

## **Opportunistic Migration: A Collateral Promise for Development in Seasonal Migration of Southwest Coastal Bangladesh**

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**ABSTRACT:** Aligning with the broader discussion of migration, seasonal migration also resembled a multifold phenomenon ranging from reasons of temporal movement to settling down process at the place of destination. In this paper, seasonal migration was portrayed in between the 'alarmists' view and 'skeptical' view of migration, holding a new position called 'opportunistic migration' that seemed to offer benefits to the seasonal migrants characterizing by gaining social knowledge and earning money from the place of destination. The empirical data, face-to-face in-depth interviews, showed that both social and economic aspects of seasonal migration were dominated by the pull factors, and environmental aspects were linked with the push factors. This paper also highlighted that social network played an active role for seasonal migrants, in particular, the workers who seasonally migrated into the brickfields of southwest coastal Bangladesh. While migrating

from the rural to the urban context, two-tier verbal agreements took place in between the brickfield owners with the contractors, and the contractors with the brickfield workers. Though those verbal agreements seemed to contain some extent of the failure of expectations by the above-mentioned actors related to seasonal migration, it also held optimism of development for every actor. Finally, this paper reused the term 'collateral promise' with a slighter social tone to understand the informal interactions among the employers, contractors, and the seasonal migrants. **KEYWORDS:** Seasonal migration, social network, collateral promise, and qualitative method.

## 1. Introduction: From Interests to Ideas

There is always an on-going debate between 'alarmists' and 'skeptical' view of migration. An alarmists or maximalists position holds the idea that environment can be a distinct factor that forces people to leave their homes (Laczko 2010; Suhrke 1994). Simply positioning the opposite side, the skeptic or minimalists argue that environment plays a nominal role in migration decisions, and that 'pull factors' in the destination are often more important than 'push factors' (Martin 2010; Morrissey 2009). Considering the alarmists position, the deadliest cyclone 'Sidr' in 2007, cyclone 'Aila' in 2009, and cyclone 'Mahasen' in 2013 severely affected the lives of the southwest coastal people resulting both temporal and permanent migration to nearby cities (Etzold and Mallick 2015; Gray and Mueller 2012; International Organization for Migration 2010).

Push factor of seasonal migration exists in Khulna, the third largest city (in terms of area and population) in Bangladesh comprising more than 1.5 million inhabitants (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2011), because more severe and irreversible environmental degradation may necessitate the temporal and permanent relocation of affected populations to safer places (Boncour and Burson 2010). In contrast to the push migration, seasonal migration characterized by pull factor is a common phenomenon in Khulna because of its better connectivity with other regional cities and satellite towns, mostly due to strategic location and economic dominance (Haider 2010). In both cases, the internally displaced people, either temporarily or permanently, tend to move only within a short distance because of lack resources to move to distant places (Piguet et al. 2010). Docherty and Giannini (2009) suggested nine components, broadly classified into three different categories such as guarantees of assistance, shared responsibility, and administration as guiding instrument to address the macro context of migration. This research contextualizes the macro components of migration into micro aspects, particularly in the context of internal migration due to its similarity in functions-economic betterment and opportunities in the place of destination.

At the place of destination, migrants tend to make an adjustment with their occupation, quality of life, and even their social values. Both push and pull factors play consequential role to migrants when it comes to choose the potential destinations. The push factors of migration are mostly connected to on-set of climatic disasters. In contrast, the pull factors of migration are predominantly associated with direct economic and social benefits. Now, the question arises to what extent they have to make adjustment linked with economic, social, and environmental aspects of migration. In answering this question, brickfield workers of southwest coastal Bangladesh, generally who migrate for certain period of time from their place of origin, have been considered as the prime interest group. It is anticipated that seasonal migration in brickfields is a continuing process for certain people located in certain geographic settings who have food and livelihood produced in locally, but they are prone to migrate in adjacent cities to strengthen their household capital and savings when the regular employment opportunities are not locally available. This research recognizes the different typologies of migration where the issues of seasonal migration, particularly the verbal agreement among the three actors namely seasonal migrants, contractors, and brickfield owners differ from other types of migration. This paper intends to create an in-depth understanding about seasonal migration addressing the aspects of seasonal migration of brickfield workers, driving forces of seasonal migration, settling down process, and level of agreement among different actors related to seasonal migration.

## 2. Theorizing Seasonal Migration: Complexities in Conceptualizing

Migration indicates the shifting of permanent residence (Weeks 1989; Newman et al. 1984; Trewartha 1969). However, seasonal migration represents the transient relocation for a certain time of the year, with or without family members. Migration means a permanent or at least for a considerable period of time, departure for a place which is not just nearby (Srivastava 1983; United Nations 1970). In contrast, seasonal migration occupies temporal dimension, containing any movement for 3-4 months, which does not fit into the very notion of migration. Considering the geographic mobility, both permanent migration and seasonal migration involve a change of usual residence between the defined political or statistical areas (Ross 1982). In case of seasonal migration, the geographic mobility often takes place from the disadvantaged rural areas during the lean period (Islam 2015).

Migration also holds multifaceted understanding and pledges multiple levels of analysis, in addressing fundamental questions such as origin and destination of migration, directionality and continuity of migrant flows, utilization of labor, and socio-cultural adaptation of migrants (Portes 1997). Theories regarding migration mostly targeted and revolved around a single issue- changes in residency; thus it failed

to address the aforementioned four issues holistically (Massey 1999; Arango 2000). At present, a variety of theoretical models or perspectives exists in migration research that employs changeable concepts, assumptions, frames and levels of analysis (Arango 2000). As the majority of these theoretical models were developed from definite empirical observations, they often grew in isolation and separated by the disciplinary boundaries (Castles 2008; Arango 2000). But the modern migration literature (Todaro and Smith 2006; Faist 2000; Portes 1997; Massey et al. 1993) argues that although these theoretical approaches offer different hypotheses, they need not be considered as mutually exclusive, but rather as complementary.

To investigate the dynamics of seasonal migration, this research successively considers four macro-theories namely neoclassical theory, new economics theory, dual labor market theory, and social network theory. The neoclassical theory recognizes migration to be driven by differences in returns to labor across markets (Todaro and Smith 2006; Todaro 1969; Lewis 1954). According to the new economic theory, migration decisions are not based purely on individual utility-maximizing calculations but are rather a household response to both income risks and to the disappointments of a variety of markets, i.e., labor, and credit (Stark 2003; Taylor 1999; Massey et al. 1993; Stark 1991). The dual labor market theory (Piore 1979) explains migration as the result of a temporary pull factor, namely strong structural labor demand (Zanker 2010; Breman 1994; Lucas 1985). Social network theory understands migration as a portal between individual and their peer groups, i.e., households, friends, colleagues weaved by social threads (Faist 1997). In addition, due to the lack of conceptual clarity and consensus, a large number of seasonal migrants are left unprotected by international law. To work on conceptualizing seasonal migration, this can become extremely challenging for the national government, and international organizations working in developing countries where the aspects of migration are not clearly understood. Contextualizing the above-mentioned dimensions in relation to seasonal migration, this research exemplifies the existing complexities in conceptualizing seasonal migration.

Considering the complexities in understanding and explaining the seasonal migration, this research has adopted four independent but interrelated hypotheses of social network theory. Out of the four hypotheses, the information hypothesis suggests that any information regarding job opportunities, living conditions increases the propensity to migrate (Ritchey 1976; Tilly and Brown 1967). Encouraging hypothesis asserts active encouragement from peer group that might have snowball effects on the potential migrants (Hugo 1981). Conflict/disastrous hypothesis states that conflict between human and environment motivates to migrate (Hugo 1981). Affinity hypothesis argues that social and economic capital commensurate with the probability of migration (Haug 2008; Ritchey 1976). Figure 1 shows the interrelation of the components of social network theory with the aspects of seasonal migration.

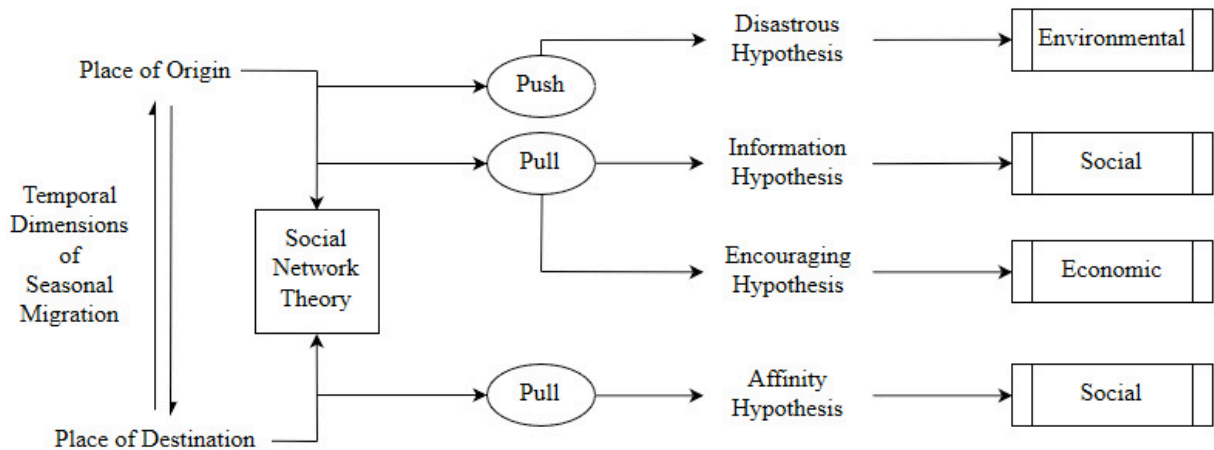


Figure 1. Interrelating components in conceptualizing seasonal migration

In seasonal migration, the connectivity in-between place of origin and place of destination hold relatively a strong network. On top, due to insufficient resources and support, seasonal migrants tend to move only within a short distance. Therefore, the seasonal migration is highly dominated by the horizontal social mobility (movement within the similar society or social class) instead of vertical social mobility for seasonal migrants because they use the same level of their social network. Linking the four hypotheses with the two broad factors of seasonal migration namely the push factor and the pull factor, the conceptual understanding of seasonal migration indicates that the three aspects of migration namely economic, social, and environmental are certainly connected with those four hypotheses along with the factors of migration, but their interconnectedness is not one-dimensional. To portray the dominance of each aspect in relation to the hypotheses of social network theory, the relations are shown as one-dimensional. The analysis of the interconnectivity among the three aspects along with the four hypotheses is beyond scope of this research. This research establishes a connection in between the decisions to migrate seasonally with the aspects of migration.

### 3. Approaching the Seasonal Migrants: Our Methodological Procedure

Fieldwork experiences can influence a researcher's epistemological premises, including value, attitude, and belief systems, if he or she is open to discovery and change (Saldana 2011). Understanding that, we allowed our respondents to talk freely so that they could share their experiences of migration through their stories. This research is grounded in Rupsha Upazila under Khulna District (Upazila is second administrative tier that



performs as sub-units of districts and maintains communication between District level and Union level). Out of 86 brick kiln factories in Khulna District, Rupsha Upazila occupies around 50 percent brick kiln factories, which is the highest in contrast with the other Upazilas of Khulna District (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2013). Therefore, we anticipated huge inflows of seasonal migrants in Rupsha Upazila who migrated from other southwestern coastal parts of Bangladesh. Due to the similar functions and characteristics of brickfields, we chose 4 brickfields on the basis of four criteria namely i) getting easy access to seasonal migrants for conducting the in-depth interviews, ii) number of seasonal migrants, iii) years of operation, and iv) on-site accommodation facilities for seasonal migrants. After the site selection, we conducted in-depth interviews with 20 seasonal migrants, 5 seasonal brickfield workers from each selected site.

This research focuses on the making sense of underlying issues related to seasonal migration, and in doing so, we have carefully selected a small number of sample size from each site. We adopted a three-stage reconnaissance visit model to collect information from the respondents. In the first stage of reconnaissance visit, we familiarized ourselves with the brickfield workers through making casual discussions in the informal locations such as tea stall, and restaurants. Surprisingly, local people, contractors of brickfields, and many other migrant workers actively participated in the casual discussions to enlighten us about the real scenarios of seasonal migration. Through the discussions, we preliminary selected our initial respondents, and we came in contact with our respondents for the first time.

During the second stage of reconnaissance visit, we collected the socio-demographic information of the respondents from on sites. In the third stage of reconnaissance visit, we asked focused questions related to seasonal migration containing the social, economic, and environmental aspects. The in-depth interviews had been conducted in two phases namely phase-1 (March to May) and phase-2 (September to October). Due to the seasonal variation followed by the availability of migrants, we collected data in two seasons namely before the start of rainy season and after the rainy season. We divided the working intensity and calculated the level of engagement in two seasons, and based on that we proportionately distributed the number of interviews in seasons. In phase-1, we interviewed 15 brickfield workers from the different working backgrounds such as masonry worker/brick arranger, brick cutter, raw brick carrier/transporter, fire thrower, rubbish gather, brick wall maker, and broken brick collector. In the phase-2, we carried out 5 more interviews with soil diggers, and soil preparatory workers because these types of works were not available during phase-1.

We have adopted a qualitative perspective of data analysis that is not concerned with statistical representativeness, but rather with a selection of units of investigation that can generate some theory (Kardorff 2004). Many researchers (Blaikie 2009;

Creswell 2007) have also highlighted that data collection and data analysis need to be informed by research paradigm. While analyzing the data, firstly, we transcribed and translated the data through identifying the important sections that came from our informed data collection and data analysis relationship. Secondly, due to high flexibility feature in thematic analysis, we adopted thematic analysis to identify and analyze the patterns (themes) within data (Bazeley 2013). From the thematic analysis, several themes related to seasonal migration such as status and identity of migrants, issues of migration, patterns of payment, and collateral agreement.

#### 4. Understanding the Seasonal Migration: Explaining the Data

Our empirical evidence shows that the brickfield workers tend to migration both with families and without families. The male young seasonal migrants tend to migrate without family, and the relatively older male seasonal migrants prefer to migrate with family. During the data collection, we did not find any female migrant who seasonally migrated without family or family members. The male workers who migrate without family members usually leave their place of origin with a group of people coming from the same village or same geographic settings. This happens due to having a collective nature of migration related to the sense of belongingness. However, both types of migrants have to come through a contractor who may not have the same place of origin. The initial socio-demographic findings of seasonal migrants demonstrate the association of age structure of the migrants with their movement pattern.

##### *4.1 Period of migration offers opportunities*

A seasonal migrant is unable to stay at his/her destination site (in this case, brickfield areas) all the year. He/she tends to come for a fixed period of time when there are not enough working opportunities available in the local environment. This research shows that two third of the seasonal migrants tend to come in-between September and November and stay on the construction sites for the next five to seven months. As the works of seasonal migration are linked with seasonality, mostly based on weather and climatic conditions, the period of migration also contain flexibility. Considering the time, the seasonal migration takes place just before winter season or sometimes after the harvesting season, directly linked with the agricultural production system. This is because it is hard to find diversified working opportunities in the agriculture sector. Therefore, people are confined with limited works and earning opportunities all the year. On top, the brickfield factories start their operations after the rainy season, and the seasonal migrants who are usually landless labors seem to find better working opportunities in the brickfield factories of adjacent urban areas in comparison to the agriculture sector in rural areas.

#### 4.2 Kinship relationship offers opportunities

Kinship relationship helps to find jobs and the initial settle-down process. Our 9 seasonal migrants mentioned that they migrated with their families. They responded that the flow of information about the working opportunities of the family members in the brickfield sites came through their neighbors and in-laws who previously worked in the brickfield sites. The seasonal migrants mentioned that the availability of information plays a crucial role in decision making while migrating to brickfield sites with or without family members because, in many situations, the other working members of the family do not directly receive money for their works. For example, the workers who carry the raw bricks from the production sites to brick kiln areas require support during the activities. In that case, family members can assist them in carrying raw bricks and get paid for the whole activities. The decision-making along with its interconnectedness to availability of information is reflected in the voice of one of the migrants (Firoz, Male, 36):

*“I have been working in the ‘Zhinuk’ brickfield for the last eight seasons. But I also worked in other brickfields of Khulna District because some of my relatives used to work those brickfields. I collect information through my relatives before getting an employment in a brickfield. This helps me a lot to earn more money with greater flexibility.”*

The interview data showed that the migrants who came without a family tended to form small groups and shared the group activities among their group mates interchangeably. The number of family members held a strong connection with the earnings of the family. However, the single migrants (migrants without families) can also earn more than those who migrate with families because the single migrants do not have to share their income with the family members at their place of destination.

#### 4.3 Payment structure offer opportunities

The thematic analysis of interviews shows that three types of payment structure such as fixed, flexible, and the mixture of fixed and flexible exist in seasonal migration in brickfield sites. The fixed payment is entirely contractual based on the agreement between the migrant worker and the contractor. The flexible payment works based on production, which is the most preferred one to the seasonal migrant workers. The last one is the mixture of fixed payment and flexible payment that depends on the contractors’ decision. Including all types of payment structure, 16 out of 20 seasonal migrants responded that they took advanced money for their works from the contractors. After arriving at the brickfield sites, their advanced payments were deducted through their regular earnings. Although there exists a potential risk of slavery due to the advanced payment system in seasonal migration, both the migrants



and the contractors undertake similar works symbolizing maximum flexibility in decision making. In fact, both the pull and push factors of seasonal migration influence the payment structure. These two factors-push and pull factors of seasonal migration in relation to payment structure are reflected in the voices of two migrants respectively (Sharwarar, Male, 45- push factor; and Kabir, Male, 30- pull factor):

*“I receive money for my work on daily basis. I migrated to this brickfield site to work and earn money that I could not earn from my place of living (village). It is totally impossible for me to save some money during the non-working season because life is very difficult in our village.” - ‘Difficulty to save money at the place of origin’ (thematic code related to push migration)*

Again,

*“At the end of every season, I am able to earn a big amount of money from my work. Besides, after the completion of each season, I can increase the amount of advanced payment for the next season. This is what I can do, and I know, my payment will be more in the next season.” - ‘Smooth payment and easy earnings for future’ (thematic code related to pull migration)*

Table 1 explains the structure of payment according to different activities performed by the seasonal migrants in brickfield sites.

**Table 1. Types of engagement according to payment structure**

Structure of payment	Types of engagement in brickfield
Fixed payment	Arrangement of raw bricks for drying
	Bring coal to construction sites
	Arrangement fire to brick kilns
	Make brick walls for production
	Clean broken bricks from construction sites
Flexible payment	Carry raw brick carrying for firing
	Prepare and cut brick according to size
Both fixed and flexible payment	Collect and prepare soil for building bricks
	Carry soil for making bricks

Source: Field data, 2018

Carrying the raw bricks into production sites for firing requires the assistance of other seasonal migrants; therefore, this activity contains flexible payment structure. This is further reflected in the voice of one of the migrants (Yousuf, Male, 52):

*“I am used to carrying/transporting raw bricks, and sometimes my wife helps me to carry bricks into production sites. Being a male, I drive the van (manual tri-cycle) and my wife pushes the van from behind because the van sometimes gets heavier with raw bricks. In this activity, my wife is a non-paid worker as I am supposed to do that by myself.”*

Fixed structure of payment is conventional and easily accepted by the migrants; therefore, most activities in brickfields hold fixed payment structure. When the seasonal migrants make the verbal contract with the contractor, they take advance money from the contractors. As mentioned earlier, once the migrants start working in the brickfields, the contractors deduct money from the weekly or monthly payment of the migrants. This represents only the limited pictures about the income of seasonal migrants. During the thematic analysis, four categories related to earnings were emerged. The first category was the ‘productionist view’ of earnings that reflected through the fixed rate of earnings. The second category was the ‘rewarding view’ of earnings that incorporated the aspects of extra work with extra earnings. The third category was the ‘encouraging view’ of earnings that included the working opportunities of the other family members. The fourth was the ‘hierarchical view’ of earnings that reflected through the hierarchy of works in brickfield sites linked with the hierarchy of payment structure. Table 2 exemplifies how the seasonal migrants discussed their payment structure under different themes.

**Table 2. Thematic illustration of payment structure in seasonal migration**

Coded category	Reflection through empirical data
‘Productionist view’ of earnings	<i>I earn around 1200-1500 BDT weekly. Thus I monthly earning is roughly 6000 BDT. I receive 140 BDT daily for carrying 1000 bricks (Yasin, Male, 50).</i>
‘Rewarding view’ of earnings	<i>Within my regular schedule, I can earn 40 BDT in an hour. If I work after hours, I can earn 10 BDT for every trip which is not possible within my regular schedule (Ashraf, Male, 35).</i>
‘Encouraging view’ of earnings	<i>I earn 130 BDT daily through my activities. So, I can earn 900 BDT per week. My husband also works here and earns around 1500 BDT per week. My father-in-law gets 1000 BDT per week. Their works are different from mine; therefore, we hold different earnings (Jahanara, Female, 30).</i>
‘Hierarchical view’ of earnings	<i>I am a contractor, and I am responsible for the overall supervision of the activities of the workers. For this, I receive 25000 BDT per month (Khalilur, Male, 45).</i>

Source: Field data, 2018

#### 4.4 Collateral promise: Working procedure in seasonal migration

During the data analysis, we observed a tri-party agreement to construct the opportunistic migration. However, unlike the collateral promise which is substantiated through written documents, the tri-party agreement in opportunistic migration is formed by the mutual trust and the verbal agreement. In stage one, brick-kiln owner hires contractor to ensure consistent supply of cheap labors. During that stage, the contractors make the verbal agreement with the seasonal migrants. Due to illiteracy and fear about the bindings in the written agreement, seasonal migrants only prefer verbal agreement. Though it seems very risky because anything can happen if it is not written anywhere, it is working perfectly for every actor in the seasonal migration activities. Through this agreement, seasonal migrants hope to get persistent working opportunities for the next 5-8 months, and contractors hope to manage the number of working migrants for their assigned works.

In stage two, contractors enlist the migrants to work in brickfield sites. Within the agreement, most of the seasonal migrants receive advanced payment from the contractors. The migrants choose from whom they would like to take that advanced payment. In contrast, the contractors consider the working abilities of the migrants. As the agreement holds flexibility and subjectivity, the migrants make their own decisions. Our field data shows that the contractors make an advanced payment of 15000 BDT on an average. However, the amount of payment changes as the number of workers within the family increase.

In stage three, migrants appear to the brickfield sites and start working there. It is the task of a contractor to mediate between owner and migrants and to be answered by both parties. If a contractor deviates from agreement, migrant workers continue to work for their employer till the end of original agreement. Here, the collateral promise works as a failsafe tool to secure supply-chain for brickfield migrants. Figure 2 shows the conceptual understanding of the tri-party agreement to construct the opportunistic migration in brickfield sites.

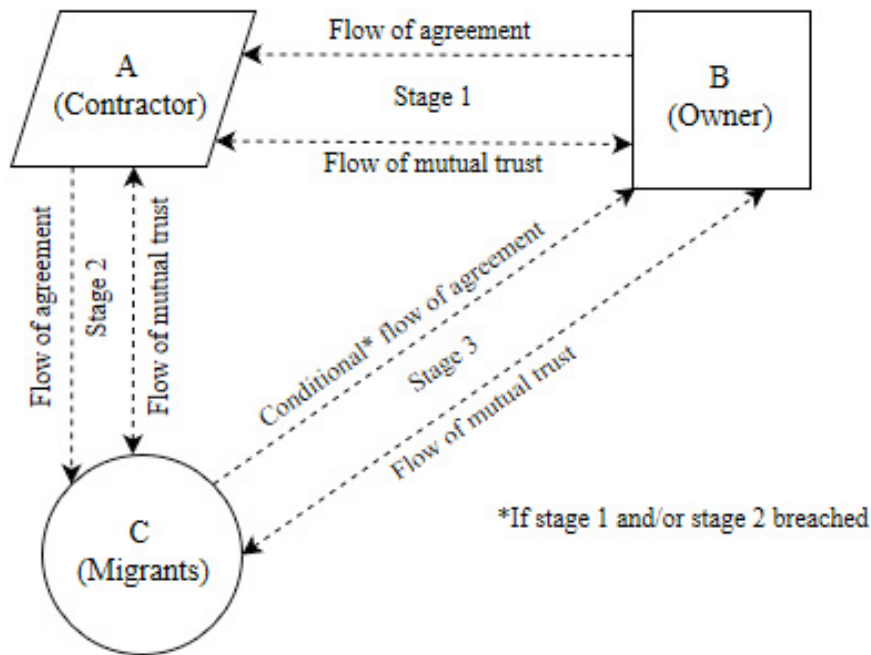


Figure 2. Triangle of collateral promise in constructing opportunistic migration

The agreement between either brickfield owners and contractors, or contractors and seasonal migrants works on the collateral basis. For example, making the advanced payment to the seasonal migrants, the contractors secure the working obligations in a particular brickfield site. The empirical evidence shows that the advanced payment system is a strategy to involve workers in the brickfields, different from bondage labor because the migrants can leave their works if they are able to return that advanced payment to the contractors. The brickfield owners also make advanced payment to the contractors hoping that the contractors would be able to collect the workers for the upcoming brick production. Knowing that there are risks of uncertainty in the agreement, the main deposit of the agreement is the 'mutual trust.' Surprisingly, the mutual trust has gained the momentum of belongingness that has made the collateral agreement effective. The format of the agreement is verbal and flexible which also indicates the effectiveness of mutual trust among the actors of seasonal migration. Though there arise some issues like the conflict with locals, substandard living conditions, and overall safety issues, which may be hard to accept, these challenges are promptly discussed by the seasonal migrants. Due to lack of proper communication and profit-centric approach taken by the higher actors, the seasonal migrants sometimes experience deprivation resulting frustration. This terrifying perception can

undermine the positive effects of collateral working approach to seasonal migration. Therefore, the persistent interpersonal relationship is crucial for the sustainability of collateral promise, seasonal migration in general.

## Conclusion

This research explores the existence of the collateral agreement in seasonal migration. This is a new exploration in overall migration research particularly referring to create opportunities through the informal and verbal agreements coupled with mutual trusts among three actors of seasonal migration namely brick-kiln owners, contractors, and migrant workers. This research also establishes that social network holding the peer-trust can become a dominant proponent in the local labor market. It is to claim that, the social class contains an immense effect on the collateral agreements. Migrants from marginalized and lower income group are more accommodating towards verbal collateral agreements. Nonetheless, formal education is also influential when agreements placed between employer and employee. This study suggests that people with higher education outreach tend to put themselves more into formal and written agreements when it comes to employability. This paper reused the term 'collateral promise' in with a slighter social tone to understand the informal interaction between employer and seasonal migrants. This study discloses that seasonal migrants adopt the positive life events during their stay at job-place and carry and transfer their social and technological skills to their places of origin. Because of the nature and types of the benefits received by the seasonal migrants, this research has envisioned seasonal migration as 'opportunistic migration.' Considering that we have concluded that 'opportunistic migration' is a positive phenomenon linked with socio-economic development, especially from the viewpoints of seasonal migrants.

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