

bricks," says Brunda Behra of Larki village, lighting a beedi. "If we fail, we are denied our weekly food allowance, reprimanded, humiliated or even tortured physically," he says.

There appears to be a huge mismatch between the figures provided by official and unofficial sources. Activists and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working with migrant labourers put the number of people migrating every season at around two lakhs. However, the official figures are much lower. According to information provided by the labour office in Bolangir, the number of registered migrant labourers stood at 10,965 for 2006; 20,701 for 2007; 10,503 for 2008; and 4,965 for 2009. The sharp decline in the 2009 figures was attributed to the global recession. "Real estate activities went down because of the meltdown and so, in 2009, the demand for bricks was lower," said P.K. Bhoi, the District Labour Officer (DLO).

This could also be the reason for the delayed migration of labourers last year. While the migration usually occurs around October, this time it peaked around January.

According to the DLO, there are 70 licensed labour agents who can be tracked by the office. However, he said, the real problem was "illegal migration", which accounted for most of the inter-State labour movement. This was fuelled by the large number of illegal brick kilns operating around Hyderabad, he said.

"Most of the labourers go with unregistered sardars or with their relatives who are already working in Hyderabad," said Bhoi. A shortage of staff has affected the labour office's efforts to keep a tab on the number of migrants. The labour office has been unable to post enough personnel at major exit points such as Turikela, Bongamonda, Kantabanji and Titilagarh.

"Our approach at the moment is curative, while the measures that are actually needed are preventive. Implementation of the NREGS [National Rural Employment Guarantee



ARUNANGSU ROY CHOWDHURY

MIGRANT LABOURERS FROM western Orissa working at a brick kiln on the outskirts of Hyderabad.

Scheme] would be the correct step in the prevention [of the agrarian crisis]," the DLO said. "After journalist P. Sainath's [Rural Affairs Editor of *The Hindu*] visits, the district administration has become more sensitive and proactive [to the issues that affect the small farmers in distress] than before," he added.

The worst sufferers of this seasonal "debt migration" are women and chil-

dren. Education of the children is a casualty in the migration process. Moreover, the children are forced into labour and are vulnerable to violation of their rights. Apart from economic exploitation, the migrant women face sexual exploitation.

"Women are often abused by contractors and even brick kiln owners," says Venkateshwar, an activist working with migrant labourers in Hyd-