

BOLANGIR – Livelihoods & Migrant Workers

CASE STUDY: How a migrant family got back on their feet

Being forced to borrow money to support his family led to a downward spiral for Niranjana Rai. Like so many families in this remote corner of Bolangir District, Odisha, earning a living as a landless farm labourer in his village was near impossible for Niranjana.

After getting married seven years ago, 27-year-old Niranjana and his 24-year-old wife Satyabhama were forced to borrow Rs.15,000. They had two young children and limited income options. The interest on the loan added further pressure to the family finances. The money-lender (Tentulikhunti of Kantabanji block) offered Niranjana an option – he could travel to Andhra Pradesh to work in a brick-making factory where he would earn enough money to pay back the loan.

Despite the uncertainty of the arrangements and having never left their village before, Niranjana accepted the offer and he, Satyabhama and their two young children set on the long journey to Daitunda, near Hyderabad. They had never travelled by train before, nor ever been around people who did not speak their language, Odiya.

They arrived at the industrial plot near Hyderabad, to find they had to live in a camp set up for labourers. “There was no clean water facility, limited food, the conditions were crowded and there was no healthcare,” recalls Satyabhama. “There were open-ground toilets and cooking had to be done outdoors.”

They lived under a polythene roof shelter. Niranjana had to work long days, after which he was paid only Rs.40 for making 1000 bricks. Tensions were high in the camp because of the mix of migrant workers sent here from all over Odisha and east India, with the dire living conditions adding to the strain.

They stayed for five months, which was just long enough to pay off the family loan, and returned back to their village in Odisha as soon as they could. There was no rescue support available to them from the Odisha Government because they were in Andhra Pradesh, yet the Government of Andhra Pradesh had no support to offer them either.

Satyabhama was pregnant at the time of their departure from Andhra Pradesh. She had had no access to proper healthcare or community support during the pregnancy and, in the middle of their long train journey home, she went into labour. They left the train at Nalkonda Station under a tree, far away from any medical care, she gave birth. The baby died.

Their story is all too common for migrant labourers. Of the 22 families that moved to work in the brick factory from their area, all returned to Odisha within the year. Niranjana is now at least happy that they do not have any major debts, but regrets ever having to borrow the money and be forced into the brick labour to pay it back.

On their return to Bagbahali, the family were identified by the village Food Security Committee (FSC), set up with the help of RCDC, as vulnerable and in need of support. They were given two goats from the villager who had already received support for a goatary. When a beneficiary has established themselves over time with a number of goats, they repay the FSC by donating one goat to another person in need.

Niranjan has been linked, with the support of FSC, to a government loan from the local Gram Panchayat office. FSC also helped to applying job card, APL card and on to the MNREGA scheme to which he is entitled. He is now employed with reasonably regular local labour activities, such as house building. It is not a full income, but it has added some security to their situation. Niranjan would like to get a government loan to start a small business. That way, they hope, their livelihoods will be secured and they can support their children's higher education.

Satyabhama has returned to working in agricultural labour, collecting local forest produce such as Mahua, Kendu leaf, which is used to make local cigarettes. When she recently required healthcare for their children, she was able to borrow Rs. 6000 interest-free from the village women's Self Help Group (SHG), which she is paying back successfully. Like many SHGs set up with the support of RCDC, this one is providing a lifeline support for female family members in their times of need.

The young couple look tired and weary when describing the story of their time in Hyderabad. The experience has left its impression upon them. But they are hopeful for their futures now that secure financial and community support is available to them, not in some distant far-away industrial wasteland, but right in the village they were born and raised in.