



Circular migration and Poverty Alleviation: A case of *Pangal* migrants in Manipur

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I. Introduction

Pattern and nature of migration has undergone transformation over recent decades, and one element of change has been the substantial increase in circular migration. Of late, with the increasing connectivity owing to improvement in means of transport and communication, time taken and the expenses to travel from villages to city centres has been reduced drastically facilitating migration, particularly the circular type, of poor people from rural areas to urban areas. This phenomenon has gained its momentum in recent decades in the state of Manipur because of low income and productivity in agricultural sector leading to tendency to search for additional economic sources to supplement their agricultural income. The augmentation of economic opportunities, particularly in informal sector, in Imphal city has also attracted these poor people who are desperately seeking some additional sources of income. It is in this backdrop that the present paper makes an attempt to investigate the relationship between circular migration and poverty alleviation using primary sources of data collected from migrants belonging to *Pangal* community residing in three urban localities in Imphal city viz. Golapti, Hatta and Mantripukhri. People of this community who are also known by the name 'Meitei-Pangals' or 'Manipuri Muslims' inhabit primarily in rural areas of valley district and are mostly engaging themselves in agricultural activities where they earn less income. Because of this occupational nature, they have been reported as one of the most socio-economically and educationally backward community in the state (RSESMP, 2004). Thus, there is a strong tendency among the poor farmers or landless labourers of this community to opt circular migration as a means to alleviate their poverty. Hence, the present paper tries to examine the type of economic activities the migrants are engaging with in Imphal city and also the extent to which this type of migration has solved their problems of poverty.

Individuals do not simply look around and decide to migrate to a new place or choose an economic pursuit or work in the place of destination. Rather they extract information about the new place or the economic activity they are going to engage with before moving out. Usually people intend to migrate to those places or select economic activities in those sector where they know other individuals that can help them. Thus, social networks provide the kinds of connections needed to make migration possible or for choosing an economic pursuit (Bartram *et. al.*, 2014). Hence, the present study also intends to examine the role of migrant networks in making circular migration possible among *Pangal* migrants.

II. Theoretical framework and research methods

The present study tries to investigate the extent to which circular migration helps in alleviating poverty of migrants and their families within the framework of ‘New Economics of Migration Theory’ which highlights circular migration as a household strategy, especially in developing economies where job opportunities are not sustainable (Haas, 2010). The study uses both secondary and primary sources of data. Primary data were collected from migrants belonging to *Pangal* community residing in three urban localities viz. Golapti, Hatta and Mantripukhri of Imphal city using structured and unstructured interview technique. Few case studies of some migrants were also being conducted to assess the motives behind their move to the city and also its economic impacts to the migrants and their families.

III. Circular Migration

Circular or seasonal or temporary migration may be understood as “a pattern of regulated or unregulated mobility between two or more destinations that is economically motivated, temporary or cyclical” (*Ibid.*). Although there is no strong agreement among the scholars on the definition of circular migration, the nature and pattern of this type of migration is indicated by several distinct characteristics (Newland, 2009). Circular flows take place between a place of origin and a destination; and have a distinct temporal dimension, often involving short-term moves, such as seasonal movements. It also involves longer-term movements up to a few years, for instance, the movements of skilled, temporary workers, or life-cycle moves as with retirees. This type of movement is repetitive, involving more than one cycle between origin and destination that encourages development both for the origin and destination of migration and for the migrants themselves (Bartram *et. al. op. cit.*). Circular migration has been in existence since centuries. Moch (2003) gives a description of the circular movements of seasonal agricultural workers between the French highlands and Spain in the 1700s and the Hollandsganger since the early 1600s. The Hollandsganger who were mostly young men from Westphalia in Germany moved to Holland to work seasonally around capital-intensive dairy production there. They did the cutting of hay and peat, digging of madder, and harvesting of grain on dairy farms that produced cheese for an international market(cited in Bartram *et. al. op. cit.*). Thus, Majority of the circular migrants seem to be low-skilled domestic or service worker and agricultural labour reproduced informally through networks of migrants (Bartram *et. al. op. cit.*).

IV. Low agricultural productivity and seasonal unemployment among *Pangals*

Pangals as mentioned earlier are backward economically because of the limited scope of economic opportunities available in their place of residences which resulted to their low economic participation as shown by many reports. According to 2001 population census, in Manipur the percentage share of the Muslim workers to the total state workers was 7.42 per cent only while the percentage share of Muslim population to the total state population was 8.32 per cent. Further, the percentage of Muslim workers to the total Muslim population was recorded at 36.75 per cent while the percentage of workers at the state level out of the total population was 43.62 per cent. Furthermore, according to the report of socio-economic survey of *Meitei-Pangals* (Manipuri Muslims), 2004 the percentage of Muslims in labour force has come down to 28.38 per cent. Thus it is apparent that *Pangals* have been facing economic hardships which force them to migrate to places where better economic opportunities are available. Since, available economic opportunities are mostly in informal sector and mostly seasonal in nature, the migrants go for circular migration as they can engage in agricultural activities in their origin villages during sowing and harvesting season as well as take up some income earning activities in Imphal city during agricultural off season.

Moreover, low productivity in agricultural sector and seasonal unemployment in their origin villages also compel the *Pangal* migrants to move out. The low productivity is not due to infertile soil but because of not employing scientific machines and modern methods of agriculture like using improved varieties of seeds, agrochemicals and laboratory methods such as soil testing. So, when these migrants talk about low productivity, they actually complain of non-availability of the facilities and services essential for increasing and maintaining agricultural productivity. This shows that people are poor in rich soil. Besides, in Manipur there is the absence of the practice of cultivation throughout the year and double cropping. Farmers are engaged in cultivation only for 5- 6 months in a year. So, they remain unemployed for at least 6 months in a year which creates seasonal unemployment in the villages in Manipur. This affects farmers belonging to *Pangal* community badly as they are mostly scattered, as mentioned earlier, in villages and engaged in agriculture. There is also limited scope for development of non-farm activities in rural areas concentrated by them. Consequently, the farmers who are facing low productivity or seasonal unemployment are pushed out from their villages to Imphal city where better economic opportunities, particularly in informal sector, are available. In this sector, they usually take up economic pursuits like working as unskilled or skilled labourers in construction sites, auto rickshaw driving, street vending, doing labour work on daily basis¹ and ticketing of municipal parking etc. They prefer these economic activities to others as they can readily start earning good income without many hurdles and with or without any small capital investment.

They go back to their villages for several days as and when their presence is needed at home or at the time of sowing rice in paddy field. After the necessity of their visit is fulfilled or the sowing of rice and giving fertilizer are over, they return to Imphal city to continue their engagement in the economic pursuits they have started or take up new one depending upon the availability as well as the season of the work². They go back

again at the time of harvesting their paddy field, then come back to Imphal city after it is done, thus leading to their pattern of migration as circular.

Classically, seasonal migration is seemed to be controlled by an extended period of low labour demand in the home village, combined with alternative and accessible labour demand elsewhere. Most seasonal migration is rural-rural, and dependent on complementary peaks of labour demand; as a result, cropping patterns can be vital (Connell et. al. 1976). Hence, in Ghana, farmers in the north migrated after harvest to the perennial cash crops in the south (Beals et. al. 1970). However, in case of *Pangal* seasonal migration, it is solely rural-urban migration usually taking place during the off season of paddy cultivation.

Thus, among the *Pangal* migrants, this type of movement becomes the main source of income for households who are unable to support themselves through agriculture particularly those having small landholding or landless due to low productivity (Hugo, 1985 cited in Keshri & Bhagat, 2012). The same factor is also the primary economic force that drives circular or seasonal migration at the national level (Connell et.al. 1976). Thus, circular or seasonal or temporary migration has been used by people, particularly rural poor, as a part of their livelihood strategies and income security (Keshari and Bhagat, 2013; IOM, 2015). The *Pangal* migrants migrate during the off season of paddy cultivation to supplement to the meagre income they get from agriculture. One migrant narrated,

"I am a farmer from a village in Lilong. I have about 1.5 acres of agricultural land on which I do paddy cultivation. This was the only source of income for my family before migrating to Imphal. Since only rice cultivation is done in the land which is also during kharif season only, income from the cultivation alone becomes difficult to manage the family's expenses as children are also growing with increasing needs. Hence, I decided to migrate to Imphal city during off season of rice cultivation to earn some money. I started involving myself in the construction of buildings as labourer (jugalli). This fetches me at least Rs. 500 for a day. During harvesting season, I go back to my village to harvest what I sowed only to come back again after harvesting is completed. In this way I am trying to fulfil my family needs by working as farmer in my village and as labourer in Imphal city during off season."

V. Specific requirement of money and circular migration

In addition to the above discussed factors for seasonal or circular migration, some migrants also move to Imphal city for a short period of time with the intention of earning money for few months to pay off a debt or to fulfil specific requirement of money. These migrants after few months or so return to their villages when their need of money has been fulfilled. They migrate again to Imphal when they need money badly or when they have to repay their debt or during the off season of farming thus, making their move a circular migration. Another migrant narrated,

"I have given 7 lakhs to our local MLA for recruiting as constable in police force during 2013 after giving 2 acres of agricultural land on lease to one rich person in my village. The money I got after leasing out the land was not enough so; my parents took 3 lakhs from a money lender on which I have to pay interest on monthly basis. When the recruitment result was out, my name was not in the list of selected candidates. The next day I along with my father went to the quarter of the MLA to ask for returning the 7 lakhs we have given to him. He said to come some other day. We went again after some days, but he was not in his quarter. We contacted a local worker of the MLA and went together again. On that day the MLA gave us 50 thousand and we were told to come after some days to collect the remaining amount. We trusted him and came back. After that day, whenever we went and tried to meet him, we were told that he was not in the quarter. Till today, we haven't received the money. But we have to pay the interest of 15 thousand per month for 3 lakhs rupees taken from the money lender. So, I started involving in uploading and downloading of sand and stones from Thoubal river in my locality in to order to pay the interest. But I was not able to pay the interest on regular basis as I was not getting to earn every day. So, I decided to migrate to Imphal city to work as labourer in construction sites. I will try to repay the principal amount after I get the marup³ I am taking part. Until I repay 3 lakhs, I have to earn as much money as I can. Sometimes, I also drive autorickshaw of one of my friends in Golapti when he doesn't drive. Once I repay the amount I will go back to my village although I may come back again when I need money badly."

Thus, as found in several studies of Indian communities (Keshari and Bhagat, 2013) circular migration becomes one of the preferable forms of migration among *Pangal* community. This is also because of the fact that their origin villages are well connected to Imphal city by road and the distance between is also not so long which facilitate their circular migration. They also don't need to spend more money to go back to their villages as and when required. Moreover, some migrants prefer circular migration to others as they can fulfil their family responsibilities, both socially and economically, through this movement. Furthermore, since they can go home when their presence is required, they don't need to migrate along with their family.

VI. Circular migration and alleviation of poverty

As discussed earlier, *Pangals* who have undertaken circular migration had been in poverty either because of low productivity in their agricultural pursuits or seasonal unemployment. It is the poverty that actually forced them to migrate as their origin rural areas do not have multitude of economic pursuits from which they can choose and take up as their supplementary source of income. Hence, they migrate to Imphal city in search of supplementary source of income to cope with the problems of low income and seasonal unemployment in their villages to ultimately alleviate their poverty. As narrated by some migrants, this type of movement makes possible for them to fulfil the increasing needs of their families by adopting 'income diversification through diversifying activities' as a livelihood strategy. The income they earn through circular migration, usually on daily basis, is either used to meet the daily requirements of the family or saved by participating in a *marup* only to use the accumulated amount to pay off a debt or fulfil occasional needs like marriage expenses for wards.

At times, people become poor suddenly because of an unfortunate and unthoughtful step in life leading to owing of money to other people and become bankrupt. In this situation, one resorts to many strategies to come out of that temporary poverty. In case of *Pangals* who are facing the same situation, they choose circular migration, as narrated earlier by one migrant, as a means to alleviate their poverty. Since many of the economic pursuits, say construction works, in Imphal city are also seasonal, they opt for circular migration as their type of movement so that they can fulfil other social and emotional needs in their origin villages as and when required. Circular migration also allows them to shift from one income earning productive activity to another from time to time depending upon the seasonality of the activity for income diversification. This opens the door for migrants to earn as much money as they can to ultimately free them from poverty and therefore, they can go back to their origin villages only to come back again when they face the same problem in future.

VII. Role of Migrant Networks

In addition to the factors discussed earlier, access to friends and kinsmen already settled in city is instrumental in making circular migration possible among *Pangals* migrants many studies (Germani, 1961; Browning, 1971 and Butterworth, 1962) show the importance of rural-urban social ties to the decision to migrate. In the present study, the circular or seasonal migration of *Pangals* in Imphal city is found to be reproduced through the networks of migrants. Information about seasonal or temporary jobs is spread informally through the networks of circular migrants, who often support one another with short-term resources such as housing. Migration researchers such as Massey and his colleagues (1998) have used the term ‘migrant networks’ to refer to this social ties. They typically defined migrant networks as “interpersonal ties linking kin, friends and community members in their places of origin and destination”. Several other migration specialists have shown that other kinds of social ties also exist for migrants. For instance, many migrants have organizational ties to institutions and organizations that help them to migrate, get jobs or adjust to a new society in other ways (Poros, 2011; Portes, 1995). These might be universities, alumni associations, diaspora organizations, refugee community organizations, state agencies, non-governmental organizations, private employment agencies, corporations, religious organizations, cultural institutions, and so on. Some ties even reflect even more complex relationships, such as those of transnational entrepreneurs, whose ties can combine interpersonal and organizational relations as in family firms (Ong, 1999; Poros, 2011). But migrant networks have been explained by migration researchers as being represented only by these interpersonal and organizational ties.

In the present study, friends and relatives constitute the major source of information for the migrants which points to the importance of the role of ‘migrant networks’ in their migration process. On the other hand, Ritchey (1976)’s affinity hypothesis suggests that the presence of relatives and friends in an individual’s community of residence tends to deter migration. But in the present study, presence of migrants’ kins or friends in the city favours in their decision to move temporarily. They move to urban localities viz. Golapti, Hatta and Mantripukhri of Imphal city after extracting information from their kins and non-kin networks in Imphal about the economic opportunities and availability of accommodations, and also about the attitudes of people towards the migrants in the city. They also get awareness about the happenings in the city through radio, television,

newspaper, and mass media like Facebook and Instagram; but for migration to Imphal city, they rely on the information provided by their kinsmen or friends as they are more trustworthy. Thus, the role of friends and relatives determine the circumstances of *Pangal* migrants' initial adjustment in Imphal city in several ways, particularly with regard to housing and job. Furthermore, the utilization of migrant networks reduced the economic and psychic cost of migrating to Imphal. Such social networks thus convert individual migration into a continuing process with constant shifting of people, each new migrant profiting from the experiences, pleasant and unpleasant, of those who preceded him to Imphal city. A migrant narrated:

"I belong to a village called Yairipok Changamdabi in Imphal east district. I have been staying in Hatta for more than 7 years now. One year after I got married 9 years back, I was compelled to earn my living by my parents as I was asked to start my nuclear family (tongan pijaba). So, I was searching for a livelihood in my village. I started doing uploading and downloading of sand and stones from truck from Thoubal river. Through this I could earn some money to feed my family. But many a time I didn't get the work because of not availability of sand and stones in the river due to high volume of water in the river during rainy season or increase in the number of people involving in the same activity. At this time, I started searching for alternative work which will fetch me regular income. So, I started asking my friends and relatives in Imphal city about the availability of economic opportunities there. As I was convinced with their encouragement to migrate to Imphal city I moved to Hatta locality in Imphal city to start driving autorickshaw."

Thus, among the *Pangal* migrants, this additional factor of 'migrant networks' tips the balance in favour of a move to the capital city of Manipur, because potential migrants are well aware that they would need help in order to locate housing and employment when they arrive in the city. Having ties to previous migrants provide the new prospecting migrants a substantial motivation at least to attempt migration to Imphal city.

VIII. Conclusion

From the above discussion we can conclude that *Pangals* inhabiting in rural areas of Manipur move to Imphal city by considering several factors which are prevalent both in the origin village and the destination. A considerable number of economic migrants undergo circular migration to augment their income as they have been forced to move to Imphal city by agricultural low productivity and seasonal unemployment. Migrant networks play a pivotal role in providing information about the availability of work and other requirements for instance, accommodation while staying in the city. With the income earned by engaging themselves in economic pursuits, particularly in informal sector, they can supplement their agricultural income or pay off a debt which puts them in poverty. Thus, circular migration has been adopted as a strategy by *Pangal* migrants to alleviate their poverty.

Notes

- ¹ There are certain locations in Imphal city viz. *Samu Makhong, Khongnang Ani Karak, konung Mamang* where individuals looking for manual work on daily basis wait for people to come and hire them to do some manual labour for which they get payment on hourly basis depending upon the type of work.
- ² For instance, work in construction sites is readily available during dry season.
- ³ A kind of financial saving scheme prevalent in Manipur where everyone in the scheme has to contribute a fixed equal amount every month and a lottery is done to choose a winner every month to whom the total collected money is given. Once one wins the lottery, he/she will not be part of the lottery in the remaining months but has to contribute the fixed amount every month till the last winner.

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