

explains how this figure was reached. Our observations and estimates suggest that several hundreds of thousands of people also migrate in the three other main seasons for employment in rice work.

Ourethnographic research, including life history interviews, in the study localities<sup>7</sup> suggests that seasonal migration has increased into the destination locality and out of three of the source area localities over the last 30 years. Although in the fourth source area locality, in Purbi Singhbhum district, seasonal migration had declined, this was not necessarily typical of the Purbi Singhbhum - east Medinipur stream as a whole. Overall, seasonal migration has continued to grow in the 1980s and 1990s. However, interviews with employers in five destination localities suggest that the source areas and recruitment mechanisms used by employers have changed over time. This change also reflects supply factors with, for example, the development of intensive irrigated agriculture in west Medinipur [see Rogaly et al 2000].

### *Migrant Workers and Their Employers?*

Each locality was selected to be illustrative of a particular sub-region. Table 3 summarises broad differences between each of the sub-regions in terms of agro-ecology, economic structure, and social identities. The migration survey showed patterns of seasonal migration to vary across the study localities.

Table 4 shows the number of people migrating out of and into the five localities during 1999-2000. Migration from the localities in Murshidabad and Purbi Singhbhum districts was highly gendered. Only men migrated out from these localities. Neither men nor women were predominant in the mixed sex migration from other localities. Outmigration was also patterned by season. For example, people from Purbi Singhbhum migrated only in the harvest seasons, while migration from the other study localities was common in all four main seasons.

We can see immediately that, contrary to popular stereotype, men travel for work in transplanting in large numbers. Moreover, contrary to what might have been expected, adult migrants take children with them in all seasons despite extremes of rain and mud at aman transplanting, cold at aman harvest, and heat at boro harvest.

The men, women and children migrating

for rice work in Bardhaman district are poor, though most cultivate on their own account back home and the livelihoods of many involve multiple activities, including, in different combinations, petty trade, processing, gathering and study. Migrants tend to be in scheduled social groups, whether castes or tribes, or according to religion.

Almost all seasonal migrants travel as bands or gangs. Gangs in the streams originating in Dumka district, Puruliya/Bankura districts and Purbi Singhbhum district<sup>8</sup> were usually mixed sex and often included children and infants. In contrast, almost all gangs in the Murshidabad-Bardhaman stream were entirely male with no accompanying children. Some

**Table 2: Characteristics of the Main Migration Seasons**

Season	Months	Conditions
Aman Transplanting	July-August	Heavy rain – standing in water to work; migrants avoid bringing children; snakes; clashes with own transplanting at source
Aman Harvest	November-January	Cold weather - risk of injury through threshing. Coincides with harvest work at source.
Boro Transplanting	February	Standing in water to work. In most source areas does not coincide with own work at source.
Boro Harvest	April-May	Extremely hot – hard manual work during day in open fields in temperatures of 40c and above. Risk of injury through threshing. Snakes. Work very intensive because of employers' need to avoid rain. Employers tense and employ more workers for shorter period than in aman harvest. Often leads to fever or diarrhoea as well as exhaustion among labourers. Does not coincide with own work at source but remittances may be useful for beginning of own monsoon transplanting.

**Table 3: Characteristics of the Study Localities and Sub-Regions**

Study Localities/ Sub-Region	Source or Dtnation	Agro-Ecology	Agrarian Structure	Group Self-Identifications
Bagri (Murshidabad)	Source (West Bengal) Men	Irrigated/ multiple cropped/ Flood prone/ Flat	Very very high pop density; exorbitant land prices; Local wage labour market; little tenancy; very high inequality in locality	Muslim majority vs Bengali; bagri vs rarh sub-regional identity (based on difference between east and west sides of Bhagirathi)
Santhal Pargana (Dumka)	Source (Jharkhand) migrants women, men and children	Rainfed/ Single cropped/ undulating hills	Low pop density; No land or wage labour market; much tenancy; Relatively less inequality in locality	Almost half pop Santhal (adivasi/tribe) – own language; strong ethnic identity vs others 'diku'. Strong sub-regional identity both as part of Jharkhand (vs Bengal) and within it
Purulia/Bankura	Source (West Bengal) migrants women, men and children	Rainfed/single- cropped plus/ drought prone/ undulating	Low pop density; land and wage labour markets; Less tenancy than Jharkhand localities; High inequality in locality	Many diverse caste and tribal identities including Mahato, Bauri, Santhal (many vs 'Bengali' caste Hindus). Strong sub- regional identity – 'unwanted child'
Purbi Singhbhum	Source (Jharkhand) migrants from locality men only but Santhal women also migrate in this stream	Rainfed/single cropped plus/ undulating	Low pop density; land and wage labour market; much tenancy; high inequality in locality	Many diverse caste and tribal identities including Mal, Mahato, Santhal, Sabar. Lack of strong regional identity despite separate dialect.
Bardhaman 'rice bowl'	Destination (West Bengal) receives migrant men, women and children from all above streams and others	Irrigated/ double- cropped/ Flat	High pop density; major wage labour market; active land market; little tenancy; high inequality in locality	Central to Bengal – culturally and geographically Strong religious (Hindu/ Mus) and caste identities



gangs leaving the source area study localities were made up of people of different 'jati' (as seen in relation to others in the source locality) but to differing degrees depending on the source locality. All-Muslim and all-Santhal groups were commonly formed in the Murshidabad and Dumka study localities respectively, though there were exceptions.

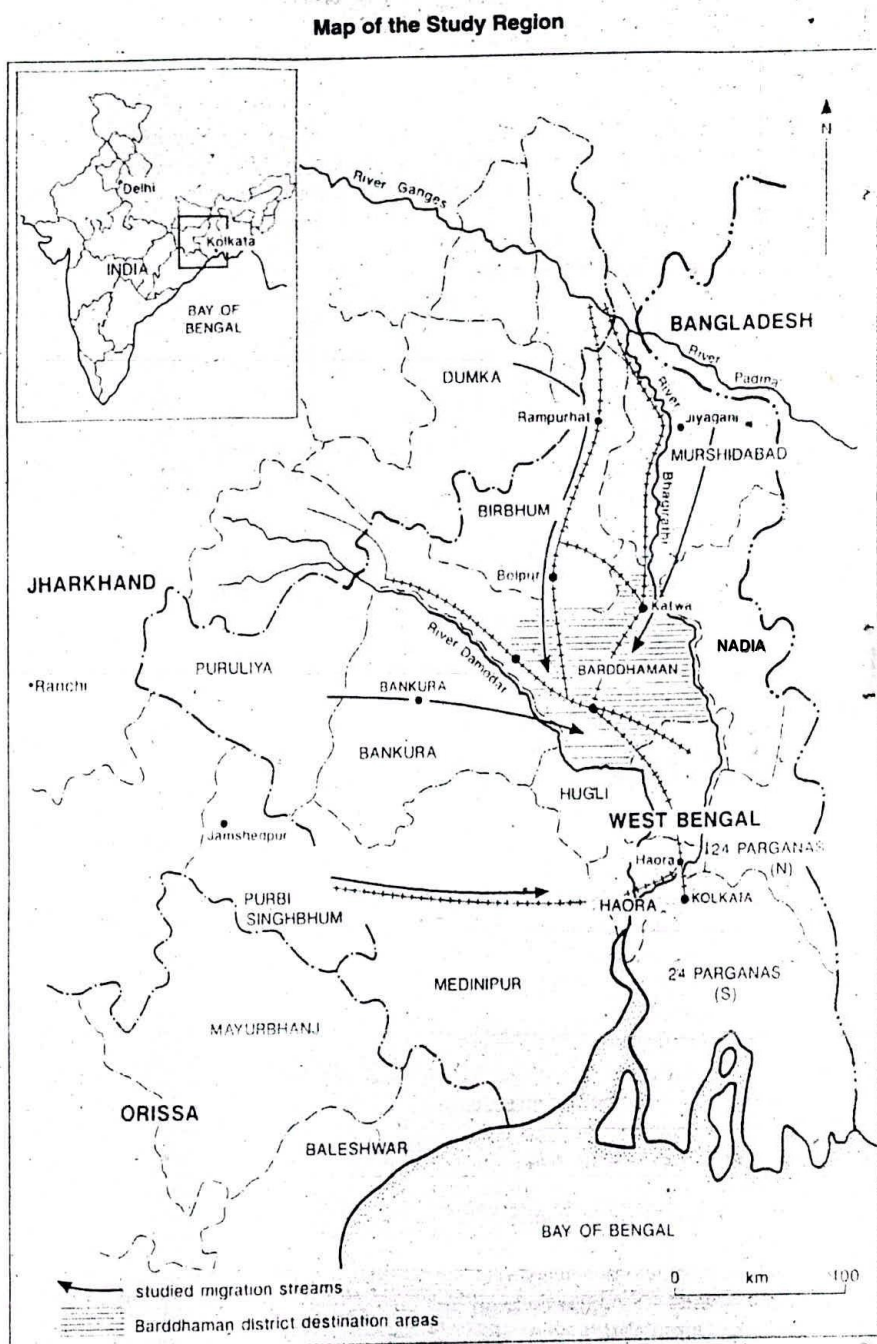
Employers may be tenant farmers or owner-occupiers. Most of the sampled employers in the studied destination area locality were owner-occupiers. Although all were Hindu, they were far from homogenous in terms of wealth, caste, education and occupational mix. The study locality included two scheduled castes, Doms and Bagdis, high caste Mahanto Bamun, and the peasant caste Aguris.<sup>9</sup> Employers of migrants included a local Bagdi labourer who cultivated a small area of land (1 bigha, or 0.3 acres, HH 55) and could borrow migrant workers recruited by his own regular employer. At the other end were employers, all Aguris, whose sons had studied to degree level, who received regular salaried income, and who controlled the trade in rice and fertiliser as well as relatively large areas of land (36 bighas, or 12 acres, HH 5).

In Bardhaman District as a whole, there is also a sizeable group of Muslim cultivators who employ migrant labourers.<sup>10</sup> Table 7 gives the breakdown by religion of employers hiring gangs of workers from the study localities in 1999-2000. There was no one-to-one correspondence between employer's religion and the social composition of the migrant gang they hired. However, a larger proportion of gangs from the predominantly Muslim Murshidabad (Bagri) locality found work with Muslim employers. Our findings suggest this pattern also holds for the Murshidabad-Bardhaman stream.<sup>11</sup>

### Gangs of Migrants and Their Recruitment

In studies of contemporary seasonal migration in other regions of India, middlemen or brokers have been found to be important in the fixing of wages, working conditions and living accommodation.<sup>12</sup> In the study region there is no cadre of brokers involved in the recruitment of migrant rice workers. In most of the studied source localities, individual men and women act as gang leaders or 'sardars'.

The role of a 'sardar' varies, however, from being a person with initiative and



confidence who builds up a group and negotiates with employers at labour market places, to an established contact and semi-permanent recruit of a destination area employer who travels regularly between their own village and the employer, bringing migrants according to prior specifications. This variation in roles exists within as well as between localities, for example in the Puruliya study locality.

Exceptionally, in Jalpara, the Murshidabad study locality, there are no

regular sardars. Groups form among relatives, friends and acquaintances, often involving men from other nearby villages.<sup>13</sup> Gangs are more like bands with a median of five or six members (depending on the season), much smaller than the gangs which travel out from the other study localities (Table 8). The larger number of gangs from the Murshidabad study locality is due to the common practice of migrating to work for two or more employers in the same season [Rogaly and Rafique 2001].



From our observations at Katwa railway station, an important labour market place, a smaller gang size appears to be typical of the Bagri (Murshidabad)-Bardhaman stream as a whole. Table 8 also indicates a relatively large median gang size (ranging from 14 to 50 depending on the season) from the Puruliya locality, where two regular institutionalised sardars worked for the same particular large-scale employers each season.<sup>14</sup>

Employers in the destination study locality hired gangs of a wide range of sizes (four to sixty) and for between one and thirty days (Table 9). Gangs of labourers were recruited directly by employers or through employers' agents ('gomostha'). Recruitment could be from a labour marketplace or by travelling in person to known villages in a source area. Sometimes employment arrangements were initiated by labour gangs or leaders of gangs (sardars) coming to seek work unsolicited. Evidence gathered through travelling with migrant workers, observations of labour marketplaces and interviews in source areas showed that in Bardhaman district as a whole, it was common practice for employers to seek one season's gang to commit to work in the following season.

In the destination study locality at least one-third of employers were supplied with migrants by other employers. For three seasons of the year, cultivators of smaller amounts of land were able to borrow migrant workers, who had been recruited and were being accommodated in the cowsheds and other outbuildings of larger-scale cultivators. Because of a correspondence between landholding size and jati, there was a jati-pattern to cross-recruitment. In general, Mohanto Bamuns and Bagdi employers required less migrants than Aguris and cross-recruitment was by Mohanto Bamuns or Bagdis from Aguri employers. Money did not change hands between employers for this, though it formed a part of ongoing patron-client relations. The smaller-scale employer paid the migrants' wages for their period of hiring.

In the season for transplanting aman rice, however, there was cooperation in recruitment between relatively large-scale employers, who would club together to cover the costs.<sup>15</sup> Whereas for the other three seasons most gangs hired were from the Puruliya/Bankura stream to the west and were paid at a time rate, for the aman transplanting, most of the gangs were hired from the east, from the districts of north

24 Parganas and Murshidabad, and paid at a piece rate.

In sum, seasonal migration is of critical importance to the material livelihoods of many hundreds of thousands of people in the study region. It involves men, women and children, mainly scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and Muslims. Employers, Hindu and Muslim, are smallholders with different degrees of wealth and varied labour requirements. While there is some cooperation in recruitment, most of this is part of patron-client relationships between relatively large and relatively small-scale employers. Most recruitment is organised by employers acting as individuals rather than in collusive groups. In Section II, we move on to consider the causes and consequences of seasonal migration for rice work.

### III

## Causes and Consequences of Seasonal Migration

### *Growing Demand for Migrant Workers*

The history of settlement and the beginnings of rice cultivation in the area now known as Bardhaman district go back over millennia [Eaton 1994]. Populations in the study region as a whole, which includes parts of present-day Jharkhand and West Bengal states (see Map), have never been static, and seasonal migration for work in the rice fields of south-central Bengal has a history of at least 100 years.<sup>16</sup>

Taken together, our evidence<sup>17</sup> suggests a rapid increase in the number of manual workers migrating seasonally for rice work in the last two decades to have taken place in the context of a series of political, economic and cultural changes in the destination area.

Prior to the coming on stream of the Damodar Valley Corporation canal system in the 1960s, there was little assured irrigation in Bardhaman district. The coming of canal irrigation and the slow expansion of the entirely irrigated boro paddy crop from the early 1970s took place at a time of violent conflict in the countryside, including a period of land seizures during the 1967-69 period and heavy repression in the eight years following. The Left Front government, which came to power in 1977, implemented agrarian reforms energetically in its early years, in particular the registration of share-croppers, the continuing

redistribution of land held over the ceiling, and panchayati raj.<sup>18</sup>

This was a period of consolidation for the smallholder cultivators, many of whom were actively involved in the political parties in the Left Front coalition, particularly in the Communist Party of India (Marxist). The CPI(M)'s strategy became more focused on electoral success, through seeking to maintain support across classes of smallholders as well as agricultural wage workers, and keeping the peace in the countryside [Webster 1990, 1999; Rogaly 1998b]. Smallholders with profits from agriculture began to invest in groundwater irrigation, which was more attractive in the less conflictive rural environment, and seemed likely to produce further profits, given the efforts made by the regime to make access to credit and other agricultural inputs much easier and their supply more timely. Rapid expansion of the new boro crop and adoption of high yielding varieties and associated cultivation technologies began in the early 1980s and has continued throughout the last two decades.<sup>19</sup>

One outcome of these changes was that more manual workers were required in Bardhaman district. Although irrigation, ploughing and threshing were increasingly mechanised, the transplanting and harvesting of rice continued to be carried out by hand. Ideologically, manual work was seen by many owners of land as something to be avoided by both men and women.<sup>20</sup> Study locality employers' aspirations for their children and even for themselves involved spending increasing amounts of time out of agriculture, in urban white-collar occupations. This 'babu' approach to agriculture came to be more affordable as profits were made from rice production and wealth was accumulated. It was scoffed at by those other landowners who continued to see themselves as 'chasis', peasant cultivators, for whom doing their own cultivation work alongside other family members and hired labourers was part of their self-identity. However, even this group required manual workers in the peak seasons. At the same time some former local labourers aspired to withdrawal from this kind of employment.<sup>21</sup> Another reason why demand for migrant workers increased was the reduction in hours of work per day for local labourers. The Krishak Sabha, a CPI(M) mass organisation made up of smallholder cultivators and wage workers, supported this direction of change in Bardhaman.



## Role of the Krishak Sabha

Other changes that the Krishak Sabha has presided over during this period (and which have been associated with increased demand for labour in agriculture) have included the closing of the gap between male and female wages and ensuring steady increases in the cash portion of the prescribed wage rate, so that real wages did not decline. Not surprisingly, given its cross-class composition, the Krishak Sabha did not represent agricultural workers as a class-for-itself.<sup>22</sup> Indeed agricultural labourers were not allowed to form a separate union of their own. The changes in wages and working conditions reflected a carefully managed balance of power, in which smallholder-farmers who employed labour were dominant. The positive developments which were felt by wage workers were necessary to the overall strategy of enabling smallholders to pursue profit in a non-conflictive countryside and of keeping cross-class support for the CPI(M) in elections.

The Krishak Sabha agreed to continue allowing migrants from outside Bardhaman district to be employed there. This reflected employers' interests in two ways. It greatly relieved their seasonal labour shortages, and it also exerted indirect pressure on local labourers to comply with working conditions or be replaced.<sup>23</sup> The Krishak Sabha decided in the early 1980s to compensate local labourers in two ways: migrants would be allowed to work only in peak seasons, and, most importantly, they could not be employed at lower levels of earnings per day than local labourers.<sup>24</sup>

## Accumulation of Wealth and Growing Inequality

Enabled by the Krishak Sabha to bring in migrant workers to cover the periods of intense labour shortages, many larger-scale smallholders accumulated further wealth. Those in the strongest economic positions had diversified beyond agriculture into trade (in fertilisers and rice), processing (of rice), salaried employment and party politics. In Moraipur, the destination area study locality, during the 1990s, better-off agricultural employers were able to build large 'dalans' (brick built houses) and to purchase consumer durables, including dining tables and chairs, televisions, satellite dishes and cars.<sup>25</sup> The gini coefficient of inequality in the

distribution of assets in the study year was 0.58. In the district as a whole inequality among smallholders and between smallholders and labourers has visibly increased<sup>26</sup> during the 1980s and 1990s.

As we have seen, the Krishak Sabha oversaw this process of accumulation in Bardhaman district, through making deals between classes with potentially conflicting interests. Accumulation has increased the demand for migrant workers (a cause of migration), while also being built on the back of migrant workers (a consequence of migration). The success of the CPI(M)'s strategy can be seen in the continued cross-class support it won in the 2001 West Bengal state assembly elections.

## Competition and Insecurity among Employers

Although employers argued common class positions within the Krishak Sabha, we have described class differences between employers [Rogaly et al 2000] and found further evidence of intense rivalry and competition among agricultural employers of the same class. This ran along-

side the vertical unequal mutuality between employers manifest in cross-recruitment in the study locality, as well as the cooperation over recruitment of piece rate workers at aman transplanting. As mentioned, employers here did their own recruitment (or used their own permanent labourers) in migrants' villages of origin or at labour marketplaces. There was no cadre of middlemen in the market for migrant rice workers.

Recruitment of labour was not the only factor which made for the insecurity of destination area employers. Profits depended on the costs of other inputs, includ-

**Table 6: Social Composition of Migrant Gangs from Source Area Study Localities**

Source Locality	Single Jati Gang	Mixed Jati Gang
Jalpara, Murshidabad	61	8
Alopahari, Dumka	39	7
Bajnagarh, Puruliya	6	6
Upartola, Purbi Singhbhum	1	6

Notes: 1 Jati is used here to refer to the social group (based on caste, religion, ethnicity), which an individual belongs to in their home locality as seen by others there.

2 In Jalpara, the social composition of two gangs was not recorded.

Source: Migration survey.

**Table 4: Number of Seasonal Migrants Hiring Out and Number Hired in for Rice Work by Season (1999-2000)**

Study Locality	Aman Transplanting	Aman Harvest	Boro Transplanting	Boro Harvest
Jalpara, Murshidabad	54 men	119 men	67 men	143 men
Alopahari, Dumka	130 mixed sex of which 18 children	61 men, 55 women, 20 children	71 men, 78 women, 29 children	49 men, 72 women and 27 children
Bajnagarh, Puruliya	127 mixed sex of which 26 children	35 men, 28 women, and 11 children	16 men, 25 women, and 7 children	21 men, 22 women, and 5 children
Upartola, Purbi Singhbhum	0	18 men	0	53 men
Moraipur, Bardhaman	?	535 inmigrants + children	500 inmigrants + children	639 in-migrants + childre

Notes: 1 The number of women and men in the mixed groups from Dumka district were not counted separately in the aman transplanting season, nor in the destination area study locality.

2 The numbers of migrants for aman transplanting work from Bajnagarh, Puruliya, is inflated because it is based on total gang size, rather than gang members from the study locality.

Source: Migration survey.

**Table 5: Sex Composition of Migrant Gangs and Number Travelling with Children or Infants by Source Locality**

Source Locality	Men-only Gangs	Women-Only Gangs	Mixed Sex Gangs	Gangs with Children/Infants	Gangs without Children/Infants
Jalpara, Murshidabad	61	0	0	0	61
Alopahari, Dumka	2	0	28	23	7
Bajnagarh, Puruliya	1	0	14	9	6
Upartola, Purbi Singhbhum	7	0	0	0	7

Notes: 1 Data on the sex and age composition of gangs was collected in three seasons only. Hence the total number of gangs is less than might have been expected from previous tables.

2 Gangs travelling with children all included both men and women.

Source: Migration survey.



ing fertiliser as well as diesel and electricity for groundwater irrigation, and the price their crop could fetch in the market. During the fieldwork year, it became clear that central government policies were having an effect on the prosperity of agricultural smallholder producers. Not only were subsidies on inputs being reduced, the prices which mills and their agents were prepared to pay for their crops had drastically declined. The classic method of making money on rice for relatively well-to-do cultivators was to store it and sell it pre-harvest. Mills were now increasingly supplied with unhusked rice by producers in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The price of rice was further reduced by purchases from Bangladesh, Thailand and elsewhere, enabled by the liberalisation of imports.<sup>27</sup> It was admitted by Madan Ghosh, the secretary of the CPI(M) in Bardhaman district,<sup>28</sup> that it was conceivable that wages might have to fall and the rise eventually agreed in November 2000 was less than had been anticipated, also due to flood.<sup>29</sup>

### *Earning Potential as a Cause of Increasing Seasonal Migration*

For people in the source areas surrounding Bardhaman district, the increases in wage rates and in the number of days' work available at the destination each season have been very important motives for migration. The length of the migration seasons was approximately 20 days (see Appendix). During the study year the wage prescribed by the Krishak Sabha in Bardhaman district for all agricultural labourers was 27 rupees per day and 2 kg rice.<sup>30</sup> This was equivalent to 4-4.5 kg of hulled rice, which in real terms showed no change from 1991-92 [Rogaly 1996:147]. Wages varied across the source area study localities and seasonal fluctuations were also more pronounced there. A peak season wage with a total value of Rs 20 per day (equivalent to approximately 2 kg of hulled rice) was not untypical.

There were upward variations from the prescribed wage in what was actually received by migrant workers; and most migrants in the Murshidabad-Bardhaman stream were paid their kind portion in cooked food rather than rice. As we have seen in the previous section some migrants were paid at a piece rate, which usually meant higher daily earnings than time rate arrangements. Most importantly, in the four main seasons, workers knew from previous experience or from others that

they were likely to get consecutive days of work at the agreed rate. This was not possible at home.

Migrant workers also knew that they would almost always be paid for the work they did because non-payment would be against the interests of the Krishak Sabha as it was likely to lower the reputation of the Krishak Sabha itself in terms of its capacity to manage the countryside. It would also work against the reputation of the locality. Several incidents in which the 'party' (whether in the form of elected representatives in the panchayats, party cadres or Krishak Sabha members) was called on to enforce proper payment were recalled by migrants interviewed in the source localities.<sup>31</sup> These incidents were especially striking for migrants from Jharkhand state,<sup>32</sup> to whom organised institutional wage protection, even at the local level was unknown.

### *Labourers' Room for Manoeuvre in Negotiations*

The main proximate cause of seasonal migration from the source areas for those who migrated was therefore that they expected to gain a lump sum of cash to take home which would not be available to them in the source area and to eat for the period of work. However, the specific dynamics of seasonal migration in the study region meant that labourers regularly found room for manoeuvre in negotiations.

Here lies another part of the explanation for the growth in the numbers of seasonal migrants. Not all migrants in the study region were compelled by economic circumstances to migrate each time they went. Lack of collusion by employers contributed to migration even by people who could get by without it. Migrants knew that in the season they were very likely to find work and to get paid in Bardhaman. Negotiation was possible over wage rates, number of days work, distance of fields from accommodation, meal quality and timing.<sup>33</sup> Of course, once a gang of migrants arrived at the work and living place for the season, the employer might renege on parts of this agreement. Employers' relatively higher material security meant their capacity to withhold work from a particular group gave them power in the market unmatched by migrants' capacity to exit. However, this did not leave migrants without power altogether. Some tested out whether the employer seemed to be true to his word and a few gangs

returned to the labour marketplace surreptitiously (if they found the reality did not match the rhetoric and they could afford to), leaving an employer who had invested time and money in recruitment and more importantly in their rice crop, with major problems.

### *Divergent Trajectories*

The underlying causes and the consequences of seasonal migration varied across the four migration streams, as illustrated through analysis of data from the source area study localities. These underlying causes reflected specific agro-ecological conditions, economic structures and wider social relations, as well as associated contrasts in the potential for change in each of these.

*Murshidabad-Bagri Locality:* Itinerant petty trade has long been an important occupation for poor residents of the Murshidabad locality, Jalpara, but agriculture remains central. The sub-region has seen a dramatic agricultural revolution in the 1990s on the scale of that which took place in Bardhaman district. A high water table meant that irrigation water was readily available beneath the surface. Those families who were able to invest early in ground-

**Table 7: Religion of Employers of Gangs of Migrant Workers from the Source Area Study Localities**  
(Number of Gangs Each Season)

Source Locality and Season	Hindu	Muslim
Alopahari, Dumka		
Aman harvest 1999	8	2
Boro transplanting 2000	7	2
Boro harvest 2000	6	3
Jalpara, Murshidabad		
Aman harvest 1999	4	18
Boro transplanting 2000	4	6
Boro harvest 2000	17	11
Bajnagarh, Puruliya		
Aman harvest 1999	5	1
Boro transplanting 2000	4	0
Boro harvest 2000	3	1
Upartola, Purbi Singhbhum		
Aman harvest 1999	2	0
Boro transplanting 2000	-	-
Boro harvest 2000	4	0

Notes: 1 This information was not recorded in the aman transplanting season. Employer's religion was also not recorded in the case of a few gangs in the three seasons reported here.

2 In the boro harvest there is a shift for the Murshidabad gangs from predominantly hiring out to Muslims to predominantly hiring out to Hindus. This is associated with migration to Nadia district in the boro harvest. Six gangs reported migrating to Nadia at the boro harvest and all but one gang worked for Hindu employers.

Source: Migration survey.



water irrigation have gained in power and wealth from renting that water as they are able to dictate terms to crop cultivators within the command area. Land prices have rocketed with the new productivity and as available land per capita has decreased further, caused by the very rapid erosion of land by the river Padma on the eastern border of Murshidabad district. Land prices in the study locality were Rs 1,50,000 per acre in the study year, compared to Rs 1,75,000 in the Bardhaman district study locality, and from Rs 5,000 to Rs 60,000 (depending on quality) in the other source area localities. Inequality has increased sharply and is much higher than in the other source area study localities. Using data on the rupees equivalent of a basket of assets including land, we estimated a Gini coefficient of 0.69 in the study year.

Seasonal outmigration from the locality offers little opportunity for structural change. Men are compelled to find work outside the district because there is insufficient employment available locally, even though, for almost all crop tasks, women do not hire out labour. This gender division of paid work is part of the cause of the high propensity to migrate among poor men – men in the household are responsible for bringing in income to cover the costs of all family members. In the study locality, men tended to give their remittances to their wives or mothers and these were spent mainly on debt repayment and on food.

In Rogaly and Rafique (op cit), we explore how dependent women in nuclear families, left behind for a season by male migrants, can be reliant on their own kin in Jalpara. This may involve compromises in behaviour, including decisions about reproduction, to keep close kin available for physical security, loans, child care and other support.

**Purbi Singhbhum Locality:** In contrast to the Murshidabad-Bagri locality, Upartola, the Purbi Singhbhum locality, is in an area of low population density. However, it too has seen change in agriculture, with action seen over the last decade to dam the nearby river and lift water for irrigation of boro rice production. This has come out of individual initiative and contacts between the family of a long-standing (recently deceased) 'mukhia' and those dispensing development grants from the Block Development Office. Migration has been important in enabling people to make more choices about their economic

livelihoods. Rather than inequality (gini was 0.54 in the study year) accelerating to exclude poorer people from being able to invest in land (as in the Murshidabad locality), migrants have invested their remittances into renting and cultivating land as tenants. Migration for some has led the way out of being compelled to migrate. Migration for rice work is on the decline, although there has been a small increase in migration to work in brick kilns.

In the Purbi Singhbhum study locality, migration has also played a part in changing social relations of jati. Different ideologies of manual work have meant that higher caste Benias have not had access to the migration which untouchable Mal men have taken part in. Remittances from migration have enabled some Mal women to become increasingly bold in taunting the Benias who have been reduced to reliance on symbolic untouchability to maintain their sense of superiority.

**Puruliya-Bankura Locality:** No such irrigation development was evident in Bajnagarh (Puruliya), also on the Chhotanagpur plateau but further north, in West Bengal. Here, boro production has only been introduced on a small amount of low-lying land owned by the dominant Rajput Rajas of the area who were able to pump water from the tanks they controlled. Though the Rajas were major local employers in the aman transplanting and harvesting seasons, there was too little work to go around. Moreover, people were reported to have migrated in greater numbers (both for rice work and to work in brick kilns) during the period between

1997 and 1999 because of three consecutive years of drought. For those who had previously migrated to invest in their own land, these years meant continuing to migrate but for different reasons – for survival. Agriculture had failed almost completely.

Seasonal migration in this locality was clearly associated with a process of partial delinking from dependence on the patronage of rajas. Wages earned through migration enabled conspicuous consumption, which in contrast to the employers of Bardhaman district meant a more secure roof, new cooking utensils or clothing. Migrants were more assertive in their speech and body language than they had been previously. However, the four detailed migrant workers' narratives reproduced by Rogaly and Coppard (2001), show how nuanced this process of change was in individual cases. Many migrants and former migrants continue to depend on the Rajas for employment and for

**Dumka (Santal Parganas) Locality:** There were no dramatic agro-ecological changes in Alopahari (Dumka) either. Here there was less evidence of change in economic structures, than in the Puruliya locality, no evidence of a widespread switch to tenancy from migration as in the Purbi Singhbhum locality, but at the same time no major regressive change in terms of inequality. Economic differentiation among the Santhals was relatively limited. In the study year, the gini coefficient of wealth inequality was 0.33.

Relations between Santhals in Alopahari, on the one hand, and their landlord and

Table 8: Median Gang Size by Study Locality and Season

Locality	Variable	Aman Transplanting	Aman Harvest	Boro Transplanting	Boro Harvest
Alopahari Dumka	Gangs	16	11	9	
	Median size	4	12	19	
Bajnagarh Puruliya	Gangs	7	7	4	4
	Median size	24	14	50	24
Jalpara Murshidabad	Gangs	10	22	10	29
	Median size	5	5	6	6
Upartola P Sing	Gangs	0	2	0	5
	Median size	-	9	-	9

Source: Migration Survey.

Table 9: Gang Size and Days Worked Range and Median by Season (Destination Area)

Season	Gang Size Range	Gang Size Median	No of Days Range	No of Days Median
Boro harvest 1999	2-60	14	2-25	15
Aman transplanting 1999	4-15	10	2-14	7
Aman harvest 1999	5-35	10	2-30	16
Boro transplanting 2000	4-27	13	1-30	15

Source: Migration survey.



other creditors outside the locality, on the other, remained highly unequal, however. Migration for manual work, not only to Bardhaman but also to the north-eastern states and further afield on ministry of defence contracts, has continued to be an important part of livelihoods. The local labour market is very small and most of the Santhals and others who migrated seasonally cultivated land as tenants for a large-scale 'diku' (non-Santhal, in this case brahmin) cultivator who lived outside the locality.

Outmigration was not a major cause of structural change in the Dumka study locality, in contrast to the effect of the Jharkhand political movement in the 1970s, which saw interest rates on diku loans considerably reduced. However, a few individual migrants were able to save enough to move out of migration here. Land was commonly mortgaged for cash in Alopahari. Because of special legislation designated to protect Santhals' and other 'adivasis' land from passing into the hands of *dikus*, it could not be sold. Remittances would be used to unmortgage land, and if production resumed, it was possible for some people to sustain themselves without migration. However, livelihoods were highly precarious and when crisis hit, often through expenses associated with ill-health, it was likely that accumulated assets would have to be liquidated and migration again become necessary.

### Changing Social Identities

Table 3 summarises some of the main group self-identifications in the study sub-regions. Group self-identifications are based on combinations of ethnicity, caste, religion, nation and territorial space as well as class. In the process of travelling across the countryside, spending time at bus or rail stations, living and working in the destination area, migrant workers' social identities changed. These changes were complicated because they included both instrumental use of identities in labour market place negotiations, and changing self-identifications through interactions with other migrant workers, with destination area employers, and with others, such as other bus passengers, drivers and conductors and stallholders selling snacks, tea and trinkets.

Moreover, it was not only migrant workers whose social identities changed, but also employers of migrants, in part

through direct involvement in recruitment from source areas. Employers from the study locality in Bardhaman district expressed their fears about having to stay in source area villages. Their sense of coming from the central place, the place of modern agriculture and their urban white-collar aspirations, were strengthened by the experience. Santhals and Muslims who had migrated from the study localities in Bagri/ Murshidabad and Santhal Parganas (Dumka) saw themselves more than previously as members of larger groups, an expected outcome when moving from the known local area to a broader playing field. However, although Santhals met Santhals from other sub-regions, and at least three marriages were reported to have happened this way, and Bagri Muslims of different jati came away with a heightened sense of their religious and territorial identities, these two groups were not found to spend time together at the destination. Such non-interactive encounters helped to harden self-identification as Santhals and as Muslims. However, self-identification did not just vary across individuals and over the life-course, different aspects of a persons' group identity became prominent at particular points in space.

### Summing Up

This section has reported our analysis of why seasonal migration for rice work has increased over the last 25 years in the Jharkhand-West Bengal region. Characterising the region as a whole, we have also highlighted important contrasts between seasonal migration for rice work there and seasonal migration elsewhere in India. Further, looking within the region, we have illustrated the divergent trajectories of four major migration streams.

The methodological approach of this two-layer comparative study has enabled us to examine causes and consequences of seasonal migration as interacting and mutually determining. Social and political conditions as well as technological ones were necessary to the take off in West Bengal agriculture. Migrants found employment in larger numbers. They were in turn essential to the continued agricultural growth at the heart of south-central West Bengal's prosperity, which fed back into increasing demand for workers.<sup>34</sup>

Instead of using middlemen for recruitment as is common practice elsewhere in India, employers of rice workers in West Bengal's Bardhaman district recruited

individually. This was part of a general picture of competition among employers, whose religion and caste backgrounds varied. Partly as a result of these differences, labourers migrating into Bardhaman district had more room for manoeuvre to make 'small choices' in the precise details agreed with employers at home or in the labour market places. However, employers' anxieties stemmed not only from labour shortages but also from the declining profitability of rice production.

The sub-regions feeding the West Bengal 'rice bowl' have varied agrarian structures, as reflected in the wide range of inequality coefficients found in the study localities. There were clear divergences between study localities in patterns of structural change resulting from migration in the study localities. Migration in the Puruliya locality enabled wage workers to bring pressure to bear on the sensibilities of local employers, in the Purbi Singhbhum locality there was general movement out of migration, whereas economic compulsion continued for different reasons for migrants from the Dumka (Santhal Parganas) and Murshidabad Bagri localities.

The stories of individual migrants and their households varied too – some used remittances to invest and eventually thereby to exit migration, others continued to have no choice in the decision. Decisions were embedded in particular structures of intra-household and broader kinship relations, which migration could in turn challenge. Even in the localities from which family migration was common (Puruliya/Bankura and Dumka), kin were important in arranging for care of the house, livestock and dependents. For younger people earlier decisions to migrate might be taken with parents' permission, urged by parents (rare) or against their wishes. In some cases migration against elder's wishes had the effect of changing the balance of power in the household [Rogaly et al 2000].

The findings suggest an overall pattern in which the element of choice for migrants about who they work for and where they go to work has increased. Many migrants are able to use the lump sum of remittances they return with for purposes beyond loan repayment and food consumption. However, the process is still driven by an economic compulsion and the choices remain small. This is why changing social relations, including stronger group identities and opportunities to taunt and unsettle employers, to get the upper hand



even temporarily, can be very significant in making the experience less undignified for migrants. Such group identification, combined with small amounts of power in negotiation and at the workplace can be important to migrants' well-being (ibid).

#### IV A Political Approach to Migrants' Rights

In one source area (Dumka), we found migrants to have been excluded from house-building grants earmarked for poor families, the Indira Awas Yojana, because they were deemed likely to be absent during the stipulated period for building. In the destination area study locality, our questions as to why neonatal seasonally migrant women did not gain access to Integrated Child Development Scheme facilities were greeted with derision.

From such incidents and from the high levels of unawareness about and/or disinterest in seasonal migrants in conversations with officials across 15 districts, we can see that migrant rice workers are not willingly accommodated by the bureaucratic machinery. This approach to migrant manual workers is not particular to West Bengal nor to India. More protective policies and solidarity with migrants and their inclusion in welfare schemes when they are away from home cannot be a matter for bureaucratic edict alone. Such measures need to be expressed politically in terms of rights.

What is specific to south-central West Bengal is that migrants have been prevented from explicitly and directly undercutting the wages of local workers by a strong political party and one of its affiliated organisations, in order to keep cross-class support, not least at elections. This has been of practical benefit to migrant workers, and acceptable to local workers and to employers. New compromises may have to be reached, if, as seems likely, there is sustained pressure on the profitability of rice production with lower product prices induced by liberalised rice imports.

However, migrants have no organisation of their own, and, as elsewhere, for example Californian agriculture [Wells 1996], are drawn from diverse ethnic (and in this case caste and religious) groups. Indeed the stronger sub-national consciousness developed through the migration process has enabled some migrant workers, particularly Muslims and

Santhals to protect themselves from an even more demeaning experience. At the same time, such divisions among migrant workers, and between migrants and local workers, play to employers' interests in preventing a unified rural working class movement.

Migrant rice workers in West Bengal do have many common interests: for example, a place to gather peacefully to negotiate contracts, rather than being lathi-charged as Muslim men migrants gathered on the railway lines at Katwa regularly were in the study year. A successful campaign for a municipal investment in a labour shelter away from the railway station could lead to a wider claim for rights to information. The state could be the target and success might make day to day and seasonal changes in labour market places (numbers of employers and workers, going wage, likely length of season) known to potential migrants; it would also be of use to employers.

A third set of rights might include rights to safe travel. A response to this would see, among other things, an extension of the number of state-owned buses on West Bengal's roads and improvements to those roads.

Migrants fear seeking treatment for ill-health when working at the destination, not just because they almost always have to repay the employer for the cost of the treatment, but also (and especially) because of loss of wages. At the very least, free health care might be campaigned for; sick pay is a long way off for casual workers anywhere.

Migrants struggle to keep children at school, including many children themselves. Social debts are made with kin; children return to take exams; at least one child migrated to earn the cost of clothes to wear to school. However, the schooling system has not responded to the seasonal requirements dictated by agricultural cycles, either in source or destination areas. Migrants' children's absences from primary school in the Puruliya/Bankura study locality could be highlighted in a push to draw attention to primary schools' need to change, not only for migrant workers, but for the children of manual workers more broadly. In the destination area study locality, there was a 40 per cent drop in attendance by children of Bagdis – mainly agricultural labourers in the cultivation seasons. Many were covering for parents busy earning a wage.

Similarly, it could be argued that infants

and pregnant and post-natal migrant women should have rights to care in the Integrated Child Development Scheme-funded 'anganwadis'. In reality, anganwadis across the study region (source and destination areas) were not functioning properly for local women and children. The woman in charge in the destination study locality expressed great surprise that we even asked whether migrant women could attend. The idea seemed absurd to her. Because of this, such measures successfully won, would be of benefit to both migrants and non-migrants and therefore more widely acceptable than measures dedicated to migrant workers alone. A bus stand health camp at Bankura is a rare example of how health provision for returning migrant workers can be organised by a coalition of unions, NGOs, local government bodies, shopkeepers and others. Those using it included both migrants and non-migrants.

Changing mindsets on seasonal migration and persuading influential people of the view that migrants have been central to recent growth in prosperity in destination areas will not be easy. However, we hope this research makes a contribution to that agenda. One result might be for area-based projects which have a reflex reaction that ends up excluding migrants, to develop the opposite tendencies. It might become more common to ask: how will our intervention make migration less costly and more secure?

In the longer term, however, those having to migrate will gain more control over their lives if they have broader choices. This requires public investment in source areas to counter the unevenness of development and economic opportunity. Such investment would be most effective if tailored to the specific potential of different sub-regions. It might include irrigation investment in a locality like the one studied in Puruliya and non-agricultural enterprises in Murshidabad where land is scarce. Migrants themselves could make more of the remittances they returned with if health and education were actually free and high quality. Like most of the other areas we have touched on, the benefits of these new investments would not be limited to migrants alone.

#### Appendix

There are two main rice crops in Bardhaman district as in the rest of West Bengal: aman, transplanted in July and



August, is harvested in November and December, and boro, transplanted in February, is harvested in April and May.

The net sown area of Bardhaman district is 4,73,900 ha (Bardhaman District Statistical Handbook, 1995). In 1993-94, 4,19,000 ha were planted with rice in the aman season and 1,58,000 ha in the boro season (Bardhaman District Holistic Development Plan, Society for Holistic Approach to Planning and Evaluation, Kolkata, no date).

Bardhaman had a population of 6,919,698 according to the 2001 census. Although at the time of writing the 2001 census breakdown of occupations are not available, we can use the proportion reporting themselves in the 1991 census as primarily agricultural labourers (6.48 per cent) and cultivators (9.12 per cent) to estimate the number of people in each occupational category in 2001. We thus estimate there to be 4,48,000 and 6,31,100 people who would have reported themselves as primarily agricultural labourers and cultivators respectively in the 2001 census.

Four cultivators were asked in detail about their labour requirements in the previous aman and boro transplanting and harvesting seasons. Their estimates for transplanting were 8-10 person days per bigha (uprooting, carrying seedlings and transplanting) and 10-19 person days per bigha at harvest (cutting, binding, stacking straw, threshing and storing). Boro rice usually yields significantly more per bigha than aman. However, the cultivators' estimates did not provide evidence of the difference between them.<sup>35</sup>

The higher end of the range for harvest were estimates by people who would not work in these tasks themselves nor expect their family members to do so. The lower end was estimated by two employers who would expect themselves and other members of their families to do harvest work. As they were asked to detail the direct financial cost of cultivation they did not include the opportunity cost of their own labour.<sup>36</sup>

The range of total labour required in each season for Bardhaman district is thus:

Aman transplanting:	25,140,000 – 31,425,000
Aman harvest:	31,425,000 – 59,707,500
Boro transplanting:	9,480,000 – 15,800,000
Boro harvest:	15,800,000 – 21,014,000

The mean number of days spent away across the 141 groups recorded in the

migration survey for the year 1999-2000 was 16.80. However, this figure was weighted downwards by the counting of groups in the Murshidabad locality which travelled out more than once per season. The mean number of days for that locality was 12.4, whereas the means for the other three localities were 21.65, 19.53, and 23.00. We therefore assume for the purposes of this calculation that the length of a season is 20 days. This is a crude assumption because season lengths vary. Boro harvesting is often done at a faster pace over less days, especially when people are employed on piece rates.<sup>37</sup>

Therefore, we calculate the total number of people required for each season of rice cultivation in Bardhaman district to fall within the following ranges:

Aman transplanting	1,257,000 – 1,571,250
Aman harvest	1,571,250 – 2,985,375
Boro transplanting	4,74,000 – 7,90,000
Boro harvest	7,90,000 – 1,050,700

If every one of the 631,100 cultivators and 448,000 agricultural labourers estimated to be resident in Bardhaman district in 2001 (a total of almost 1,080,000 people) were to work throughout each season in these tasks, there would still be a major shortfall of at least half a million workers in the aman harvest. However, many of those classifying themselves as cultivators prefer not to do transplanting or harvesting work and thus the shortfall is likely to be much greater.<sup>38</sup>

Importantly, these calculations were consistent with our own observations in five destination localities in Galsi, Memari, Bardhaman Sadar and Katwa blocks of Birbhum district and in Nanoor Block of Birbhum district. In all these villages the number of migrant labourers was higher than the number of local wage labourers in the peak seasons.

Our journeys around the countryside during the seasons of outmigration and return have included periods of detailed observation trying to count migrants at labour market places. Estimates have been made by railway staff, bus drivers and owners and shopkeepers. These numbers are less reliable as estimates of the number of migrants, as our own migration survey suggests that in three of the four source area localities labour market places were used relative little for recruiting labour or finding work.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, we only studied two labour market places in detail: Bankura bus stand and Katwa railway station and we could only briefly visit some of the rest, for example, Tinkonia bus

stand and the railway stations at Bardhaman and Guskara. Others, including, importantly Nadanghat in Nadia district, and Kusumgram in Bardhaman were not visited.

At Bankura bus stand alone, stallholders estimated that at the peak of aman harvest recruitment as many as 10,000 to 15,000 migrants passed through the bus stand in a day. The station manager at Katwa station, narrow gauge line estimated that at the end of the season 15,000 to 20,000 migrants returned each day. Given that the peak part of each main rice work season can last for as much as 15 days, this could mean 1,50,000 – 2,25,000 passing through Bankura bus stand and 2,25,000 to 3,00,000 passing through Katwa railway station. One of us estimated that 6,000 labourers left for Bardhaman for boro transplanting work from Dumka bus station on one day in late January 1999. Bus operators interviewed reported that this outmigrating season lasted for 15 days. This suggests as many as 90,000 labourers left from Dumka bus station alone. Such estimates, each of which refer only to one part of one stream, do not contradict the scale of the estimate above based on demand calculations. **EW**

## Notes

- 1 Our thanks especially to the migrant workers, their employers, officials and others, who spent time and effort engaging with us during the study. This research would not have been possible without the direct and indirect support of many colleagues, including coordination and research assistance by Somnath Chattopadhyay; research assistance by Sujata Das-Chowdhury and Malini Munshi; sustained insightful guidance from beginning to end from the late Sunil Sengupta; valuable advice from Nirmala Banerjee, Sonia Bhalotra, Debabrata Bhattacharya, Partha Chatterjee, Samantak Das, Jean Drèze, Arjan de Haan, David Mosse, Nitya Rao and Samita Sen; and the reflective feedback of others including Mukulika Banerjee, Tony Barnett, Kumkum and Ranjit Bhattacharya, Piers Blaikie, Rahul Bose, Srabani Chakrabarty, Surendranath Chatterjee, Meena Dhandu, Madan Gopal Ghosh, John Harriss, Barbara Harriss-White, Mark Holmström, Vegard Iversen, Cecile Jackson, Praveen Jha, Catherine Locke, Richard Palmer-Jones, Kirat Randhawa, Kunal Sen, Dikshit Sinha, René Veron and Glyn Williams. The map was drawn by Philip Judge. Rogaly is grateful to the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Kolkata and he and Coppard to Palli Charcha Kendra, Visva-Bharati, where they were affiliated during the research, and to those institutions' respective directors Partha Chatterjee and Onkar Prasad. We thank the Department for International Development (UK) for funding. Views expressed and any