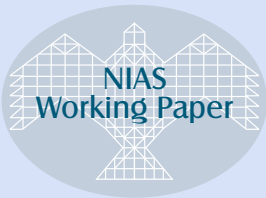


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Jiyaul Haque

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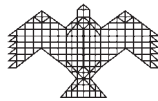
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**NIAS Working Paper: WP9 - 2018**

# **LAND, CASTE AND POWER IN CIRCULAR MIGRATION**

**Jiyaul Haque**



**NIAS-UNDP Policy Research Initiative on Inequality and Human Development**

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# LAND, CASTE AND POWER IN CIRCULAR MIGRATION

## Introduction

The phenomenon of rural workers seeking employment in multiple locations is a well-established practice. Seasonal migration of agricultural workers occurs both intra-state as well as inter-state. There is now growing evidence that this search for employment for a part of the year extends beyond agriculture in rural areas to non-agricultural work in urban settlements. This leads to what has been called as circular migration, or the phenomenon of workers working for a part of the year in urban settlements and returning to their rural base for the rest of the year. Much of the attention around circular migration has focused on the conditions prompting workers to seek employment outside their villages. Micro-studies have shown that circular migration is largely undertaken due to rural unemployment, scarcity of land, inequitable land distribution, low agriculture productivity and high population density (Bird & Deshingkar, 2009). This denotes extreme economic and often social hardship and is undertaken mostly by landless or land-poor, unskilled and illiterate poor laborers (Deshingkar & Start, 2003, p.2). Consistent with this picture is the fact that circular migration

is more prevalent in regions which witness high levels of intra- regional and inter-regional socioeconomic inequalities (Keshri & Bhagat, 2010, p.39). While these analyses provide insights into why workers are forced to seek employment outside their villages, they are somewhat less forthcoming on why they return to the village for a part of the year. Among the possible reasons is the inhospitality of the urban spaces to circular migrants. These migrants often have to live in very difficult conditions in the city and urban employment is temporary.

But the village is also not unchanging. Indeed, the phenomenon of migrant workers earning higher nominal wages in the high-cost city and spending most of it in the low-cost village has its own impact on the economic, social and power structure in the village. It may be possible that through the various economic opportunities that the migrants receive outside the village for a significant portion of the year, they become less dependent on the local landowning households. In regions where land ownership is closely linked to the caste hierarchies in the village, circular migration could weaken the dependency of the poor and marginalized communities on the

upper caste and landed households. Work in urban areas may bring them into contact with political agenda that challenge the legitimacy of existing caste and class hierarchies (Gidwani & Sivaramakrishnan, 2003: p.197). This paper uses the case of a village in Bihar to argue that the process of earning in the city and spending in the village can sufficiently alter power relations in the village to a point where it becomes an incentive to return.

The paper begins with a brief overview of the nature of economic, social and political power in Lohuria village of Banka district of Bihar. The paper then goes on to look at the processes of circular migration originating in Lohuria. Its third section outlines the effect of circular migration on power relations in Lohuria. The final section examines the emergent nature of change in migrant's attitude, aspiration and way of living influenced by urban practices.

### **Land, caste and power in Lohuria**

At the heart of the process of circular migration is the pressure to seek employment outside the village in which the worker lives. This implies a lack of employment opportunities within the village. In the absence of detailed employment data it is difficult to estimate

those seeking but not finding work at the village level. The best we can do is go by the Census category of marginal workers as an indicator of those who are only employed for less than six months. Data shows that concentration of marginal workers is highest in north and north-eastern part of India. This data leaves us in little doubt that Bihar is one of the states where the proportion of marginal workers to total workers is high and has grown sharply over the decade 2001 to 2011. Within Bihar, Banka district has the highest proportion of marginal workers which is 52.3 percent and within this district, Rajaun block has been chosen for the study as it has the highest proportion of marginal workers which is 62.33 percent. Further, Lohuria village of this block is marked by the startling fact that almost all its workers are marginal workers. The 2011 Census records 99.6 percent of its workers as being marginal workers.

Lohuria is a village in Banka district of Bihar in the south-eastern part of the state close to Jharkhand border. It is one of the seven villages of Chilkawar-Asota Panchayat surrounded by Kathwan, Uprawan, Gopalpur, Karsoni and Chilkawar village. It is a small village with a population of 1,982 in 2011 and also the smallest village in the panchayat in terms of area. Its land is fertile and

the plains terrain suits food crops, with the main crops grown in the village being rice, wheat and pulses. However, this land is unequally distributed and majority of the population are either marginal farmers or are landless.

This village with its entire Hindu population was dominated by Rajput till the 1970s. They were the major landowners and controlled the panchayat. This picture changed dramatically after the JP movement in the 1970s. The Backward caste domination of that movement had its impact on Lohuria as well. After the end of the Emergency in 1977 the Bihar Panchayat elections in 1978 were largely polarized on caste lines. This polarization was reflected in Lohuria as well with the Rajput losing their political dominance of the Chilkawar panchayat. In addition to this, political marginalization and caste-based conflict, the Rajputs also had to deal with the larger rural Indian reality that with the passing of each generation the land was divided into smaller fragments. As their holdings became less viable they began to look for other options. The forward caste domination of government services provided them an opportunity to find alternative occupations. Many Rajput families decided to give up their declining status in the village to move to the town. Only a relatively small section of them

continued to stay in the village. There were only six forward caste households living in Lohuria in 2017. Most of them had family members living in the city. These households owned land which they had largely leased out.

This movement of power to the backward castes was far from being evenly distributed among these castes, brought a new concentration of power. The new power of the Other Backward Castes (OBC) was concentrated with the Yadavs. This was reflected in the post-1978 power equations in the panchayat. Many panchayat posts, including the post of Mukhiya (Headmen) and Sarpanch, were occupied by Yadavs. The Yadavs remained the main beneficiary of the change in power equations and maintained their hold on various posts of the Panchayat, including the post of Mukhiya till 2016. This political dominance was also enabled by the demographic patterns in the village. The Yadavs were numerically dominant in the village and accounted for around half the total population of Lohuria in 2017. This new dominance has resulted in the Yadavs being economically superior to most of the other castes except the forward castes of Brahmin and Kayastha. The Yadavs are largely engaged in farming and animal rearing. The other caste in the village classified as OBC was the Telis till 2015. However,



Bihar government had included Teli in Extremely Backward Castes (EBCs) category in 2015<sup>1</sup> (Bihar Gazette no 511, 2015). The Telis is a caste consisting primarily of small landowning cultivators as well as others involved in local businesses. Next in the caste hierarchy of Lohuria are the Sharma/Tati, Mandal and Halwai castes who come under the EBCs category. Together they contribute more than one-third of the total population. The landowners among them own only marginal landholdings and landlessness is widespread. Corresponding to their land ownership pattern they are largely engaged in marginal farming, labour and animal rearing. At the bottom of Lohuria's caste hierarchy are the Scheduled Castes of Paswan and Harizan who account for around 10 percent of the total population of Lohuria. They are landless, poor, and work as agricultural and other labour. The unequal distribution of land and power in Lohuria is so extreme that the Extremely Backward Castes and the Scheduled Castes remain steeped in poverty. They were also discriminated against in the distribution of welfare services such as BPL ration card, Indira Awaas and other social benefits. In addition to the caste-based discrimination, these castes

also suffered from the larger negative trends of fragmentation of land and population growth leading to increased unemployment.

Agricultural workers is largely dependent on seasonal work which hardly provides two months of employment in a year. During that limited period women are paid Rs. 200 a day while men get Rs. 300 a day with meals, and during the harvest season, payment is made largely in grain. During the rest of the year, they engage in marginal work in non-agricultural activities. Some of them work in a flour mill within in the village. A few are also employed in the brick kiln work and paid Rs.700 per 1000 bricks. In addition, construction work in nearby villages and towns also provides work to some of the workers at Rs.250 to Rs. 300 a day. However, these work opportunities remain uncertain.

### **Circular migration**

Rampant poverty along with unemployment and underemployment compel many workers to follow a livelihood strategy of circular migration where they work for a part of the year in the city and return to the village for the rest of the year for their livelihood by living their family behind. This livelihood

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<sup>1</sup> The Bihar government had issued a notification on April 28, 2015, including Teli and Tamoli castes on EBC list in order to provide people from these two castes reservation benefits.



strategy is however not open to all the poor. It requires a social network to be aware of jobs available in cities and the contacts to be able to gain employment. In addition, it is also necessary for the circular migrant to have access to the economic resources that are needed to meet the initial costs of migration including travel. Thus the pioneers of circular migration in Lohuria were not the poorest, that is, the Extremely Backward Castes or the Scheduled Castes. Instead, the initial circular migrants were Telis, who are classified as Other Backward Classes. As the Teli households had been sidelined by the Yadav during the rise of the lower castes in Bihar in the 1980s they felt the pressure of diminishing employment opportunities in Lohuria. At the same time, as a traditional trading community, they had the capital required to migrate. Trading also gave them access to a network that made them relatively more aware of employment opportunities outside the village. The difference in living standards between the city and the village ensured that even as they worked at the lower end of the wage hierarchy in the city their nominal wages were well above those that prevailed in the village. By minimizing expenditure in the high-cost city they were able to

transfer resources to their households in the low-cost village. The livelihood strategy of earning in the high-cost city and spending in the low-cost village ensured there were visible improvements in the economic condition of the circular migrant households. This influenced members of other lower castes to migrate by seeking employment in urban-centers using the knowledge and contacts of the early migrants.

One consequence of this process is the similarity in the employment patterns of circular migrants from a particular village. Typically the networks they have access to provide the same type of jobs resulting in all those who use the same network specializing in a particular job. This village-based specialization is further enhanced when the migrants return for a part of the year as there can be a rudimentary transfer of skills to those who remain in the village. Thirty five year old Guddu Kumar<sup>2</sup> travels across the breadth of India from Lohuria in the east to Ludhiana in the Northwest to work as a mason for a part of the year. As he puts it, “All the labourers from one village have similar work. If someone is doing manual labour then all of them carry out manual labour; if someone is driver then all of them are drivers. When one person

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<sup>2</sup> Interview dated 15<sup>th</sup> March, 2017. All the names of respondents has been changed except the caste based title

migrates and earns and construct a home others follow him. Take my case. I saw someone earning outside and building a house. I said take me also. When I earned, someone observed and said I will also come, take me also. Thus everybody did the same type of work.”

The networks of that provide employment opportunities may initially be restricted to the family when circular migrant workers take their school-dropout sons or other younger members of the family with them when they migrate for work. But as the circular migrant continues with this process over a longer period of time he often has to extend his network beyond the family. This can be seen in the case of one of the oldest circular migrants in the village, sixty year old Hira Mandal<sup>3</sup>. A member of one of the Extremely Backward Castes, he had first migrated twenty five years back with the help of one of his relatives to work in an ice cream factory in Srinagar, Kashmir. He had been working in the same factory over the entire period and was promoted to be the manager. Over the period he had employed at least ten young men of his village in same ice cream factory, where they work as ice cream vendors and get forty percent commission on sales.

Over time as circular migrants have been able to improve their economic condition it has received greater acceptance within the village. This acceptance is understandably strongest among the poorer households. While initially circular migration may have been forced by the conditions of acute poverty and unemployment, it has over the decades become very much more acceptable. By the time of this study, there were some Yadavs who were following this pattern of migration.

This is not to suggest that caste-based attitudes to circular migration have completely disappeared. It has been pointed out that the caste distinctions that have been consolidated in agriculture do not easily disappear when workers take the circular migration route; that the more dominant castes do not participate in circular migration to avoid being placed alongside the lower castes in workers shelters (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan, 2003, p348). This is true of the Yadavs of Lohuria as well. Their perception is that working as construction labour along with the lower caste Mandals and Paswans will hurt their social status in the village. This tendency is strongest among the larger landowners belonging to the Yadav community, but the mindset could extend to influencing the work decisions of even

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<sup>3</sup> Interview dated 18<sup>th</sup> March, 2017

those Yadavs who prefer to remain in the village and engage in farming even when they are small farmers. This combination of the effects of land and dominant caste mindsets is well captured by fifty two year old Mukesh Yadav<sup>4</sup>, a member of the panchayat samiti and a former Sarpanch: “Some of the Yadavs have a passion for work while others do not. Some Yadavs do migrate for labour work, but those who own more land are reluctant to work as labour outside the village. That is why they do not go out to work, preferring to protect their status in the village. They cultivate whatever they can here and feed their family.”

The option of circular migration is also not open to all families. It depends, among other things, on whether household conditions permit the individual to participate in the process of circular migration. This could sometimes be a matter of whether the worker remains in a joint family or has chosen to become a nuclear family. Take the case of Ravi Mandal<sup>5</sup>, a thirty five year old member of an Extremely Backward Caste who has four children. He worked as a circular migrant for six years, first as a labourer in Delhi and later as a security guard in Chandigarh. However, soon after he got

married, he separated from his parents and began living with his nuclear family. He returned to Lohuria when his wife was pregnant and as there have been health issues in the family since then he has remained in the village. In summer he sells ice cream in the village which he makes by himself and in other seasons he is another of Lohuria’s marginal workers.

Lohuria also confirms a pattern that households with more male members increase the relative likelihood of migration and higher income level than those not sending migrant labour. There are households in the village having only one adult male member. These men continue to stay in the village even when they have the option of circular migration evidently to take care of the family. This typically means they have to lower paid occupations in the village such as becoming marginal farmers if they own small amounts of land, or working as marginal workers in a nearby village or town. Prakash Kumar Mandal migrated to Ludhiana in 2009 with his uncle who had worked there for several years as a construction labourer. Prakash started as a construction worker and progressed to become a mason. He now stays back in

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<sup>4</sup> Interview dated on 4<sup>th</sup> April, 2017

<sup>5</sup> Interview dated on 5<sup>th</sup> April, 2017

Lohuria because, as he puts it: “One man should stay at home, he is the one who takes care of agriculture, maintains the family, harvests the crop and takes care of work outside the home”

The availability of male members also affects the nature and extent of participation of all households in circular migration. Even among those households who have male members available for circular migration, the number of such members can affect the nature of its involvement in circular migration. Circular migration allows for the task of earning a living outside the village to be rotated among family members. This is most evident in the case of households having two male members who generally take to rotational migration. Households with a larger number of male members have an even greater ability to tap circular migration by sending out more male workers. Typically the households with more male members participating in circular migration are able to accumulate savings.

The hardships involved in circular migration, including having to stay at site in worker shelters have contributed to the demographic character of circular migration. The circular migrants of Lohuria are exclusively men between the ages of 15 and 40 who are prepared to do any kind of labour depending on the

nature of job demands. They are largely engaged in daily wage work including construction labour, plumbing, and carpentry. Some of them get relatively longer-term employment as drivers or security guards. The main circular migration stream in Lohuria is however as construction workers which pay Rs.400 a day for the unskilled labour and Rs.700 a day for a mason.

The uncertainty about employment makes it difficult for individual workers to seek work directly. This is particularly true of daily wage workers. This uncertainty leads them to work under a contractor, an option which provides regular work opportunities along with additional wages for overtime. This benefit is considered worth the lower wages that the contractor pays them. The contractor reduces the wages from Rs.700 to Rs.600 for a mason and Rs.400 to Rs.350 for labour. Initially, the destination for much of the circular migration from Lohuria was Punjab, Haryana, Delhi and Kashmir. However, improving access to road, railway, communication infrastructure, and literacy widen the scope of migration to other parts of the country such as Chennai and Hyderabad.

### **Patterns of circularity**

A significant section of migrant labourers, return to their village two to three times

in a year and stay around six months in the villages. Others stay in the city for six to eight months and spent the rest of the time in the village. The patterns of circularity, that is the distribution of time between the city and the village varies from person to person and is influenced by several factors. A factor influencing the amount of time workers spend in the village, especially unskilled labour, is the availability of seasonal work in agriculture. The high labour requirement in peak season provides more labour opportunities for the landless and allows marginal farmers to harvest their rain-fed crops before moving into a period of migration. Furthermore the, landless labours engaged in agriculture with in and in nearby villages due to the high wage rate. Workers usually migrate after Holi and Ramnovmi (end of March or first week of April) and return in July for paddy cultivation in the Kharif season, and other household work. They leave their village usually during the end of August after paddy cultivation and return home in November for harvesting and wheat cultivation and stay for a longer period till winter. In addition to seasonal work, strong social relations and loneliness also influence circularity. Many times they come to the village

to fulfill household obligations such as the construction of a house, marriage, births, deaths and for the celebration of festivals such as Durga Puja, Chhat, Holi and among others.

Skilled workers may or may not follow a seasonal pattern of migration. They earn considerably more than unskilled labour and therefore do not bother about farming. They generally lease out their land in return for fixed rent in kind. They can also employ agricultural labour in their farms. This process is normally carried out by non-migrant members of the households, using remittances sent by the migrants for labour and input costs. The non-migrant members of the family need not be agriculturists themselves. Twenty year old Bablu Kumar<sup>6</sup> is a Kirana (provision) shopkeeper and whose father works as a labourer in Ludhiana summarized the different options: “Some migrants do not return every season despite having agriculture land; rather, they send money to their parents for agriculture inputs and labour costs. Others rent their farmland to those who do not migrate in return for a fixed rent in kind and stay free from any kind of agriculture work.” The rent in kind is expected to take care of the needs of the members of the household who stay

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<sup>6</sup> Interview dated 5<sup>th</sup> March, 2017

behind. In other cases, when the land available to the migrant is not enough to generate the output the members of the family staying back in the village need, the migrants can lease in land and have it cultivated by the members of the household who stay behind. Bablu said his migrant father had taken two *bighas* of land on lease and handed it over to the family for farming.

The need to retain regular contact with their village is further enhanced by the fact that circular migration is primarily a young person's activity. The harsh living and working conditions in the city make it difficult for older persons. Most workers find it difficult to continue in circular migration beyond the age of 50. They typically try to save as much as they can from their stay in urban areas, often living in extremely difficult conditions in the city. For instance, construction labourers often stay in the construction site with limited facilities whereas the other labourer stay in dormitories or lodge with fellow workers. Once they have earned what they believe is enough to survive in their village, they return to the village permanently. The options available to them can vary quite substantially. Landless migrant workers sometimes

lease in land and become tenant farmers. Others seek options outside agriculture. The nature and extent of the options available to them are undoubtedly influenced by how successful they have been in accumulating resources from their work in the city. This is not just a matter of how much they earn but also of their expenditure in the city. It is also possible that this choice is not entirely independent of caste equations. Lohuria has thus seen a fairly wide range of activities taken up by the circular migrants who return permanently. Fifty year old Brajesh Yadav<sup>7</sup> migrated to Delhi in 2000 and worked as a carpenter. In 2016 he returned to Lohuria and established a private school with hostel facilities. Presently, there are 120 children from Lohuria and nearby villages enrolled in his residential school. He is the Principal of the school and his daughter teaches there along with two other teachers. Towards the lower end of the local status hierarchy is thirty five year old Rakesh Kumar<sup>8</sup> who worked as migrant labourer in Delhi. He returned to Lohuria in 2015 and bought an auto with his savings. As an auto driver, he earns Rs. 300 to Rs. 500 a day and lives with his family in the village.

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<sup>7</sup> Interview dated 9<sup>th</sup> March, 2017

<sup>8</sup> Interview dated 14<sup>th</sup> March, 2017

The continuous link between the city and the village during the period of circular migration and after the circular migrant has permanently returned to the city has influenced social norms in Lohuria. The most visible change due to the adoption of urban norms is in the attitudes of the younger generation. This change is most visible in their dress and eating habits. Young migrants prefer to wear jeans, T-shirt, shoes, and watches. Some of them purchase motorbikes which they ride when they return to the village. More importantly, many migrant workers are more open to moving towards nuclear family structures. The belief among the older residents of the village is that migration allows the worker to hide his income from his family. This allows him to plead a lack of resources to support his parents. As forty five year old Bimla Devi<sup>9</sup>, a wife of a migrant worker admitted, “A person living and working in the village can’t hide his income from his family. The harvested crops need to be brought home, weighed in the home, and are sold from the home. Thus every member of the family will know the income. Even if he is working as labour, his parents will still

know his income. In contrast, parents have no idea about the income of their migrant sons. He can lie to the parents by giving excuses of illness or less work or no work and can sent remittance to his wife only”.

Many circular migrants in Lohuria sent remittances only to their wives resulting in their parents remaining poor. They only give money to them on specific occasions such as festivals or if they face a health crisis. Fifty five year old Gita Devi<sup>10</sup> recounts after three months of her son’s marriage her daughter-in-law separated her kitchen from that of the older household and her son sent remittances to his wife only. Her son transferred money to their joint account and his wife would withdraw money for their expenses. Gita Devi now works in other fields for her survival.

It must be noted that nuclear families are not confined to households with migrants. It is equally true that not all migrant households have moved towards nuclear family households. There are many migrant labours who still live with their larger family. But there is visibly a greater tendency among circular migrants to move towards becoming nuclear families.

<sup>9</sup> Interview dated 19<sup>th</sup> March, 2017

<sup>10</sup> Interview dated 21<sup>st</sup> March, 2017



## Changing power relations in Lohuria

The overwhelming influence of circular migration in Lohuria has had its impact on economic, social and political power relations in the village. The immediate impact of circular migration is on economic relations in the village. Income from migration has helped many households to lift themselves out of poverty. The ability to develop a steady consumption pattern has given these households a sense of empowerment. The economic transfer is not through financial measures alone. The circular migrants are also able to convert knowledge gained in the city into economic benefits in the village. There were several houses in Lohuria which had been built by the migrants themselves as they had learned centering work during their stay in the city. They have also invested in household amenities such as tubewells, toilets, electricity, mobiles, TVs, motorcycles and other products. There is also an effort to create conditions to sustain this economic gain. Many circular migrant families are educating their children, some are even sending their sons to cities like Bhagalpur and Patna for graduation and to prepare for competitive examinations. These changes have had a significant impact on the relative economic status

of the lower castes in Lohuria, but this impact has not been even. Some lower caste households have benefited more than others from circular migration. There are a number of factors that explain this differentiation. Given the male domination of the process of circular migration in Lohuria, those households who have a larger number of male members are better positioned to benefit from this process. Again, the households that are able to develop and sustain more effective networks outside the village also stand to benefit more from circular migration. And, it is important not to entirely ignore the role of efficiency in this process. More efficient workers tend to be preferred by contractors seeking to make a mark in the competitive urban job environment. Even as the lower castes were benefitting however unevenly from circular migration the process also had a negative impact on the interests of the dominant castes within the village. If the fragmentation of land ownership with each generation was forcing small farmers to become marginal farmers and join the process of circular migration, the same process of fragmentation was also adversely affecting the relative economic status of the larger farmers. The availability of options outside the village also meant that labour did not

need to accept the relatively lower wages being paid in Lohuria. The resultant high labour costs reduced the income of the larger farmers even as uncertainty about the availability of labour constrained their ability to adequately plan for the entire crop period. This has influenced, at least partially, the relative status of the landed and the landless in the village. The landowners are dependent on the relatively decreasing returns from their land while the landless who are forced into circular migration are able to inch their way up the economic hierarchy. As a result, the once substantial difference in economic conditions between the landowners and the landless is becoming just a little less so. In the words of forty year old Ajay Saha<sup>11</sup>, a ward member and small trader: “Those who have land cultivate it and live off it for the whole year while those who go outside the village for work are able to earn more than their basic needs and are able to prosper.”

It is possible that there may have been some expectation that the poorer among the dominant caste households, who were not always keen to join lower caste groups in circular migration, would step in to ease the shortage of

labour. If these expectations existed, they were soon belied. The younger generation had the benefit of school education and preferred to wait for a job that they believed suited their new social status. Indeed, they preferred to stay unemployed, rather than work as labourers the village. Sunil Yadav,<sup>12</sup> a sixty five year old farmer who has five children said: “Literates are unemployed and will still not plough the land because they are educated. Fools are much better than this, as they are prepared to do any kind of work unlike the educated who are ashamed of this kind of labour.”

The preference among the educated youth for unemployment rather than work that is considered below their status reflects a larger contradiction that has emerged between social and economic status. The dominant caste households that seek to protect their social status are willing, if need be, to lose some of their economic status while doing so. The loss of relative economic status in the younger generation may be traced to attitudes to work of those who have had the benefit of school education, but it is not confined to them. The reluctance to do work that would place them on par with the lower castes

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<sup>11</sup> Interview dated 4<sup>th</sup> March, 2017

<sup>12</sup> Interview dated 27<sup>th</sup> June, 2017

extends to those of other age groups in many Yadav households. Thus in the effort to maintain their social status, the Yadavs are losing some of their relative economic status, particularly since income from migration has at the same time improving the socioeconomic status of the lower caste households.

Despite the deeply entrenched caste prejudices of the Yadav households, their attitudes to circular migration are not entirely immune to change. The divergent fortunes of the landed who stay in the village and the circular migrants are becoming more visible and are percolating to some Yadav households. Ramesh Yadav<sup>13</sup> is a forty five year old farmer who lamented the changing relative status of the landed and the circular migrants: “Those who own land have a *kutchra* house while those who work outside the village have *pucca* houses. After all, we cannot sell our land to build a house. But those who have four sons who work outside the village are building houses.”

The differences in the types of houses of the circular migrants and those who stayed behind are increasingly becoming points of conflict in Lohuria. The Yadavs are doing what they can to make it

difficult for the circular migrants to build larger houses. Many circular migrant families are willing to buy land for the construction of a larger house. But the landowning Yadavs restrict this potential for upward mobility among the lower castes by not selling land to them. Even when someone from Yadav caste needs to sell their land, they will make sure that their land remains in the family or at least in their caste. The lower caste households are then forced to build houses within their smaller sites, often building two-storied houses on their small plots of land. Thirty five year old Kishan Kumar Mandal<sup>14</sup> who works as a mason in Ludhiana now has enough money to buy more residential land in his village, but is not able to do so. As he puts it, “We are four brothers with only one khata (roughly 3.125 decimal) of land. As no one sells us land to construct a home, we have built we live in two-storied houses. Yadavs have land but if they sell, they will sell to Yadavs only. First they offer the land to their relatives and then to others in their caste and someone is always there to buy it.”

Despite such efforts at curbing the social assertion of the lower castes, the economic potential of circular migration

<sup>13</sup> Interview dated 4<sup>th</sup> April, 2017

<sup>14</sup> Interview dated 24<sup>th</sup> March, 2017

is now beginning to attract some of the Yadavs who prioritise economic gains over the compulsion to maintain caste status. This is particularly true when young Yadav men get married. Several Yadav households are beginning to follow the livelihood strategy of circular migration in an effort to improve and in some cases just maintain their economic status. They do however still avoid the option of working as construction workers outside the village. Their perceive that construction labourers are often treated as servants and forced to engage in 'dirty' work in the work place. They would thus prefer options that would give them a slightly higher status, say, as drivers or other occupations that could give them a monthly salary. As a result of this mindset, they are left with limited work opportunities compared to the lower castes who are open to doing any kind of work.

The changing economic and social power dynamics have had their impact on the polity of Lohuria as well. The extent of this change was made explicit by Bihar's Panchayat reservation policy of 2006, which give 20 percent reservation to the Extremely Backward

Caste (EBC) in Panchayat election allocated by the block level through the district magistrate (Bihar panchayat election rule 2006, p 6). Although, until 2011 seat was not reserved for the EBC in Chilkawar-Asota panchayat seats were reserved, once the Teli caste (which was classified as an OBC) was included in the list of extremely backward class in 2015<sup>15</sup>. Since the Telis constituted one-third of the population the proportion of the EBC in Chilkawar-asota panchayat population also increased (Bihar Gazette no 511, 2015). Therefore, in 2016 panchayat elections, all seats of Chilkawar-Asota Panchayat were reserved for women under EBC category except for the post of Panchayat Samiti. It provided a tremendous opportunity to the Extremely Backward Caste group to alter the political dominance of the Yadavs which was consolidated over a period of four decades.

Seeing this as an opportunity, a taxi driver named Manoj Sah of Gopalpur village, adjacent to Lohuria, filed nomination papers for his wife Jyoti Devi for the post of Mukhiya with savings generated from circular migration. She competed

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<sup>15</sup> The Bihar government had issued a notification on April 28, 2015, including Teli and Tamoli castes on EBC list in order to provide people from these two castes reservation benefits. The EBC category enjoys 20% reservation in the state.

against another lower caste candidate who was backed by the Yadavs and a local Teli farmer. Another circular migrant taxi driver, twenty five year old Niraj Sah<sup>16</sup> sums up the transformation in the Panchayat: “This time we made up our minds to remove the Yadav *mukhiya* from his post at any cost. Manoj Sah was a senior and respected driver among us so we have insisted him to contest for the post of mukhiya and pledged him to support him financially and physically. We left our work for one month and returned to the village for the election campaigning with all strength and power.” Chandan Sah claimed a huge amount of Rs. 16 lakhs was spent for the election; a figure that was later acknowledged by Manoj Sah. As a result of the strong support and active campaigning by circular migrant, Jyoti Devi wife of Manoj Sah won the election and ended four decades of political dominance of the Yadav family who were the *mukhiyas* since 1978. Clearly, winning the powerful post of *mukhiya* would not have been possible without the savings generated from migration and the financial and physical support of other migrants. Despite this prominent role for circular migrants the local narrative tends to see the political

process primarily in caste terms. As a ward member of Lohuria, thirty five year old Ajay Sah sees it, the Kanus and Telis contested the election for the post of mukhiya. The Kanus spent money and won the elections, whereas, the Teli was a farmer. He has some land but could not afford to lose his land for the election. Those who spend money got a vote and those who did not lose the election”.

It is evident that migration has not only improved the socioeconomic condition of the poor but it also makes them capable to challenge and alter the decades-old dominance of Yadav not only in the village but the entire Panchayat compose of eight villages. Participation of the landless poor in circular migration may enable the subordinated groups in the village to contest caste discrimination and repudiate their “interpellation” as working bodies by the dominant castes (Gidwani & Sivaramakrishnan 2003: p.197). However, changing power dynamic in the village may not easily be accepted by the dominant caste and resentment is already visible among many Yadavs through their reluctance to sell land to the migrants belonging to lower castes thereby making efforts to limit their upward social mobility within the village.

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<sup>16</sup> Interview dated 3<sup>rd</sup> March, 2017

## Conclusion

The concentration of land in the hands of upper and dominant caste leave many households particularly from the lower castes landless and marginal. Further, fragmentation of land over the period left many of them unemployed and underemployed, thus forcing them into chronic poverty. However, improving road and railway connectivity opens another avenue of employment in many cities. Thus, people follow the strategy of circular migration for their livelihood in which social relations plays an important role. A majority of the households sent one or more of their members to work away from home for several months in a year. The finding indicates that remittances from circular migration push many households into the middle and upper-income ranges. However, the dominant caste households continue to rely on low income agriculture activities and do not depend on remittances. It is also evident that the younger men of dominant castes are reluctant to do work that would place them on par with the lower castes.

Further, income and attitude generated from migration do not only improve socioeconomic condition of the lower castes but also challenges the political dominance of the dominant castes.

Recent Panchayat election results in the demonstrate that the winning of the powerful post of mukhiya by any lower caste individual would not have been possible without the savings generated from migration and the financial and physical support of other migrants workers. Clearly, circular migration has a dynamic and profound impact on the socioeconomic and political realities of the village.

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