

Footloose and Fragmented: A Sociological Discourse on the Female Domestic Labour Migration out of Bengal

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In India and in any other developing countries one of the side effects of unprecedented population growth and lack of growth in formal industrial sector is rapid increase in internal migratory movement. Almost all Indian women migrate at least once in their life when they leave their natal home after marriage. As a footloose commodity in the labour market, female work forces a far more critical estrangement. Migration as a transforming experience can improve or worsen the position of women in families and society. The consequent feeling of insecurity and loneliness rings with a hopeless fear of losing their dignity and control over their bodies. This paper seeks to explore, with sociological inputs, the locations and dislocations of the female labour force, which is in the constant flux of migration out of Bengal.

[Key words: female labour force, female migration from Bengal, marriage-migration, sequential migration]

Female domestic labour migration out of Bengal

The United Nations Multilingual Demographic Dictionary defines migration as a form of geographical mobility or spatial mobility from one geographic unit to another, generally involving a change in residence from the place of origin or place of departure to the place of destination or place of arrival. The life-time migration, tabulated by place of birth separately for males and female, reveals that females predominate among the migrants. But when the scope of migratory movements increases the percentage of female migrants among the local migrants drops, which indicates that female migration is to a great extent short-distance migration. The large percentage of short distance female migration is mainly due to marriage (Bose 2008).

Field survey in Coachbehar and Bnakura, two extreme side districts of West Bengal, shows that the basic and most important reasons of migration are poverty and unemployment at the place of origin. Therefore to meet food deficit and to meet other needs they undertake migration as a livelihood strategy. Over 90 per cent families of both the districts are near landless. They therefore are not self-sufficient in food-production. Sufficient employment opportunities are not available in these areas. Thus for the sake of survival they migrate to prosperous regions and states. Generally rural out migration from West Bengal has contributed to the prosperity of urban formal and informal sectors in the states of Rajasthan, Gujrat, Delhi, Karnataka and Kerala and so on.

If we look at the nature, pattern and impact of migration in these two districts we would see that the majority of the migrants belong to the age group of 15 – 30 years. On the whole, nearly 96 per cent members were found to remain engaged in wage employment and only four per cent were engaged in self-employment. Most of the workers in this come from marginal farmer and landless households. Thus, massive underemployment and unemployment was found to be a powerful push factor for migration. Compared to the place of origin, the migrants had higher level of income at their destination. On the negative side, the children migrated along with adult male or female members were deprived of basic education, besides experiencing many other forms of socio-cultural deprivation (Bagchi 2010).

For migratory women in their place of destination employment opportunity is available throughout the year in construction, brick kilns and as a domestic labour which is my main focus area in this study.

The term 'labour force' is equivalent to 'economically active population'. The Multilingual Demographic Dictionary states that the working population consists of those individuals who take part in the production of economic goods and services including family workers in an economic enterprise as well as persons who work for pay or profit. According to this definition, home-makers, engaged in household duties in their own home are not considered as 'economically active'. But domestic helps (working for wage) however are classified as economically active. Now the problem is that in most countries census statistics are likely to understate the number of economically active women, as they are unpaid family workers. Even some economists distinguish between 'production for self-consumption' and 'production for the market'. Only the latter is counted as 'work'. Thus much of the 'work' that women do in household industries if unpaid is not recognised as 'work' in the data system. As the majority of women are house-wives, they are engaged in productive activities only inside their homes. Despite the fact that they undertake the important jobs of child-bearing, child rearing and home-making, they are not considered to be the economically active. They are however certainly not dependent on the economy as the children and the aged one (Root 1991).

Female migration cannot be understood without relating it to the dynamics of gender relations in the family and labour market. Female migration is different due to the differences in the set of motivational social factors associated with the migration of women. Women are generally neglected due to their secondary migrant status which emanates from the assumption of a subsidiary income position of women. Against this backdrop, I would highlight female labour migration focusing on the Bengali marriage migrants who give their lifelong labour and productivity to the family and society yet remain unpaid on the one hand and on the other hand out migration of Bengali women as domestic labours, who despite being paid workers go without any social security.

While studying migration it is important to find out why some people migrate and others do not. In other words it is necessary to study the motivational factors associated with migratory movements. There are numerous factors which act to drive away the people from the area or to hold the people in the area or to attract the people to it. In this respect there are significant differences between the factors associated with the area of origin and those associated with the area of destination. It is also apparent that in most areas migrations occurs not because of either push or pull factors alone but as a result of combined effect of both (Rao 1986).

Another point to be taken into consideration is that not all migrants migrate as a result of their own decision; the children who move along with their parents and wives who follow their husbands do not have a say in the process of migration. Such type of migration is called sequential migration. And while cross regional and cross cultural marriage appear to be occurring more often in general, many more such brides happen to be Bengali who seem to be migrating to far-flung and culturally strange destinations away from their own homeland. The presence of Bengali brides has been reported in Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh (UP), Gujarat, Rajasthan and Kashmir. The question then is, what are the underlying reasons for this 'Bengali bridal diaspora'? Study by Neela Mukherjee shows that in two female deficient states of the country, Haryana and UP, almost 40 per cent of the brides out of a sample of 482 couples are Bengali.

The two most important reasons for such marriage migration from Bengal are poverty and dowry. Bengal remains one of the poorest states in the country. More than 40 per cent of people in the state live below the poverty line - a clear indication of the failure of development and the precariousness of livelihood for a large member of families, especially the female members. Data show that most women migrating for marriage are from 'poor working class families'. On many occasions, they are constrained to marry men who have some 'disadvantages'. Unable to find local brides in Haryana and Punjab such men look outside the state - West Bengal is a popular destination - for marriage (Mukherjee 2007).

For the impoverished Bengali women such long distance marriages are 'dowry less' and even the marriage expenditure is taken care of by their grooms. Such 'zero cost' marriages are acceptable for the girls' parents as a local marriage would have meant a significant drain of household resources.

But poverty alone does not give us the entire explanation, as poverty statistics for some other states, especially Bihar and Assam, are even worse than that of Bengal. Assam joins Bengal in sending some of the

daughters out as brides, however, Bihar, equally or more poor, appear to send off fewer women as brides. It is probable that while Bengal is less obsessed with caste and caste endogamy the caste-conscious Biharis prefer to marry within their own castes and communities? More Bihari men migrate out for work but bring their wives from within Bihar and from their own caste when they eventually marry (Roy 1990).

A more robust explanation, according to Ravinder Kaur, lies in family livelihood strategies. As a rationally worked out strategy the impoverished families marry one daughter in West Bengal paying dowry beyond means and send the rest outside the state as marriage migrants. It is not that Bengali women do not migrate out for work – they are found to be working as domestic workers in many parts of the country. However, migrating as a bride achieves both marriage and work. Here sexual and reproductive labour combine with economic labour pointing to the increasingly complex form of migration in which women are used as commodities. The percentage of domestic workers in total female employment in the service sector increased from 11.8 per cent in 1999 – 2000 to 27.1 per cent in 2004 – 2005 (Kaur 2010).

Paid domestic service falls in the informal sector which is most exploitative with long working hours, low wages and absence of social security provision. Industrialisation and urbanization are the factors that encourage the growth of domestic service, with a 'servant employing' middle class and a surplus of unskilled workers. The increase in demands for domestic workers can also be related to the emergence of dual careers as a new family norm by employing someone to take care of the household tasks, the double burden on middle class women is reduced without disturbing the traditional patriarchy.

Poor women from landless households of West Bengal are migrating in large numbers in search of secure livelihoods. Why do these poor women migrate leaving their near and dear ones behind? What kind of situations are they faced with, how do they adjust to such different and difficult circumstances and does migration enhance their social position? Such migrants were the residents of the districts of West Bengal such as Nadia, Hoogly, Burdwan, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Midnapore, 24 Parganas and so on. As field evidence shows there is systematic uncertainty and vulnerability of livelihoods and food insecurity faced by poor women from many parts especially those from rural and semi-urban Bengal. As per published data the state of West Bengal can be considered as positioned in the middle rank, as far as ranking of socio-economic indicators for the major states are concerned, with a rank of 9th in head count index of poverty, 10th position in terms of growth of state domestic products, 11th in terms of infant mortality ratio and 7th for female literacy amongst 16 major states of India (Dasgupta 1989).

The depressed job markets at grass-root level, structural changes in the agrarian sector, new technologies, gradual marginalisation of women labour and absence of proper policies and strategies for landless households as well as poor women, push them to migrate to affluent cities. With their low level education and skill women get employed in the domestic sectors as maids, cooks, private nurse for taking care of the sick and aged or to take care of children (Sundari 2007).

Difficulties faced

Migration of women, with insignificant control over resources, material or human, involves a great deal of uncertainties and insecurity. At least in the initial years of their migration when they have to confront many difficulties they find the adaptation tough. Here are some difficulties they usually face.

(1) Domestic work occurs in isolated, largely non-regulated and privatised environment and most domestic workers negotiate job terms and pay on an individual basis.

(2) The working hours of domestic workers also vary. Research on domestic workers suggests that many workers suffer from occupational health problems especially backaches, joint pains and allergies.

(3) The women live with worries about their family members who live away from them in their poverty stricken surroundings at the place of origin.

(4) There is no provision for social security in terms of provident fund, health insurance or pension; the irregular nature of job and low wages prevent them having a decent living for themselves and their families back home.

(5) The conditions of work and lower socio-economic status make these workers vulnerable to physical and sexual exploitation and assault, which remains largely under-reported.

Society and Social Networking

During the past few years there has been an upsurge in the number of agencies supplying domestic workers especially in metropolitan cities. Since agencies differ considerably in terms of functioning, doubts are often raised about the genuineness and method of functioning of these organisations. Single women migrants depend on these agencies as they are unaware of the dispersed employment opportunities in the city. It is widely documented that a large number of agencies take undue advantage of the illiteracy and ignorance of these workers. The existence of various layers of recruitment agents and the system of advance payments adds to the complexity. Migration of domestic service is found to be largely a female-driven phenomenon, based on personal and social relationships. Social networking which is largely female-centred is found to influence the migration decision, the process of migration and also the day-to-day life of the migrants. Support is extended to the migrant family either by relatives or even by people from the same village, which results in a chain migration of workers from rural to urban areas. Women domestics during their visit to native places spread the information on the possibility of migration and employment opportunities among relatives and friends. Apart from job seeking they are the most important source in introducing the new domestic employers and to overcome the language barriers. Since leave is limited and travel is expensive such support is very important for them. Slums are normally places of regular conflict between the dwellers, police and urban development authorities. There is no safety of money. There over threats come from male members who are unemployed. In this situation, especially in the absence of any social care and support these women help each other, celebrate cultural occasions and bring some sense of solidarity and collectivity among them. The role of the agency networks are found to be important in the process of migration and entry to work. The informal movement of workers is organised through agency and thus act as the central agency between the employers and domestic workers (Patriwala 2008).

A look into the occupational pattern of the male family members of domestics would show that a majority of them are engaged as casual wage labour or in informal sector activities such as hawkers, rickshaw pullers, factory workers, fish vendor, petty trade and other activities and a considerable share of the income of men is spent on consumption of alcohol and intoxicants. The share of women's contribution to the actual family income is much higher which makes them primary bread-earners.

But despite women's considerable contribution to family income and survival, social control remains the domain of the male member, the husband in most cases. Patriarchal relations are visible in terms of violence against women.

Need for Regulations

Due to collective struggles, some interventions have come through in a few states. In Karnataka, Maharashtra and Rajasthan domestic work is now included under the minimum wages notification. In Tamilnadu domestic work is added to the scheduled list under the manual workers Act 1982. However, even in Karnataka which is the first state to fix minimum wages for domestic workers and has a strong organisational backing of domestic workers, the legislative benefits are yet to reach a large chunk of workers. Lakhs of women and girls turn to domestic work as one of the few options available to them in order to provide for themselves and their family. This definitely poses serious concerns in terms of women's work and employment (Neetha 2008).

Domestic workers have been excluded from even a basic labour law like the Minimum Wage Act. The first attempt to regularise domestic work, i.e., the drafting of the Domestic Workers' Bill 1959 is now a matter of history. Along with the efforts to include domestic workers in the pending Unorganised Sector Workers' Bill (2004) there are also demands for a separate bill which would address the special employment conditions of this category of work. In this context, the bill framed by the National Commission for Women deserves special mention.

Conclusion

Domestic work in itself has undergone tremendous change. In modern system of domestic work, a large number of workers undertake heterogeneous work in different households. This system of 'part-time domestic work' is typically associated with the phenomenon of urbanisation and the emergence of modern nuclear middleclass families. The increased demand for domestic workers has also been related to the reduction in provision of public social services which has forced families to depend on market oriented care services, especially when women members are employed outside home.

Nevertheless migration is also a terrain where gender relations are negotiated. The before and after migration experience of women domestics, the shift from old world values, customs, habits and traditions and the demands of the new place redefine and reposition their status within home and in the community.

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