

Gender and Development in Odisha: A Critical Analysis of the Dadan System's Impact on Women and Communities

Mr.SrikantaSha , Research scholar, Dept. of public administration, Utkal university, Bhubaneswar
Dr.SandhyaraniNayak, Assistant professor, Dept of political science, Rajdhani college Baramunda
Bhubaneswar, Odisha pin-751003

Abstract:

The phenomenon of labour migration has emerged as one of the most significant socio-economic realities in Odisha. Among the various forms of migration, the Dadan system a labour recruitment mechanism in which workers receive advance payments from labour contractors and migrate to other states for employment has profoundly shaped the lives of rural communities, particularly in western Odisha. While migration often provides an important source of livelihood for economically vulnerable households, it simultaneously reproduces cycles of poverty, indebtedness, exploitation, and social exclusion. The impact of the Dadan system is not gender-neutral. Women experience migration differently from men, facing unique challenges related to labour exploitation, unpaid care work, social insecurity, health risks, and limited decision-making power. This article critically examines the relationship between gender and development in Odisha through the lens of the Dadan system. It analyses the socio economic causes of distress migration, explores its effects on women and communities, and evaluates policy interventions aimed at addressing migration-related vulnerabilities. The study argues that sustainable development in Odisha requires a gender sensitive approach that recognizes women not merely as dependents of migrant workers but as active agents of social and economic transformation.

Keywords: Dadan System, Gender and Development, Labour Migration, Women Empowerment, Odisha, Distress Migration, Bonded Labour, Rural Development.

Date of Submission: 11-08-2026

Date of acceptance: 24-08-2026

I. Introduction:

Migration has historically been a survival strategy for economically marginalized populations. In Odisha, seasonal and distress migration has become a widespread phenomenon, particularly in districts such as Balangir, Kalahandi, Nuapada, Bargarh, Sonepur, Nabarangpur, and Koraput. These districts are characterized by chronic poverty, recurrent droughts, limited industrialization, and inadequate employment opportunities. Consequently, thousands of workers migrate annually to states such as Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Gujarat, and Kerala in search of livelihood opportunities.

The Dadan system occupies a central place in this migration process. Under this system, labour contractors, locally known as Sirdar's or Dadan agents, provide advance payments to workers before migration. These advances often create conditions resembling debt bondage, where workers become dependent on contractors and lose bargaining power regarding wages and working conditions. Research on western Odisha indicates that distress migration is closely associated with poverty, landlessness, indebtedness, and social marginalization.

Although migration studies have traditionally focused on male workers, increasing evidence suggests that women play crucial roles within migrant households and migration processes. Gender relations significantly influence who migrates, who remains behind, who controls remittances, and who bears the social costs of migration. Therefore, an examination of the Dadan system through a gender and development perspective is essential for understanding its broader implications.

Understanding the Dadan System in Odisha

The term "Dadan" refers to an advance payment provided by labour contractors to workers before they migrate for employment. Historically, the system emerged as a response to rural distress and seasonal unemployment. In contemporary Odisha, Dadan migration is especially prevalent in western districts where agricultural productivity remains low and livelihood options are limited. The recruitment process generally begins with labour contractors visiting villages before the migration season. Families receive advance payments

that range from a few thousand to several tens of thousands of rupees. In return, workers agree to migrate and work in sectors such as brick kilns, construction, agriculture, mining, and manufacturing. Recent reports suggest that between three and five lakh workers migrate annually from Odisha to other states for employment, many under conditions linked to labour contracting and debt dependency. While the system provides immediate financial relief to poor households, it often traps workers in exploitative labour arrangements characterized by low wages, unsafe working conditions, long working hours, and restrictions on mobility.

The Dadan System: Origins and Structure:

The roots of the Dadan system are tied to the agro-ecological distress of the former Koraput-Balangir-Kalahandi (KBK) region, an area long marked by erratic rainfall, weak irrigation coverage, and limited non-farm employment. The KBK districts were administratively reorganised in 1992 into eight present-day districts: Koraput, Malkangiri, Nabarangpur, Rayagada, Balangir, Subarnapur (Sonepur), Kalahandi and Nuapada. Together with parts of Bargarh and the Ganjam–Gajapati–Kandhamal belt, this region constitutes the principal source zone for distress migration in Odisha.

The state's own legal architecture recognised the problem unusually early: The Orissa Dadan Labour (Control and Regulation) Act was passed in 1975, several years before the central Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act of 1979 was enacted following deliberations at the 28th Labour Ministers' Conference in 1976. Under both frameworks, a Dadan worker is, in essence, a person recruited under a contract, express or implied, by an agent for work outside the state.

In practice, recruitment happens through sardars or khatadars, village-level contractors who are often themselves former migrants. They typically pay a lump-sum advance, escort the family to the destination, and broker the wage settlement, frequently on an opaque piece-rate basis for the number of bricks moulded. Migration is overwhelmingly a family affair: husbands, wives and children migrate as a single labouring unit, since brick-moulding is organised around household-based production targets rather than individual wage contracts. Destinations include the brick kiln belts of Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, the power-loom units of Surat (drawing heavily from Ganjam district), and, for some Kandhamal and Kalahandi households, plantations and construction sites in Kerala.

The Scale of Distress Migration: Data and Trends

Reliable, real-time data on Dadan migration is notoriously difficult to obtain, since much of it is unregistered and informal. Government and academic estimates, while imperfect, indicate a substantial and, by some measures, growing phenomenon.

Indicator	Figure	Source / Period
Districts identified as migration-prone in Odisha	About 14 of the state's 30 districts	State government data
Estimated total migrants statewide (all forms)	Around 10 million	Academic legal study, Balangir district
Seasonal labour migrants recorded leaving Odisha	87,000 (2008) rising to about 1,45,000 (2015)	Government migration tracking, cited in IJFMR (2024)
Dadan workers, Balangir–Nuapada–Kalahandi belt alone	Estimated at roughly 5,00,000	Statement of a former Kantabanji MLA, 2025
Registered migrant persons (one reference year)	13,081 registered; about 1,150 rescued from bondage	2016 government figures
Brick-kiln workers rescued from Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka	1,139 workers, over 20% of them children	2011–2013, government and NGO rescue operations
Migrants from Ganjam to Surat power-loom industry	Approximately 7,00,000	District-level estimates, 2025

Several caveats apply to these figures. First, official registration captures only a fraction of actual movement; unofficial estimates for some districts suggest the true number of migrants exceeds 1,00,000 even where only a few thousand are formally registered. Second, the data conflates distinct categories short-duration seasonal migration, longer-term semi-permanent migration, and outright trafficking-like bondage making it difficult to isolate the specifically coercive 'Dadan' subset from voluntary labour migration more broadly. Third,

sex-disaggregated data on migrants is almost entirely absent from official statistics, which is itself a significant gap given that women and girls typically migrate as part of family units and perform substantial productive labour at the destination.

Notably, evidence from Kalahandi district shows that the Dadan phenomenon can recede where structural investment occurs: several blocks have reported a marked decline in seasonal out-migration since the completion of the Indravati irrigation project improved local agricultural returns. This suggests that distress migration is not an immutable cultural pattern but a rational response to the absence of viable local livelihoods, one that recedes when those livelihoods are created.

Gender and Development: A Conceptual Framework

The Gender and Development (GAD) approach emerged as a critique of earlier development models that viewed women merely as beneficiaries of welfare programmes. GAD emphasizes the social construction of gender relations and seeks to understand how power structures shape opportunities, resources, and outcomes for men and women.

From a gender perspective, migration cannot be understood solely as an economic process. It is also a social process that influences family structures, community relationships, labour division, access to resources, and women's autonomy.

The Dadan system affects women in multiple ways:

1. Women migrate alongside male workers.
2. Women remain behind as caretakers of households.
3. Women assume increased economic responsibilities during male absence.
4. Women face risks of exploitation and trafficking.
5. Women experience changing social roles and decision-making responsibilities.

Therefore, analyzing migration through a gender lens helps reveal hidden dimensions of labour mobility and development.

Gendered Dimensions of the Dadan System

4.1 Invisible and Underpaid Labour

Within the brick kiln economy, women perform physically demanding tasks, moulding bricks, carrying head-loads, stacking kilns, that are comparable in intensity to the work performed by men. Yet research on the sector consistently finds that women are paid less than men for equivalent work, with payment and advances frequently routed through a male 'head of household,' rendering women's individual labor contribution statistically and economically invisible. Because households are paid on a piece-rate basis for output rather than per worker, women's labor effectively subsidises the family wage without separate recognition, while women additionally bear the unpaid burden of cooking, child care and water collection within the kiln settlement.

4.2 Sexual Harassment, Coercion and Violence

Multiple investigations point to women and girls in brick-kiln settings facing a heightened risk of sexual harassment, coercion and, in some documented cases, forced marriage at the hands of supervisors or kiln owners. In one widely reported 2023 case, child-protection and labour officials rescued 54 migrant workers, including seven minor girls, from a brick kiln in Telangana after allegations that the owners had been sexually harassing the girls while also abusing the wider workforce. Broader regional research on brick-kiln labour across South Asia has similarly documented patterns of verbal abuse, beatings, and in extreme cases torture or abduction, with women workers described as 'especially vulnerable.'

Academic research focused specifically on Scheduled Caste Dadan migrants from Odisha has documented serious physical abuse and occupational injury, including instances in which migrant workers suffered mutilation or died in custody-like conditions at destination brick kilns, underscoring that the risks of the system are not merely economic but can be physically life-threatening.

4.3 Reproductive and Maternal Health Neglect

Pregnant and lactating women in migrant brick-kiln settlements have little practical access to antenatal care, institutional delivery, or postnatal support, since kiln sites are typically located away from public health infrastructure and work schedules leave little room for clinic visits. Migration research from brick-kiln belts elsewhere in India similarly documents that local Anganwadi and health outreach systems rarely extend to seasonal migrant settlements, leaving pregnant workers dependent on informal or absent care. Independent labour studies covering the 2017–18 period have also recorded gender-based violence by supervisors and intimate-partner violence within migrant households, compounding the health burden carried by women in these settings.

4.4 Women 'Left Behind'

Not all Dadan migration is undertaken by entire families; in some households, men migrate while women remain in the village. These women take on full responsibility for agricultural work, livestock, children and elderly relatives, often with reduced household income and weakened social support during the migration season. Existing research on left-behind households in western Odisha highlights resulting psychosocial strain, alongside continued vulnerability to domestic violence, frequently linked to alcohol use, within a context of economic precarity.

4.5 Caste, Tribe and Intersectional Disadvantage

The Dadan workforce is disproportionately drawn from Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities. Research specifically tracing the experience of Scheduled Caste Dadan migrants in Odisha finds that decades of labour-law reform and caste-protection measures have failed to meaningfully shield these workers from abuse, debt bondage or discrimination. For women within these communities, caste-based marginalization compounds gender-based vulnerability: Dalit and tribal women migrating under Dadan arrangements face a layered set of disadvantages relating to caste, gender and class simultaneously, a dynamic that mainstream migration policy has been slow to recognize.

Impact of the Dadan System on Women

Economic Impact

Migration generates remittances that contribute to household income. These earnings often support food consumption, education, healthcare, and housing improvements. However, women rarely exercise full control over remittance utilization.

Women migrants are frequently concentrated in low-paying and informal occupations. They often receive lower wages than men despite performing similar work. Additionally, women undertake unpaid domestic responsibilities alongside wage labour, resulting in a double burden.

Increased Workload for Left-Behind Women

When men migrate, women assume responsibility for agricultural work, livestock care, household management, childcare, and elderly care. Although these responsibilities increase women's contribution to household survival, they often do not translate into greater social recognition or economic independence.

The feminization of migration-related responsibilities has become a significant feature of rural Odisha.

Health and Well-Being

Women migrants face serious health challenges, including poor living conditions, inadequate sanitation, malnutrition, occupational hazards, and limited access to healthcare. Construction and brick-kiln workers often work under physically demanding conditions. Research on migrant women workers from Odisha highlights issues related to occupational health risks, reproductive health concerns, and limited healthcare access.

Gender-Based Violence and Exploitation

One of the most troubling aspects of the Dadan system is the vulnerability of women to exploitation. Migrant women may face harassment, wage discrimination, workplace abuse, and trafficking risks. The informal nature of labour recruitment often leaves them without legal protection.

Debt dependency further weakens their bargaining power and increases vulnerability to coercive labour practices.

Impact on Education and Children

Migration often disrupts children's education. In many migrant families, children accompany parents to worksites, leading to school absenteeism and dropout. Girls are particularly affected because they frequently assume caregiving responsibilities for younger siblings.

The educational disadvantages associated with migration contribute to the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

Critical Analysis: Why the Gap Between Policy and Practice Persists

- Enforcement deficit: Registration requirements under the 1975 and 1979 Acts are routinely bypassed because recruitment happens informally at the village level and enforcement agencies have limited capacity to monitor cross-border, interstate labour movement.
- Gender-blind data and design: Migration statistics, registration drives and even rescue operations are generally recorded by household rather than by individual, obscuring women's specific labour contribution, risks and needs, and making targeted policy design difficult.

- Welfare without structural substitution: Saturation drives and SHG expansion provide important safety nets, but do not, by themselves, replace the income that migration provides; only sustained investment in irrigation, local employment guarantees and non-farm livelihoods, of the kind that reduced migration from parts of Kalahandi after the Indravati project, durably lowers the incentive to migrate under exploitative terms.
- Cross-state coordination gaps: Because exploitation occurs in destination states outside Odisha's direct jurisdiction, protection depends on cooperation with destination-state labour departments, cooperation that has historically been inconsistent and reactive, typically triggered only after a rescue or a media exposé.
- Top-down programme design: Both the migration task force and major women's schemes have been criticised for limited participation by affected communities, particularly migrant women themselves, in shaping the interventions meant to serve them.

Recommendations for a Gender-Responsive Approach

- Mandate and publish sex- and age-disaggregated migration data at the block level, so that the specific exposure of women and girls to Dadan-related risks can be tracked and targeted.
- Extend Mission Shakti's SHG model with migration-flexible membership rules, allowing seasonal migrant women to retain SHG and loan eligibility despite periods of absence, and to access remote savings and credit facilities while at destination sites.
- Establish destination-side support cells, ideally jointly staffed by Odisha and host-state labour departments, with specific responsibility for women's safety, grievance redress, and identification of sexual harassment or bonded-labour cases at brick-kiln clusters known to draw Odisha workers.
- Strengthen portable maternal and child health entitlements so that pregnant and lactating migrant women can access antenatal care, institutional delivery support and child immunisation regardless of their location during the migration season.
- Expand residential bridge-education and hostel facilities in high-out-migration blocks, prioritising adolescent girls who are most likely to be withdrawn from school for caregiving responsibilities when parents migrate.
- Scale up local employment guarantees, including MGNREGS and tribal livelihood missions, with explicit annual targets in the most migration-intensive blocks, modelled on the stated 200–300 day local employment goal, and evaluate outcomes against actual reduction in distress out-migration, not merely scheme expenditure.
- Replicate structural interventions, such as irrigation and water-resource investment shown to have reduced migration in parts of Kalahandi, in other high-migration blocks as a long-term substitute for seasonal Dadan recruitment.

II. Conclusion:

The Dadan system is, at its core, a story of how poverty, geography and weak local livelihoods combine to push some of Odisha's most marginalized households into exploitative labour arrangements far from home. Read through a gender lens, that story acquires additional and urgent dimensions: women whose labour subsidises household survival without independent recognition or pay; women and girls exposed to sexual harassment, violence and reproductive-health neglect at distant work sites; women left behind who absorb the social and economic costs of male migration; and girls whose education is curtailed to sustain a system that offers their families no better alternative.

Odisha has not been without policy response, from one of India's earliest state labour laws addressing this very issue in 1975, to a large and genuinely transformative women's self-help group movement, to a renewed task force and migrant helpline launched within the past two years. Yet the persistence of Dadan migration, at a scale still measured in the hundreds of thousands, suggests that these efforts have not yet been designed with sufficient attention to how the system specifically affects women, nor matched by the scale of structural investment needed to make staying home a viable choice. A genuinely gender-responsive development strategy for western Odisha would need to treat women not as an undifferentiated part of the migrant household, but as a distinct constituency whose safety, health, education and economic agency deserve to be centered in both the design and the evaluation of every intervention meant to end the Dadan system.

Bibliography:

- [1]. Bera, Sumita & Das, Sibabrata. *Patterns and Reasons of Migration to Urban Odisha*. National Geographical Journal of India, 2022.
- [2]. Datta, Amrita & Rajan, S. Irudaya (Eds.). *Migration, Livelihoods and Gender: Insights from Odisha*. Springer, 2026.
- [3]. Khamari, Chandni Prasad & Tripathy, Anjana. *A Study on the Legal Aspects of the Inter-State Migration of Labour (Dadan) with Special Reference to Balangir District, Odisha*. 2021.

- [4]. Mishra, Lopamudra. *Debt Bondage and Seasonal Migration: A Study of Western Odisha, India*. The International Journal of Community and Social Development, 2024.
- [5]. Patel, Amrita &Giri, Jasmine. *Climate Change, Migration and Women: Analysing Construction Workers in Odisha*. Social Change, 2019.
- [6]. Ponnusamy, K. &Sendhil, R. *Gender Issues and Livelihood Pattern of Migrant Women Labourers of Farm Families*. Indian Journal of Agricultural Sciences, 2015.
- [7]. Sahu, Chodaganga. *Temporary and Seasonal Migration in Odisha: Regional Patterns, Characteristics and Determinants*. SSRN Working Paper, 2025.
- [8]. Government of Odisha. Reports and Policy Documents on Distress Migration, Labour Welfare, and Rural Livelihood Development.
- [9]. Census of India Reports on Migration and Labour Mobility.
- [10]. National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) Migration Reports