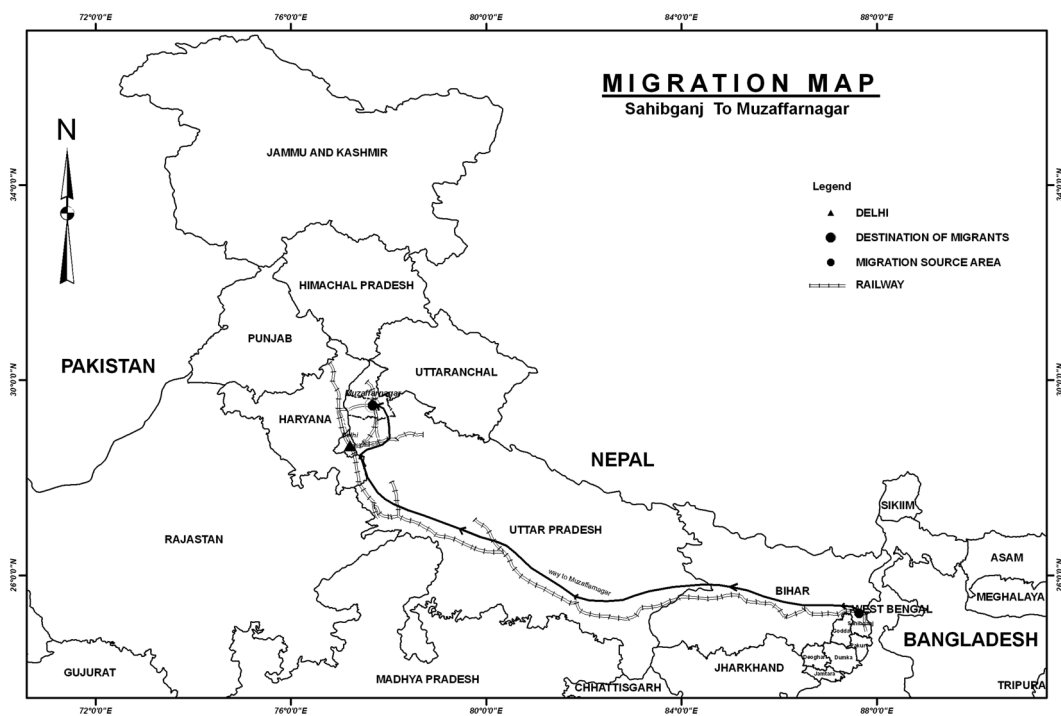


Figure 1. Migration map: Sahibganj to Muzaffarnagar

The village survey revealed that the largest migration stream (over 70 per cent of all migrants), to Muzaffarnagar district, is dominated by Santal men, who leave the village after ploughing their fields and transplanting paddy (in August), to return only the following year before the start of planting (May) (Rao, 2009). Ploughing is a male preserve, but also confirms their identities as landowners and cultivators (*chasa hor*) (Rao, 2008). Wives of the migrants manage all other farm operations – weeding, harvesting, threshing and storage of the grain; sometimes also working as labour for other farmers in the locality, often Hindu landowners. Where the home cultivation is totally unviable or the plot too small, the wife may migrate along with the husband. Such instances however are still few. Women prefer to migrate to West Bengal, closer to home, for shorter durations of time, for paddy transplanting and harvesting work, given the responsibility they also bear for managing their homes (Rao, 2008).

Schooling in Mahari is poor and a majority of Santal and Muslim children drop out before completing primary schooling (Rao, 2010a). Only seven Santal boys have completed secondary education, two of whom are currently studying to graduate, and no girls. In the absence of social contacts in the bureaucracy and money to pay bribes, they find schooling unhelpful in gaining jobs. As Samuel, 32, who graduated in 2001, noted ‘I was appointed only as a helper in this school on a 10-year contract, and a monthly salary of Rs 2000.⁸ I have to support my family and this is totally insufficient, yet without money to pay bribes I am unable to get a job.’ Elections to the local government (*panchayats*) were held in Jharkhand only in October 2010. In the absence of a local governance structure which could be held accountable for the functioning of institutions like the school and health centre, or indeed development programmes, their operations have been inadequate.

The Muslims are largely landless, but rather than agricultural labour, engage in petty trading (in livestock, cloth, household products) and casual labour, both in the locality and in urban centres like Delhi. Several Muslim young men were working in offices (as security guards), hotels, restaurants and factories in and around Delhi, and a few, like Ahmed, have used this experience to build the social networks needed to turn into labour suppliers themselves. Muslim women do not actively seek work

outside the home. While shunned by the Hindus, the Muslims treat the Santals as being lower in status and more 'backward' than them.⁹

The Hindus are divided into two groups. The better-off Hindus (including Sah, Thakur and Teli, all classified as Other Backward Castes) have land and education and take up formal and informal white collar and service provision jobs like insurance agents, newspaper reporters, teachers, tutors, doctors and moneylenders, or work as government contractors. They hire Santals to cultivate their lands, with the women largely playing supervisory roles. There is also a large group of poorer, assetless Hindus who live off the illegal coal trade in the area, alongside some who engage in traditional artisanal work such as pottery (kumhar) and iron-smithy (lohar) (Rao, 2010a). Women help their husbands in the household enterprise, occasionally seeking wage work in the homes of the better-off Hindus. While the Santals work as agricultural labour for the Hindu landlords, there is minimal social interaction between them.

Muzaffarnagar district, in contrast, has benefited greatly since the adoption of Green Revolution technologies in the late 1960s. Agriculture is highly capitalised, tractors and tubewells are common (Jeffrey, 2003). One of the richest districts in the country, sugarcane and wheat are the major crops and income-earners. The district has eight sugar mills, each governed by a Cane Growers' Society, taking responsibility for the purchase and processing of the cane. Despite some fluctuation in prices and consequently production of sugarcane over the last few years across India, the sugarcane acreage has not declined substantially (Retrieved on 13 June 2011 from: <http://muzaffarnagar.nic.in/dco.htm>).

Kalsi's population also consists of three main groups – the Jats, Muslims and Dalits. The former two are landowners, seeking to diversify into trade and formal and preferably white collar employment, the latter are largely wage workers. Amongst the Jats, as Santosh, 22, explained, 'it is rare to find an illiterate person, whether a man or a woman, in the present generation'. Schooling has been central to parental ambitions of securing salaried, public sector employment for their sons and hypergamous marriages for their daughters. Yet given the lack of formal sector jobs, Jat young men over time have either acquired clerical jobs in the informal economy or moved into managerial/supervisory roles in agriculture. Some have gone into business, including the 'school provisioning' business. Muslims have focused on strengthening artisanal and trade-based activities, rather than investing in education.

Illiteracy is confined to the Dalits and Muslims, though with a long history of Dalit political mobilisation in the region, this too is changing (Pai, 2007). Several Dalits have used state affirmative action policies to secure formal sector jobs and, being close to Delhi, others have migrated for casual work, thus resisting working for the local Jat landlords at low wages. A large number still work locally as casual wage labourers, their levels of dependence on the Jats however having significantly declined (Jeffrey and Lerche, 2000; Leiten, 2003; Lerche, 2003). The Jats and Muslim landowners are interspersed in the main habitation of Kalsi, the Dalits live in a separate settlement. Though labour relations are maintained, social interactions between the three groups are minimal.

We now discuss the evidence on the process of migration itself, the characteristics of the migrant workers, the nature of labour regimes and relations, its implications for wider relations of production and reproduction and their representation at both the destination and the source villages.

The Migration Experience

Most migrants to Kalsi are young Santal men above 18, around 80 per cent of them illiterate. Due to constraints of language and location, lacking both social networks at the destination and financial resources at home, they depend on village-level agents, mostly Muslim youth, to facilitate migration. The work stretches over a period of nine months. The regular cycle is August/September to the last week of May but in case of need, migrants are sought for a shorter duration from November to March. Incomes are predictable; hence, despite involving hard manual work, such migration offers security in terms of meeting immediate food, health and educational needs.

Ahmed, 23, a farm servant for several years, and now a contractor, explained the logic of the migration process:

There is high demand for agricultural labour in Saharanpur and Muzaffarnagar areas. The boys can easily find work with different farmers. The large farmers don't cheat the labourers as they have to get the work done on time. A labourer can cut about 20 quintals of sugarcane a day. The harvest season lasts from September 15 to March 25, then the fields have to be cleared and the new crop planted. The weeding is over by May. From June to August there is not much work so the labourer returns home. At home, there is no electricity for irrigation so we can only produce one crop.

Migrant work, by fitting into the long duration of the lean season at home, enables the workers to earn cash without depriving them of their identity as cultivators. The employers secure round-the-clock labour for relatively low wage payments.

Labour Regimes and Relations

Mahari's Santals all own small plots (84 per cent are marginal or small farmers with less than two hectares), and engage in subsistence paddy cultivation based primarily on household labour. While representing themselves as self-employed, owner-cultivators, with insufficient production for survival, the Santals hire out their labour to the landowning Hindus – men to prepare the land and bunds, and women for weeding, transplanting and harvesting. Local wage rates are Rs 50 per day for ploughing, Rs 25 for transplanting and weeding and 5 kg of paddy for harvesting (village census data). Minoti Soren, 35, noted,

The wages are low, but being in the locality, we get paid. But the women stand nearby and supervise us, ensuring we don't leave early. They grumble, but don't say too much, as they need us to do the work. We get a short lunch break and continue till the evening. Everything is expensive, so we do it.

Wages are low, food limited and services inadequate, yet being in the village, periods of intensive work are interspersed with seasonal breaks and socialisation with fellow Santals, relieving somewhat the harshness of everyday life.

The situation in Kalsi is a complete contrast. Baiju Soren, 26, married and with two young children, is the *naukar* (servant) in Sanjay's household. He speaks little and is praised by his employers. Baiju came with seven other migrants brought by Ilyas. He says, 'Ilyas gives money to my parents and wife when he goes home. There is the security that he will definitely find us work here. I studied only till class two, hence will not be able to manage on my own. I will take home about Rs 10–11,000 when I return in May.'

This was Baiju's third visit to Kalsi. He highlighted the security and assured earnings instead of the nature or conditions of work and life. Constantly under the gaze of the employer, Baiju could not talk much when we met him at the destination. His deference and conformity to the standards expected, did not necessarily reflect consent, yet was a way of ensuring that he received his full wages at the end of his stay, and a level of self-respect and dignity was maintained (cf. Scott, 1990, p. 3).

Sanjay was upset as the other boy who came with Baiju ran away after three months, though he had to pay the agent his full commission. Sanjay's mother points out,

That fellow had to be woken in the morning and prodded to work. Look at Baiju. He returns from the fields, chops fodder for the cattle, then goes to sleep. The power comes at 11 pm, he gets up and switches on the water-pumps. He does not have to be woken up. When the water is filled, three hours later, he goes to sleep and gets up on his own.

Estimates of 'Jharkhandi' farm servants in Kalsi vary from 400 to 1000. Approximately one such servant is needed for every hectare of land. While the labour requirement can be calculated based on area cultivated, estimating the number of migrant labour is harder. This is because each farmer

employs one or at most two labourers, and once the labourer is handed over to a farmer by the labour contractor, he stays in his home and has little interaction with his peers. Regulation hardly applies.

The grueling work can stretch up to 18 hours a day. Cleaning the courtyard, feeding and washing the cattle, cutting fodder, preparing the fields for cultivation, irrigating the crops, in brief doing whatever agricultural or non-agricultural task asked by the employer or any household member. When there is no work in the fields, they are given something else to do, like breaking stones in the field and removing them. Except for Holi,¹⁰ the migrant farm servants do not get weekly holidays. They are not given separate living quarters and sleep in the fields, in the pump house or on the verandah of the *gher* (homestead). The fields are used for defecation and bathing is at the pump house. They do not cook their own food, but are given the same from the household: vegetarian food, mainly *rotis* (wheat bread), *dal* (lentils) and a vegetable. But they can eat their fill.

Sugarcane-related work is only a part of the work and, going by the field observations as well as the landlords' versions, makes up only a small part of the tasks performed by the migrant farm servant. Most of the sugarcane is cut and sliced for transportation to the factory by the local Dalits working under the *gole* system, wherein they only receive the leafy tops of sugar cane (*gole*) in return for harvesting this crop (Leiten & Srivastava, 1999; Lerche, 1999). Krishan, a Jat farmer in his 60s, explained:

Earlier, the *kamins* (workers) would do many things in exchange for payments of wheat at harvest time. This included the barber (*nai*) and the *barboojas* (a caste that parched grains). The Jatavs (a sub-group of Chamars)¹¹ would cut and peel the sugarcane and get the leaves and sometimes attend to the bunding work in the fields. But over time all this changed.

Most of the cane peeling work is family based and still done by the Chamars, preferred in fact to the migrants. The Jat landlords now pay them a wage in addition to the *gole*. The present wage rate in the region is Rs 120 per day plus a meal for seven hours work, yet in practice this varies according to the nature of prevalent patron–client ties. While the Chamars here continue to depend upon the Jats for fodder for their cattle and access to fields in which to defecate, limiting their capacity to bargain for higher wages or obtain speedy and full payment for their labour (cf. Jeffery, Jeffrey & Jeffrey 2008, p. 4), this to some extent has been set off by the politicisation of the Chamars in western UP since the 1970s (Pai, 2007), alongside the emergence of numerous off-farm employment opportunities. They are employed as daily wage labourers on farms, brick-kilns or small industrial units near the village, and paid minimum wages. Most farmers stressed that given the low returns from agriculture, engaging locals was unaffordable.

Paralleling trends among rich farmers in Gujarat (Rutten, 1995; Gidwani, 2001), wealthier Jat households now protect their sons from physical work on the land by employing a farm servant, usually a migrant tribal, on a relatively long term (6–10 month) contract. Explaining this transition, a group of farmers said,

The tribals work hard, but they are rather weak as they don't get much food at home. But more than that, employing local labour has many problems. First, it is difficult to find someone locally to work for you. Secondly, they keep going home (even if they are from some other village) or their relatives keep dropping in. All this interferes with the work. We can't pay them for doing nothing.

The migrants, apart from fulfilling immediate needs, hope to accumulate some savings to help diversify their livelihoods at home (cf. Rodgers & Rodgers, 2011). They strive to purchase assets such as livestock, a bicycle to make local travel easier, and improve the productivity of their own agriculture. Anil Murmu, 22, is a case in point. He studied in a mission school yet withdrew before completing secondary school. In 2005, he travelled to Kalsi with others from the village to work as a *naukar* on a monthly salary of Rs 1000, in addition to food and accommodation. He was frustrated, as despite his education the only opportunity for work appeared to be as an agricultural labourer. But this

frustration led him to think of other ways in which he could fulfil his aspirations. While working as a labourer, he developed links with other sugarcane farmers and turned into a labour contractor. He took 17 migrants in 2008, and this gave him savings of Rs 20,000. He opened a bank account. He bought a mobile phone as, apart from helping stay in touch with the employers, it is a marker of status. Very few Santals have mobile phones, a privilege of the educated Hindu castes. Yet, in 2009, Anil mentioned giving up labour contracting. Being a tribal, the Jat farmers found him lacking in the communication and negotiation skills necessary for a contractor, and preferred others over him. While Deshingkar and Farrington (2009) postulate that, over time, knowledge and experience gained may allow a migrant to move up the ladder from survival to accumulation, clearly this does not hold true in this instance.

In contrast, Ahmed, whom we discuss in the next section, has done better and expanded his networks into Delhi. He explained, 'I come to Delhi every two–three months. I stay with my sister in Govindpuri but go and meet everyone around, even in Gurgaon. It is important to build up relationships.' This points to the complexity of social relationships, including those of authority, at home and at the destination. Anil owns land and is more educated than Ahmed, and while his skills and knowledge are recognised at home, he is unable to command the same authority at the destination. Controlling labour is clearly not enough to gain such authority, not even the accumulation of capital and symbols of wealth such as a bank account and mobile phone. Santals like Anil strive to create relations of reciprocity and redistribution in their desire for social parity and dignity, yet the exchanges at the destination reinforce hierarchies based on ethnicity and language, rather than education or even capital, giving credence to Meillasoux's (1981) contention that identity is crucial to any transaction, or Bakewell's (2010) emphasis on structures having a life of their own.

Mediating the Labour Process: The Role of Contractors and Agents

The labour contractors are familiar with both the source and the destination. They operate through a process of subcontracting, with a few large farmers at the destination negotiating labour supply for themselves and others in the locality. Yuvraj of Kalsi is a labour contractor. He visits Mahari and nearby villages annually to recruit labour. Over time, he has developed close links with Ahmed and Ilyas, whom he can rely on for bringing additional labour, if required.

On his role as a contractor, Ahmed says,

Recently, Yuvraj, the Jat landlord, asked Ilyas and I to be his agents and supply labour from our villages. Each agent has a counterpart at the destination. The farmers who need labour contact Yuvraj, who contacts me. A commission of Rs 3000 was paid this year for each labourer supplied. Yuvraj takes Rs 500, another Rs 800 is spent for travel and food expenses. Of the remaining, I pay Rs 500–1000 as a cash advance to the labourer. On an average, I save Rs 1000 per labourer, my responsibility being to ensure that they reach the work-place safely on time and return home at the end of the season. This year I supplied over 50 labourers. Since I belong to Mahari and have been working in Delhi for 10 years, people trust me.

There is some variation in the wages paid to the labourers. 'It all depends on the worker's experience and the years he has worked with a farmer', explains Ahmed. Thus Sanjay's father pays Rs 1300 per month for Baiju, who has been working with him for three years now. Apart from the money, everyone in Sanjay's household is emphatic that Baiju gets food three times a day plus clothes and once in a while some alcohol. However, a newcomer would get Rs 1000 according to Yuvraj, who jokes that there is an 'increment system' here too.

Why don't labourers like Baiju then go directly to employers, once they have established links with them as noted in the case of neighbouring Bihar (Rodgers & Rodgers, 2011)? Landlords like Sanjay say they are willing to pay a part of the commission to the labourers (Rs 2000 instead of Rs 3000), but blame the 'lack of education', tribal culture and lack of entrepreneurial skills for not entering into a direct agreement. Without the agent, they are not sure that the worker will actually come and be on time. Ahmed and some workers have a different view. According to them, some employers cheat and

physically abuse the workers. The system of intermediaries, both at the source and the destination, protects both the workers and the landlords, ‘We actually do unrecognized social work (*samaj seva*)’, says Ahmed. Rather than being exploiters, they highlight their role in rendering a form of social protection in the absence of any regulation by the state. Being from the same village, Ahmed feels responsible for ensuring that the workers get their dues at the end of their contract. At the same time, if there is a problem with the worker, he also takes the responsibility of providing the employer with a replacement to continue the work uninterrupted.

Interestingly, while contractors like Ahmed perceive themselves as benign social facilitators for their Santal co-villagers, helping them get jobs and earn a living, they also contribute to reproducing the cycle of labour migration and control, for the sake of their own livelihood. They ensure that wages are paid; but contracts are agreed at a very low level – the cash component being less than a third of the daily agricultural minimum wage. Food and accommodation are seen to make good this gap, but they cannot fully justify the low wage.

Strategies of Domination and Control

Having discussed the working conditions and labour relations of the migrant workers, we now briefly analyse the strategies of the Jats to control the labour, life and social processes of the migrants. Adopting a gendered lens provides new insights into how gender asymmetries both shape and are shaped by the reorganisation of relations of production and reproduction due to migration, though in different ways, in both the source and destination areas.

By assigning tasks to fill up the time of the labourer, the Jat farmers establish control over time use (both work and leisure) and mobility. A discourse is set up of a good servant that stresses hard, uncomplaining work round the clock. The physical arrangements for living and working, which follow from the tasks allocated, ensure segregation of the migrant, allowing few opportunities for socialising with other migrants. The closely watched movement of the labourer to the fields, home to eat and sleep and look after the cattle also prevents the snatching of labour by other landlords. As Scott (1990) notes, while servility of the subordinate requires watchfulness and attuning of response to the mood of the power-holder, the dominant too seek to preserve a public reality of unanimity and consent, where contradictions are concealed and discord is kept out of sight. One way of achieving this is by keeping the subordinates atomised and under close supervision, abolishing a social realm where ‘hidden transcripts’ as expressions of frustration, may be generated.

Physical violence is uncommon. Control is established through co-option into the landlord’s household. Many landlords having visited the source area, note that the labourers have nothing at home, no work, no food, no clothes; but in Kalsi, they are treated very well, get plenty to eat, what the household does. Free clothes are given and there is no short-changing on wages. And if the labourer’s family back home faces a crisis, like someone falling ill, the farmer sends money immediately. Using the language of kinship, of treating the worker as a member of the household, does not just mask relations of exploitation inherent in class domination, but also allows for the over-exploitation of their labour (Meillasoux, 1981, p. 86; Rao, 2011).

The arduous work at the destination exhausts the migrants. As 25 year old Manik Murmu said, ‘I worked for six months. It is not possible for us to migrate every year, as the work is too strenuous. I stayed in the landlord’s house and got food, but worked every day of each week. There were no holidays.’ Instead of demanding better working conditions (and developing class consciousness), the migrants see this as a temporary option for four to five years. Their short time horizons vis-à-vis such migration contribute to a higher rate of time preference, making them accept lower wages and hard working conditions for the immediate security and benefits it provides. This contrasts with the Dalits, who are local, and in their longer-term interests have been able to mobilise and secure wage rate increases through displaying a lower time preference.

Baiju was more expansive when interviewed in Mahari. Given the social space in terms of unmonitored physical locations, free time, and also the presence of other people who speak the same language and have had similar experiences, they discuss the nature of toil, the tough conditions

and their counter-strategies, including flight, feet-dragging and not returning the next year. Flight leads to loss of commission paid by farmer to agent, so is resented by farmers. And as Ahmed pointed out, 'If a labourer runs away, the farmer not only faces a monetary loss, he stands to lose face in the community. He often becomes the butt of village jokes.' Yet such instances are infrequent, the workers feel assured that they will receive their wage at the end of their contract and can then go home – the need to put up with these conditions is not permanent in their lives.

In Kalsi, migrants' sexuality is controlled by carefully monitoring their movements and also generally not allowing their wives to come unless there are no able women to perform the domestic chores in the farmer's home. Even then, the wages are very low, so not a preferred option for Santal women, who stay back to cultivate their fields. Talamai Hembrom, 28, said,

I got married to Sunil in 2004. We had started living together, which is accepted in Santal society but his parents disapproved and did not give us any land. His mother feels that I do not work enough at home or in the fields and I do not clean the house properly. Being landless, we decided to migrate to earn some money. In 2002, I went to Muzaffarnagar with Sunil and worked in the landlord's house. He owned a ration shop which I cleaned. I worked there for nine months and was paid Rs. 400 monthly along with clothes and food. Sunil worked in the fields for Rs. 900 monthly. We saved Rs. 10,000 to build ourselves a home and buy a pair of bullocks. We have leased in some land, so I no longer migrate.

Talamai's narrative raises an interesting issue about the gendered motivations for migration. A woman follows this migration stream only when they are landless. Childbirth ends such migration as the costs of reproducing and maintaining a future labour force are not borne by the landlords at the destination. Social reproduction remains the responsibility of the domestic economy. But migration here also challenges the established structures of authority within the village, enabling Talamai and Sunil to make a living despite parental disapproval and denial of a share in the land. Their immediate objective for migrating was saving money to access some land at home, a crucial consideration in reproducing Santal male identity. What then are the implications of these strategies for relations of production and reproduction and their representation at both the home and destination villages?

Representations of Work and Identity

Despite the ground realities of low wages and harsh working conditions, the Santals and the Jats talk about their experiences of the interaction in quite different terms. These are motivated by considerations of status and identity, dignity and self-esteem, much more than the everyday experience of material appropriation and exploitation. Dignity in fact is a public and a private attribute, a source of self-esteem, particularly to be preserved and built in one's closest circle of family and friends (Scott, 1990). In Mahari, the migrants claim they go for sugarcane work, but in Kalsi this is a small portion of what they do. Indeed, the contribution of migrant labour to sugarcane harvesting, unlike in western India, where seasonal migrants have virtually replaced local labour for cutting cane (Bremner, 1994), is substantially lower than that of the locals. The rigours of the work and the social indignity of being a farm servant are not mentioned. Amongst the Santal, for an adult male to be a farm servant, who has to perform non-agricultural chores when asked by the landlord, would be considered denigrating, given their self-representations as cultivators (Rao, 2008). It was only by going to the destination that this became apparent.

The Jats however claim to be doing a service by employing the Santals and treating them humanely, almost as members of their family. They speak of the intense poverty and lack of infrastructure and services in Mahari, and how in comparison the labourers have a comfortable life. Through the public articulation of their generosity and patronage, they justify their claims for legitimacy, as they too cannot take liberties with those symbols in which they have invested, and which contribute to their dominant status (Scott, 1990). In striving to sustain a single, unanimous public reality, the extent and nature of the work, including the hard schedules, are not explicitly mentioned.

Renegotiating Gender Relations

These production relations and their representations are intensely connected to the reproduction and reconstitution of gendered social relations at both the source and destination. For the Jat landlords, hiring a tribal migrant farm servant is both a need and a status symbol. It is a way of accessing cheap labour for essential farm work, keeping the local Dalit labour in check and adding to their prestige as landlords. Freed from farm labour, their sons can spend their time in education, in urban employment or business activities. Rai Singh, a 62-year-old Jat farmer, with four sons, points to the importance of diversification. His eldest son, Jaipal, practices as a veterinarian, the next, Sanjay, works as a temporary foreman in a sugar mill, while the younger two sons run a transport business and fertiliser agency respectively. His wife supervises Baiju, the migrant farm servant, while the daughters-in-law are almost entirely involved in home-making activities.

Many of the tasks traditionally performed by the Jat women, such as animal care, picking dung, and collecting and chopping fodder is handed to the migrant farm servant. The lack of Jat women's mobility is used as a pretext to enhance the labourer's work burden. Kavita, Sanjay's wife, a graduate, is now involved full time in cooking, cleaning, washing and other household chores. Having a farm servant has meant freedom from farm and livestock-related tasks, but has contributed to greater restrictions on her mobility. While she has two children, studying in middle school, she is not allowed to go to the market to buy clothes, even to the school to discuss her childrens' performance. They are allowed to walk between the home and the *gher* – a modern house built on a plot of land on the roadside, used for the cultivation of vegetables for domestic consumption and the keeping of cattle – but only with their saris covering their faces.

Jat women have little voice in their own conjugal relationship. Kavita was keen that her husband give up his part-time blue collar job in the sugar mill and start an English-medium kindergarten school in the village. 'After all, he is qualified and we have the necessary space', she said. She was willing to help him in this venture, but to no avail. She could not resist speaking about her second pregnancy, which was aborted following a scan which showed the sex of the foetus to be a girl. This experience had clearly upset her; even though it was several years ago and she subsequently had a son. Her critique, however, is only possible in private; in public, she performs the deferential role assigned to her.

While status for the household has clearly improved, the employment of a migrant worker has provided an opportunity for further controlling women's mobility and voice, by reducing their visible contributions to the productive process. Most Jat women like Kavita are highly educated and articulate, yet they are unable to transform their own conjugal relationships in egalitarian ways. In fact as Rai Singh, her father-in-law, pointed out, 'girls study more than boys. They are interested in studies. But parents also know that today no one will marry an uneducated girl'. Education here translates into status for the household, but does not improve Jat women's control over their own lives (cf. Jeffery & Jeffery, 1994). Despite material prosperity, structures of authority and control have intensified in both relations of production and reproduction vis-à-vis the tribal migrant farm servant and their own women. Effective political mobilisation has freed Dalit workers from such rigid control, though incidents of violent backlash seeking to re-establish this control are also visible.

For the Santal household, the conjugal unit is the locus of production and reproduction of both labour and food. The hard work at the destination for several months, with no breaks, wears the Santal male labourers down. They do come home with lump sum money, which is used for purchasing food, repairing the home, meeting health expenses and, if they are lucky, accumulating assets, all essential for household survival and reproduction, yet the social dimensions of their contributions at home are minimised. During their stay at the destination, communication with their homes and families are limited to occasional messages sent through the agent; their socialisation with fellow villagers is also restricted, limiting opportunities for association or a normal social life.

The possibility of migration and earning a living outside the village, however, provides scope for internal transformation. It enabled Talamai and Sunil to get married, challenging the authority of the kin elders in this process. Sunil's father tried to retain his authority by denying him his share of land,

given that he was not consulted in their matrimonial decision. Kinship becomes an ideological frame of reference for justifying social hierarchies through the control of marriage decisions and exchanges, but with the availability of alternatives to land as a productive enterprise and the declining value of local knowledge in the context of interactions with a wider economy and society, these are open to renegotiation.

While norms of seclusion are observed at the destination, these are not carried home as ideals by the migrant workers, as observed in other contexts (Rao, 2012). Tribal polity, marriage systems and culture are here premised on a degree of gender equality and collective solidarity, with both men and women sharing in production and reproduction. However, what has happened is that women's work and responsibilities have intensified during their husbands' absence – managing the farm and the home, earning or borrowing money for everyday expenses, looking after and educating the children. Reproduction and maintenance of the family draws exclusively on women's unpaid work, with enhanced burdens having implications for their health and leisure. Men too are drawn into both productive and reproductive work at the destination; this, however, contributes to reproducing Jat identity and status rather than their own.

Conclusions

Migration streams, studied at both the source and destination, offer a useful means to understand processes of identity construction and wider social change. Through a study of migrant experiences, this article has highlighted the importance of structures, especially of ethnicity and caste identity, and kinship and family relations, in shaping opportunities and livelihood trajectories, with the educated Santals not faring much better than their non-literate counterparts at the destination, a majority never progressing from coping to accumulative migration. Stereotypes of Santals as good agricultural labourers, dating back to the colonial period, have been perpetuated, and despite some investment in education, and their landowning status, they are unable to break free from existing social structures and relations of production which almost seem 'to exercise their own causal power, independently of the agency which produced them' (Parker, 2000, p. 73 quoted in Bakewell, 2010, p. 1696). While the migrants do exercise agency, the crucial role of ideology, status and identity in shaping migration outcomes challenges the emphasis placed on material resources and economic drivers of migration in earlier studies of circular migration, such as that of Deshingkar and Farrington (2009).

For policy, the analysis presented in this article indicates the need to pay attention not only to addressing the material deprivation contributing to regional inequalities, but equally the social drivers and consequences of labour movements across time and space. Women's contributions to agrarian livelihoods in particular need to be acknowledged so that gender asymmetries are not further aggravated.

Also missed are issues of governance and politicisation: why is it that Mahari continues to remain underdeveloped, despite its rich natural resources, and Kalsi so developed? The former has seen widespread mobilisation under the aegis of the Jharkhand movement, though focusing primarily on the control of natural resources – land, water and the forests – and breaking of relationships often described as being those of 'internal colonialism', that is, vis-à-vis local exploiters (Corbridge, 1988). State corruption, lack of attention to the provision of basic needs, the implementation of developmental programmes or indeed decentralisation through panchayats, have not been questioned to the same extent (cf. Corbridge et al., 2005) as in UP (Leiten, 2003). While the role of the state has not been the main thrust of this article, by perpetuating subsistence production through the relative neglect of agrarian development in Jharkhand, it plays a central role in maintaining visible disparity between the two regions and giving credence to the Jat discourse of patronage and support to labour.

With the local Dalit labour being highly politicised, demanding higher wages and refusing to accept the dominance of the Jats, the landlords of western UP have found a way out by recruiting migrant tribal labour through agents. Employed as farm servants, and set in competition with the local labour, the migrants perform a wide variety of agricultural and non-agricultural jobs under rather harsh

conditions. Having a farm servant is also a mark of prestige for the young Jats, who say they are 'farmers' and regard supervision as the main task of farming. The migrant workers contribute to agricultural production at the destination; they also contribute to the production of status for Jat landlords, allowing them to seek opportunities for diversification and upward social mobility.

For the Santals, the fixed contracts and the lump sum that comes at the end of the year provide some security and income. Collecting some symbols of distinction, such as clothes (jeans), mobile phones and mp3 players, creates the potential for enhancing status. While their immediate needs are met, this stream of migration however rarely contributes to substantial accumulation at home or shifts in exploitative labour relations at the destination.

Social relations based on age hierarchies and access to sources of information within the community, as well as gender relations, however, do potentially change. Status reproduction in UP, while facilitating Jat men's engagement in 'modern' economic activities, constrains women to 'traditional' activities outside the labour market, simultaneously enhancing controls over their mobility and voice, confirmed by statistics pointing to declining sex ratios. Amongst the Santals, while daily interaction and joint production is reduced due to male absence for a considerable part of the year and women's workloads increase, they are recognised as producers and their decisions respected. Gender asymmetry is then not just a product of the institutional and sociopolitical processes underlying migration, but also produces them at the same time (cf. Lutz, 2010, p. 1650).

The interactions between different social groups and economic systems discussed in this article point to the centrality of migration in the transformation of gender relations and authority structures, though often in contradictory ways. While embedded in unequal power relations, conceptualising gender as a process, where gender and wider social relations, identities and ideologies are fluid, not fixed (Mahler & Pessar, 2001), enables a deeper understanding of individual agency and social change. Roles change, as do responsibilities, particularly in the case of migration, which involves spatial separation for considerable periods of time (*vis-à-vis* the home), as well as interaction between different cultures of production and consumption (at the destination).

The gap that is often created between the actual experience and its representation opens the epistemological space for questioning the nature of reality itself. What constitutes 'reality' at a particular place and point in time is not just negated in the safety of the home but also spurs the articulation of alternate realities that seek to reconstitute and renegotiate accepted hierarchies of domination and exploitation. Such a spatial analysis, which focuses on the relations between the household and wider regional processes, between local social formations and rural production systems, between identities as lived experience and their representation, between various forms of agency and resistance, located within particular historical and political contexts, contributes to a more nuanced perspective on migration and its relationship to the social structures of production, but equally to social change and transformation.

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Notes

1. All names of respondents and places have been changed in the article.
2. The Act requires 'establishments' and 'contractors' to be registered with the government and agreements to be made with the workers. It applies only to those employing more than five migrant workers: http://pblabour.gov.in/pdf/acts_rules/interstate_migrant_workmen_regulation_of_employment_and_co.pdf.
3. Anthony Giddens (1981: 40) uses the terms to describe the 'stretching' of social systems across time and space, that is, the interaction with people who are absent in time or space entailed 'the expansion of interaction over space and its contraction over time'.

4. Rogaly et al.'s (2001) work in eastern India is an exception, as is Breman's (1985) work in western India.
5. The Jats are a dominant peasant caste in north India, who took the lead in the spread of the Green Revolution and benefited from the ensuing prosperity. The single largest tribal group in Jharkhand State, constituting 36 per cent of the Scheduled Tribe (ST) population, the Santals have a distinct language, Santali, which was recognised as a national language under Schedule VIII of the Constitution via the 92nd Amendment in 2003, yet they lag behind in terms of socio-economic status, with a majority still living below the poverty line. Retrieved from: http://censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/SCST/dh_st_jharkhand.pdf.
6. The Hindus include several sub-castes, such as potters (*kumhars*), oil-pressers (*telis*), ironsmiths (*lohars*) and moneylenders (*Sahs*), mainly classified as Other Backward Castes in national data sets.
7. Sixty-one Santals, 27 Muslims and 32 Hindu men reported their status as migrants during the survey. Amongst women migrants, 14 were Santal and two Hindu (Rao, 2009).
8. GBP 1 = INR 85, USD 1 = INR 54 as on 22 January 2013.
9. The Report of the Sachar Committee on the status of Muslims in India (GOI, 2007) found the STs to be the only group who fared worse than the Muslims.
10. Holi, the festival of colours, marks the start of spring and is celebrated in March each year.
11. While the Scheduled Castes (Dalits) and Scheduled Tribes (Adivasis/tribals) are administrative categories, benefiting from constitutionally guaranteed quotas for education and public employment, they are constituted of different sub-castes, tribes and clans, each with their distinct occupations, cultures and lifestyles. The Chamars are the major Scheduled Caste group in the study locality.

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