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Sil, Milly

Indian Social Institute

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Women Migration in India: An Overview

MILLY SIL*

In recent years, several issues related to women migration focusing on the context of development have been doing the rounds. The Report of the Consultative Meeting by United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women in 2003 discusses many such issues related to both international as well as internal migration of women and its affects. Critical amongst them are the international laws and labour migrants; human trafficking; refugee migration; and migration in the context of economic globalisation, in the context of international migration, and vulnerability and exploitation of women labour migrants; trafficking; labour and capital contribution of female migrants; and rural to urban migration of women, in case of internal migration. Current discourses on migration and development have also emphasised the growing numbers of urban to urban migration of women besides rural to urban migration and the role of remittances of these women migrants. Another issue of internal migration that has not been widely explored is the propensity of the migrants who move from rural or semi urban areas to main urban centres or moving outside the country. (Skeldon 2005). Discussions on these issues highlight the resurgence of interest on internal migration and its linkage with international migration in the recent years.

Internal and International Migrants

Several studies on migration of women have been put forward by scholars that address the problems, determinants and consequences associated with such migration. While international movements have been the focus of agenda in recent times, the process and consequences of large scale, internal movements of women, especially in South East and South Asia, have also been an interesting concern. Though internal movements of women in South Eastern Asia, especially during 1970's and 80's due to emergence of global production chains in these areas, had been associated mainly with employment reasons (Sassen-

Koob 1984; Kusago 1998; Ghosh 2004 Chammartin 2001; Lean and Oishi 1996) internal movements of women in South Asia had been mainly associated with marriage migration. Recent studies on internal movements of women in these regions have emphasised on the fact that migration of women for reasons other than just 'marriage' have been grossly underrepresented due to flawed or biased methodology adopted by the main data sources in this case.

Since the declaration of the year 1975 as the year of women and that decade as women's decade, several issues related to women came into the focus of scholars (Martin, 2003). Migration of women was one such issue which gained much attention since then. Due to an increase in 'autonomous' female migration especially because of an increase in the demand for female labour in certain industries and services, pre and post liberalisation, combined with growing acceptance of women's work participation and mobility, had led to the concept of 'feminisation of work' and 'feminisation of migration' (Deshingkar and Grimm, 2005). Vast literature on international movements of women discuss various kinds of movements along with the determinants as well as consequences; in India, on the other hand, migration of women was mainly attributed to marriage and patrilocal form of residence. Employment related migration of women was, either not given importance or was understated due to several cultural factors (Sen 2004). Studies on internal migration of women in India were mainly based on secondary sources of national statistics, including Census and National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), in the initial years.

One of the pioneering attempts to explore the dimensions of female internal migration in India was done by Premi. His work was based on secondary data using census statistics and NSSO during the years 1961-71. He found that rural-rural migration was dominated by women and that it comprised more than

* Ph. D Scholar at Tata Institute of Social Sciences.

70 per cent of the total migration. And this migration was mainly associational or marriage migration. He stressed on the need for a detailed investigation on female migration that was occurring due to broken marriages, widowhood, separation and destitution. An interesting feature that was noted during that period was that though the strength of the rural-urban migration stream remained the same over the years 1961-71, the sex ratio had improved indicating greater urban ward migration of females. Also, it was noted that in long distance migration category, urban-urban migration of women was more prominent compared to rural-urban migration. This study was one of the first of its kind to bring the process and importance of female migration in India into the focus of the researchers and the various aspects of this phenomenon in the country, which usually considered it to be unimportant and insignificant. The contribution of female migrants and their participation in the workforce was neglected and often ignored (Premi 1980).

Owing to patrilocal form of residence for women and village exogamy in India, a predominance of short distance rural-urban migration of females due to marriage is generally observed. According to 1991 census data, the sex ratios were highest for intrastate (3,643 per 1000 males) migration of females followed by interdistrict (2,194 per 1000 males), interstate (1,245 per 1000 males) and international (939 per 1000 males) (Singh, 1998). But both census and NSSO data reveal an overall growing trend of female migration compared to men in rural and urban sectors (Sundari 2005; Shanthi 2005).

But several recent studies indicated the failure of national statistics to capture the complexities of migration of women and short term movements of women (Narayanan 2000; Shanthi 2005; Chattopadhyay 2005; Choudhary and Jain 2007). Chattopadhyay gives evidence of increased female mobility between states or long distance migration due to betterment of transport systems and also highlights the increased mobility of women from poorly developed states to that of prosperous and developed states (Chattopadhyaya 2005). She also highlights the recent rise in migration of unmarried females for employment reasons, but states that it is still for a shorter duration and migrants are likely to return after some earnings. But she points out that this kind of migration of unmarried females for employment may also be along with families but are understated in census statistics as associational

migration. She therefore, stressed on the need to develop migrant typologies sensitive to women in her study. She also emphasised that reason for migration should be used as criteria for distinguishing female migrants where nature as well as place of work should be taken into account for which there is lack of data available especially in the unorganised sector.

Several studies have been based on the causes and consequences of migration of women, especially in the unorganised sector, taking the gender aspects into consideration and have produced interesting results. Such studies bring out the various determinants of female migration that are associated with both types of female migration, that is, autonomous and associational. The various macro and micro level studies, in the Indian context indicate differential participation of women in the labour force. For instance, women in North India, an area characterised by village exogamy, were seen to be less participatory in the labour force and avoided long distance migration to cities. Whereas in South India, where women enjoy a better position socially, in terms of literacy for instance, seem to participate more into labour force and long distance migration (Fawcett, et al 1984). The distance of migration is also a major determining factor in female migration studies. It was observed that longer the distance, less likely were women to migrate.

Historical Context

An interesting study based on historical context of migration of women in India set in colonial times by Sen (2004) questions the past historical literature to answer the question "were women in India really immobile?" This study based on the colonial era of 1901 to pre independence highlights some important facts about internal migration of women in India. It indicated the presence of women in a variety of work including petty commodity production, gathering and foraging, food processing, retail and even wage work in the countryside which clearly indicated that rural women were "neither invisible nor immobile". The historical research had ignored peasant economy and focus was more on the urban industrial worker. Considering the large scale migration of women in North India to Assam tea plantations for work during the end of 18th century and the beginning of 20th century, it was inferred that instead of an increase in the mobility of women due to commercialisation of agriculture, there was a decrease in their mobility. Hence, due to setting up of tea plantations in Assam,

on one hand there was a demand for female workers in that area that advocated for women's migration and also decisions on their behalf (also the colonial state's revenue policy made women's labour essential for poor rural households), and on the other hand the state's judicial process made an explicit endorsement of male's claims on the women's labour within the family. This was a paradoxical situation at that time. She also states that during 1911 only 2 per cent of women above the age of fifteen and 0.8 per cent above the age of twenty were unmarried, which indicated a clear movement of women due to marriage, yet women did migrate for work and also sometimes over long distances. Since families resisted women migrating long distances for work, women's labour was mostly deployed within the rural areas because women migrating to cities for work were merely looked down upon and were seen as fallen women by her rural folk.

Using sources like the District Gazetteer of 1930, it was found that most of the migration of women that occurred in the rural areas was mainly seasonal migration where the women, either individually or with families, migrated for work which clearly indicates work related migration of women and also the fact that this was the family's survival strategy. Presence of permanent migration of women during that period was due to textile industries in Bombay, jute industries in Calcutta and some coal mines in Bihar belt, while migration to Assam tea plantations was more organised, but unregulated. There was also presence of single women workers in these industries. But they were few in number due to two reasons: one was poor living conditions and second, due to cultural constraints on women to move from rural to urban areas for work. So, mainly destitute, deserted, widowed and lower caste women who wanted to escape oppression mainly comprised single women migrants to such industries. In the coal mines, huge percentage of women workers were either seasonal or circular migrants from nearby villages or districts, who contributed substantially to coal production and most importantly, were single. Though these industries became the core formal industries in independent India, many adult women withdrew from these industries which led to dropping down of women's employment in the formal sector.

Migrants in Unorganised Sector

Exploring migration of women in India illustrate mainly two types of migration; seasonal and permanent migration. Research studies on seasonal migration

illuminate some important aspects of this type of migration for women. Typically, in India it has been observed that it is the poorest people who migrate. Since costs involved with migration are great, the poor look for options, in and around the village. Though this situation cannot be generalised (Banerjee, 1986), most of the seasonal migrations are due to survival needs. It had been observed that lower caste women in general, especially from tribal areas are largely involved in seasonal migration under highly exploitative conditions.

In this country, seasonal migrants are mainly engaged in brick-kiln industry, construction, crop-cutting, tile-making, cane-bamboo craft, prawn or fish processing, tobacco grinding, chilly plucking, sugarcane cutting, to name a few. These types of occupations generally involve harsh working conditions and the migrant women generally belong to villages with abject poverty, comprising mainly tribals and destitute. Profound gender differentials in wages with regard to nature of work is observed in these industries, even though both men and women do similar kinds of jobs that are tedious and monotonous under same working conditions along with occupational hazards (Pandey 1998; Hema Kumari and Tataji 1998; Nishchith 2000; Deshingkar and Grimm 2005).

A characteristic situation has been observed in case of these seasonal women migrants. As Karlekar (1995) points out, in construction sites and brick-kiln industries, labour is employed under highly exploitative conditions and often, in a situation of bondage where the employees work seasonally for a specific contractor who might have given them an advance or loan to lure people who are in dire straits (especially backward caste groups). This loan becomes a first step towards bondage. The employers then take advantage of the situation and exploit both men and women financially as well as sexually (in case of women). A similar situation was highlighted by Sen (2000) for migrant women of Chhattisgarh into construction sites in North India where contractors played a major role. The study highlights the ways in which the Interstate Migrant Workmen Act, 1979¹ as well as the Contract Labour Act, 1970 is violated in many ways by the employers. Instances of deception by the employers as well as the contractors were revealed in the study where the employers did not bear the travel expenses of the migrant workers and provided them with extremely poor living conditions. Women especially widowed and

destitutes were cheated and not given proper payments and sometimes, not even paid. Sen (2000) advocates for a more effective legislation though, the roles of licensed as well as non licensed contractors required more clarification.

Teerink's study shows that the seasonal migration of Khandeshi women in Gujarat failed to give them greater social independence (Teerink 1995). These women did not even receive wages in their hands, which are generally given to their husbands at the end of the season. Since, in this case the families together migrated to the sugarcane fields, there were no female headed households and hence, women did not exercise greater autonomy in decision making, though their contribution proved to be of greater importance to the households. There was no enhancement of their social status. This study indicated that in case of seasonal labour migration, the extent of exploitation was profound. Since only the poorest people are engaged in seasonal migration, the employers seek labour from different areas of origin that speak different languages in order to prevent them from unification. Also, by paying them at the end of the harvesting period, they ensure their stay for the entire duration (till harvest season). Again women contribute to the reproduction of labour power by doing unpaid domestic work. So it was profitable for the employers to hire entire households.

Another fact that was observed in case of seasonal migration of women was that this kind of migration was more voluminous compared to permanent migration of women (Pandey 1998). Another grave fact is that in case of seasonal migration, women generally leave their family and children behind which eventually leads to a greater number of school dropouts, since they are neglected and hence develop unhealthy habits and turn to petty crimes (Hema Kumari and Tataji 1998).

So we see that seasonal migration, in general, has been in focus and dealt with quite extensively in literature which shows various aspects of the phenomenon that is so prevalent in India. But apart from seasonal migration, women have been prominent in various other permanent types of moves that we come across in literature. Prominent amongst them are a large proportion of women that move to work in various cities from rural areas as well as from other small towns. There are also instances of women that moved to various industries for work, namely the Export

Processing Zones (EPZs)² in India. But the process of migration and their living and working conditions at the destination or industries of these women, were similar to those of the seasonal workers. That is, they are characterised by extremely poor working conditions that are hazardous (Ghorude 1998; Sharma and Sengupta 1998 and Neetha 2004; Vishwanathan 2005). They work as wage labour in these industries run by subcontracting firms where the working conditions are arduous and require, mostly female labour due to the nature of the assembly line work that is tedious and repetitive (Sassen-Koob 1984; Ghosh 2004). But such studies, though are informative about the working and living conditions, fail to give a broader framework or comprehensive overview of the processes of movements and consequences of the migrant women into these enterprises.

Migration of women to cities and their involvement in the unorganised sector is another important area that had gained recognition in the past decade. There exist different kinds of engagements of women workers in unorganised sector, but amongst them female domestics working in urban households have been largely studied (Reddy, 1992; Mukherjee 2001; Virk 2004; Sarkar 2005; Bhattacharya 2006; Choudhary and Jain 2007). These women migrants are mostly illiterate who come to the cities for work for a variety of push and pull factors. Reddy (1992) however opines that the conventional push and pull factor assumes that push is always from the rural areas and pull from urban areas. So, he categorises into social and economic factors. Choudhary and Jain (2007) elaborate on the assimilation patterns of the Bengali women migrants who work as domestics in Jaipur city, but though they mention recent migrants, their duration of stay in their study indicates women migrants who have lived for more than twenty years which is a long time. Time is a major factor in the assimilation process. An interesting feature cited in this study is that the duration of stay and interaction with people from their origin are inversely related. This may be due to the fact that they do not have time out of their hectic schedule. Some of the domestic workers work in different houses to wash utensils, clothes, etc., in the same day, apart from those who are live-in maids. This distinction has not been examined clearly.

Another interesting observation is that the increasing engagement of middle class women to work has given way to another stream of migration of women for

domestic work to cities. This is because the middle class women have shifted their household activities to the 'maids', in order to maintain their 'upward mobility' and 'status symbol' which has led to an increased demand for maids in urban areas. So, it can be said that these women not only migrate due to push factors, in fact there is a sufficient 'pull' for women from rural and tribal areas (Kumar 2006) into domestic work in urban areas. These studies emphasise the need to capture the economic, social, legal as well as psychological aspects and emphasise on provisions for minimum wages for empowerment of these women and also enhance their skill development and social networking to overcome their insecurities on arrival (a rights based approach). The above fact directs us to also identify the other group, that is the so called 'middle class' women migrants who mostly live in nuclear families in cities and are engaged in the workforce. The process and consequences of migration of this particular group has not been adequately explored.

Narayanan (2000) attempts to study the characteristics of female migrants to metropolitan cities in India on the basis of census reports of 1991. In his study, he takes into account all the million plus cities in India during that decade. He finds that women migrating to metropolitan cities were mainly due to work related reasons and not just due to marriage. These women were not necessarily main workers but were also engaged in marginal work and household industries. Hence the 'traditional' concept needs to be changed. He also indicates that with these cities undergoing more political, economic and social changes and the concept of nuclear families in cities gaining momentum, there is further scope of these women migrants to enter labour force in these cities.

Shanthi (2006) indicates the failure of NSSO data to capture the magnitude of high levels of rural-urban migration of females for employment reasons. But justifies that earlier years of male selective migration in the country is definitely up for a change to include more family migration of males as well as females; though employment oriented migration of females within that is still hidden. Hence by taking "marital status" and "relationship with head" as proxy variables in her analysis, she finds a high urban-urban migration in "never married"³ as well as "widowed" categories indicating a high migration of widowed females from rural or urban areas to urban areas to fend themselves.

An important point raised by her in this study is the fact that since women migrants form a highly heterogeneous group in macro level data, migration of females should not be considered to be for only survival strategies but also women migrate for "economic diversification, upward mobility and desire for personal growth and autonomy".

One study done by Sundari and Rukmani (1998) on causes and pattern of female migration from Tamil Nadu to New Delhi Sundari and Rukmani found that employment was the main driver that pushed women out of Tamil Nadu. Again, Samuel (1995) in his study of patterns and consequences of female migration in Tamil Nadu studies some marital aspects. He finds that distance was a major deterrent in female migration and that for female migrants the propensity to migrate was greatest in 15 – 24 age groups. But though the study focuses extensively on married women moving to fast growing centres, it gives only a vague idea of married women who move for employment and that too, only in Tamil Nadu. Several other factors related to this kind of migration are yet to be explored.

Trafficking and prostitution related migration of women is another type of the phenomena of female migration where some detailed investigations have been done. But this is not a phenomenon in isolation; in fact studies indicate a linkage between other forms of migration of women and trafficking. There have been instances when due to inability to pay off loans in time by the husbands, wives and daughters are sold off into prostitution by brick kiln owners (Chopra, 1987 as cited in Acharya, 2007). Certain studies point out the lack of information on the 'specific' conditions that facilitate such migration of women, especially at the areas of origin. Acharya (2007) though show several ways in which these women are trapped into this profession. He identifies that either due to utter distress these women succumb to such trade, or they are lured by work in cities and then sold off to brothels or end up in such profession due to false marriages or love. Some communities in India also practice such a profession as a tradition. Studies based on such communities identify characteristics that are different from those who are trafficked. But whatever the case may be, migration and trafficking of women into prostitution has a large involvement of middlemen and agents who are a link between prostitution sites in cities and villages. They develop contacts in places where there is generally utter destitution and women are in desperate need for some kind of a livelihood.

Though studies focus on various aspects of this type of migration of women, hardly any of them focus on the economic consequences of such migration and what happens to their income.

Conclusion

From a broad overview of literature on female internal migration in India, it has been observed that many aspects of this phenomenon have been looked at from various sources. One can certainly conclude from these sources that female migration is indeed moving from more "marriage related" and "short distance" moves to more "employment oriented" and "longer distance" moves and the fact that the trend is moving away from male selective migration to more of family migration with greater "independent moves" of females compared to previous decades. But these studies merely give the geographical patterns of the moves where mostly fail to capture the reasons behind the changes in the patterns of the moves. Changing patterns of women's moves, post trade liberalisation in the country, is said to have enhanced independent migration of females. Cultural factors that undermine female work participation especially by male heads have also been responsible for this.

Though several micro and meso level studies on seasonal female migration have dealt with the nature and extent of seasonal movements of females in the country, yet several issues related to such migration call for a greater investigation into the wages, working conditions, origin and destination areas and social security from a rights based perspective. This would enable authorities to develop policies sensitive to such groups of workers and their families and their children.

Various causes and consequences of female migration in terms of seasonal and permanent migration of women, migration of women from rural and urban areas to major urban areas in search of livelihoods as well as migration of trafficked women and women into prostitution have been studied. But what appears is that largely women migration in India have been studied from the angle of survival strategies of women, that is linked with mainly push factors and poverty in areas of origin. Though this kind of migration largely impacts the lives of women post migration in terms of living conditions at destination, their decision making in families and their relationship with their native place, yet various aspects of female migration have yet to be closely examined. Likewise, though there has been

an increase in more migrant women in self employed categories (as indicated by studies), yet there has been a dearth of studies that look into the characteristics of women migrants who are self employed *per se* in various rural areas as well as urban centres. There may be presence of both educated (especially) as well as uneducated women in this category. Also, studies on a particular group of highly educated and professionally qualified female migrants, who come from families with educated parents to mainly cities in search of better prospects compared to their hometowns, are hard to locate. This group needs attention in the wake of rapidly growing service sector jobs that are mainly located in cities and particularly attract professionally qualified personnel.

If migration and its link with development have been doing the rounds in current discourses, then this aspect needs more emphasis because as she points out, even though the individual quantities may be smaller, the total volume of the remittances might be a sufficiently large because of the huge number of migrants involved. Hence, if studies on migration, by tradition, focuses on who migrates and why, and several dimensions of female migration needs to be explored adequately, then these comparatively unexplored aspects needs the attention of scholars which would enable more intricate understanding of this growing phenomenon.

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ENDNOTES

1. The Act has provisions for travel expenses for workers when they migrate and decent living conditions.
2. Due to globalisation and flexibilisation processes in 1980-90s, there was an increase in export oriented production in many Asian countries especially in manufacturing (garments, textiles, computer hardware and consumer electronics). The international supplier of goods rely less on production subcontracting a greater part of the production activities that is mainly done in these regions.
3. The percentage being high for females in Southern states (Shanthi, 2006)

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