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Can the migrants speak: A study on seasonal migration from Bihar to Kolkata after COVID-19

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Abstract

Migration is a dynamic social process that relocates cultures, ideas and resources from one region to another. In India, seasonal migration occurs due to various reasons such as economic, political, social, cultural, etc. The internal migration of India is fueled by the need for employment by unskilled labours in the informal sectors. Numerous unskilled labours from Bihar travel to West Bengal in search of better job-related opportunities. Such people are mostly employed in unorganised sectors with a very low pay scale. However, there are numerous challenges associated with the informal or its unorganised labour force due to fact of the limited scope of production, lack of social security, and so on. There is a paucity of research regarding the trends associated with this particular sector. In this vein, this research paper will aid in understanding the livelihood activities partook, the necessities of such individuals and their coping mechanisms. Furthermore, this research paper also delves into the changing socioeconomic and cultural contours of the studied population after the coronavirus pandemic.

Keywords: Migration; Socio-economic condition; Bihar; West Bengal; Cultural Silencing; COVID-19

1. Introduction

The 2011 census reports of India reflect that employment-induced out-migration is a day-to-day feature of several Indian states such as Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, etc. In similar veins, it was observed that there were around 45.6 crore migrants in 2011 (38% of the population) compared to 31.5 crore migrants in 2001 (31% of the population). Thus, between 2001 and 2011, while the population grew by 18%, the number of migrants increased by 45%. This is a matter of grave concern as such internal migrant masses constituted one of the most vulnerable individuals with no governmental policies or safety net protecting them. Therefore, to look into the fabric of internal migration this present paper seeks to follow the movement of the population from different rural districts of Bihar to Kolkata. This research was conducted in an anthropological manner, in a bid to look into the macro-level aspirations and needs of such individuals i.e., what drives them to do so? In the end, the primary and secondary data were analysed to explore the presence of any form of "Cultural Silencing" by employing the approach of the "Can the Subaltern Speak" model of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (see Spivak, 1985, 1999, 2005, 2012).

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2. Methodology

The primary goal of the research was to understand the process of out-migration from the area of study, its effects on society, and its dependencies on livelihood strategies. So, in this inquiry, we didn't seek to study the relationships between dependent and independent variables, but a basic-level hypothesis was tested via qualitative proofings. What we wanted to explore was the struggle of migration, the lifelong journey for earning basic livelihood commodities, social silencing of migrants. Thus, the underlying philosophical thinking in our work is interpretive, and the methods used were of Mixed nature i.e., both qualitative and quantitative.

In this vein, it should be noted that mixed-methods research is emerging in several fields, including internal migration studies (Bagchi & Paul, 2020). Yet, there is still little research truly integrating qualitative and quantitative methods, data, sampling and analysis techniques (Ibid). The tools which were used in this study are: in-depth interviews, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, etc. The limit and the scope of the study were quite small in scale with a very short tenure. However, a long-scale study on similar lines can be carried out in future. In this vein, through quantitative research methods, we would be enabled to conduct surveys, descriptive statistics, regressions, etc. which can be used for analysing micro and macro-level information. For example, statistical aspects of migration flaws, stocks, numeric and demographic interpretation of emigrants and immigrants, causes for migration, etc. Apart from these, qualitative research methods can also be applied in the field wherein the researchers would focus on the study of social and cultural information, individual perspective and detailed analysis of any fact (see Singh, 1985; Haan, 2000). However, as discussed earlier due to the short scale of study special focus was laid on the livelihood subsistence strategies after migration. In this context, qualitative research is a good parameter for this present research. Thus, qualitative research methodology was beneficial in processing data to achieve the research queries to formulate the current research paper.

2.1. Study Area

In our study on migration, the Howrah district was pre-selected and furthermore, the Shalimar area was selected according to the objectives of the research. Based on the primary data most of the migrant workers are born and brought up in Bihar state. So, the scope of our study can be socio-culturally expanded into the states Bihar and West Bengal, henceforth a consistent study on analyzing the socio-economic condition of the migrant peoples and their livelihood factors, coping mechanisms as well as their unstoppable journey was taken up in due course of the study. The primary data was collected from 1st March to 31st May, 2021 from the aforesaid area. The recruitments were done on the basis of informed consent and their voluntariness to partake in such a study.

2.2. Participants of the Study

In our study, there were 37 males and 3 females. They are divided into two groups ascending to their age, a young adult age group belonging to 20 to 40 years age and a mature adult consisting of 41 to 60 years age group of people. The primary data exhibits that, the young adult group consisted of 42.5% of the total population, however mature adult group consists of 57.5% of the total sample. They came from various linguistic communities in Bihar. Most of them belong to the general caste category. The Schedule caste (SCs) constitutes around 4.3% of the total studied sample. Out of the 40 migrant individuals, 37 were married. Most of the individuals in the studied population were illiterate, and half of the population (42.5%) have a secondary level of education i.e., up to class 10 only. Hence, due to migration most of these people are unable to fulfil their basic education criteria. At the time of migration, they mostly belong to the nuclear family before migration. In the matured adult group although the joint family was also noticed at a considerable frequency (52.5%). This pattern is also supporting the working hypothesis that our traditional joint family system in Indian society is gradually disintegrating due to the emerging effects of westernisation, modernisation and industrialisation (Bagchi & Paul, 2020).

3. Results and discussion

In the context of migration, various concepts especially the ones developed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak can be employed in the third-world context. Spivak (1985) in her model "Can the Subaltern Speak" looked into the voiceless masses of the subaltern space. This model can be applied for exploring the ethical scopes of communication between migrants and their managers. This method is typically a postcolonial approach; this can be used when inspecting the inadequate power structures in the association between western philanthropical organizations and assistance beneficiaries across the world. Further, Spivak's hypothetical understandings are beneficial in the debate of what it means to communicate and what it is to study, what is being trained, and the interaction-related approaches being applied in the training process. In her work, Spivak emphasized that philanthropists must identify that they function in

a postcolonial setting. As per Spivak, it is of excessive relevance to use pedagogies that look critically into the part of essentialism in the politics of individuality and ethos. Furthermore, Spivak observes that information should not be seen as somewhat unbiased, but as part of a classical approach, upholding the economic edifice in profit of the west. Thus, the model of systemic exploitation can be exposed through such a notion. Apart from this, the primary data collected from our survey was quantified in form of tables to look into the basic socio-demography of the migrant populace in West Bengal.

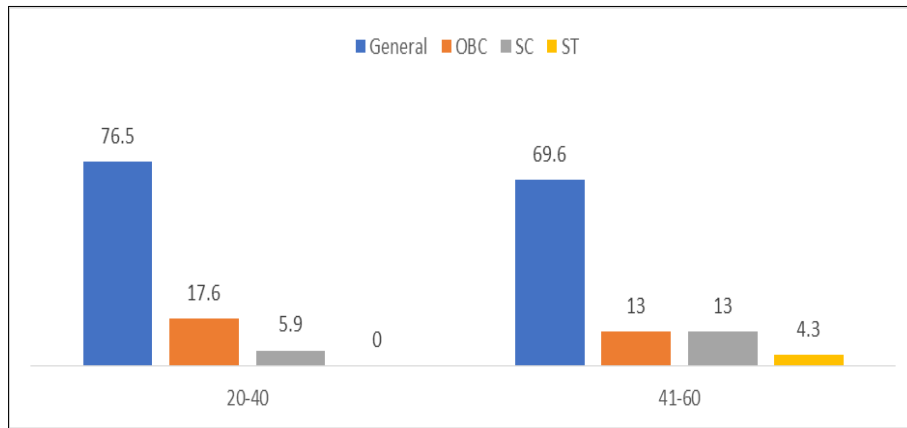


Figure 1 Distribution of individuals as per reservation and by age groups

Figure 1 shows the distribution of ethnic groups by age group among the migrant populace. In both the age group, general caste holds the major place (76.5% and 69.6% respectively); Schedule Caste (SC) constitutes 5.9% and 4.3% of the total population; while the ST constitutes only 4.3% of the total population.

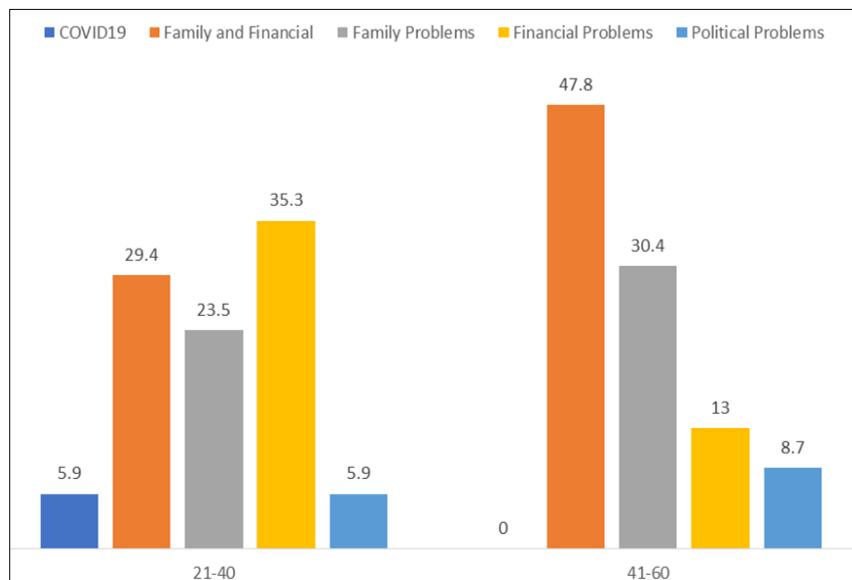


Figure 2 Reasons for migration, by age groups

The reasons for migration are tabulated in figure 2. Among both age groups, the financial factor is the main cause of migration. Besides this, the family problem is another factor for migration. Political reasons also play an important role in migration among the studied population.

Figure 3 shows the various leisure activities in their migrant life among the studied population. Most of them in spite of age group prefer to consume liquor during their leisure time. Chatting with friends and relatives has a little frequency as shown in the table. This reflects their loneliness in the new environment.

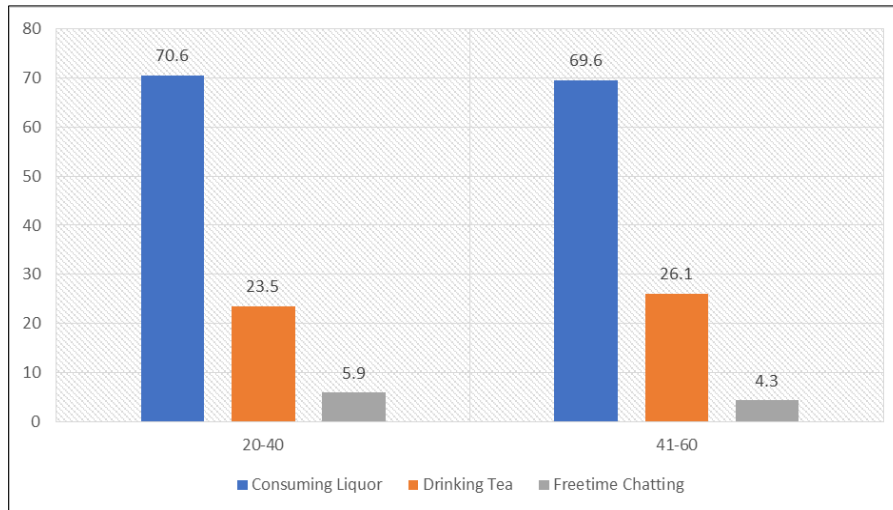


Figure 3 Leisure time activities, by age groups

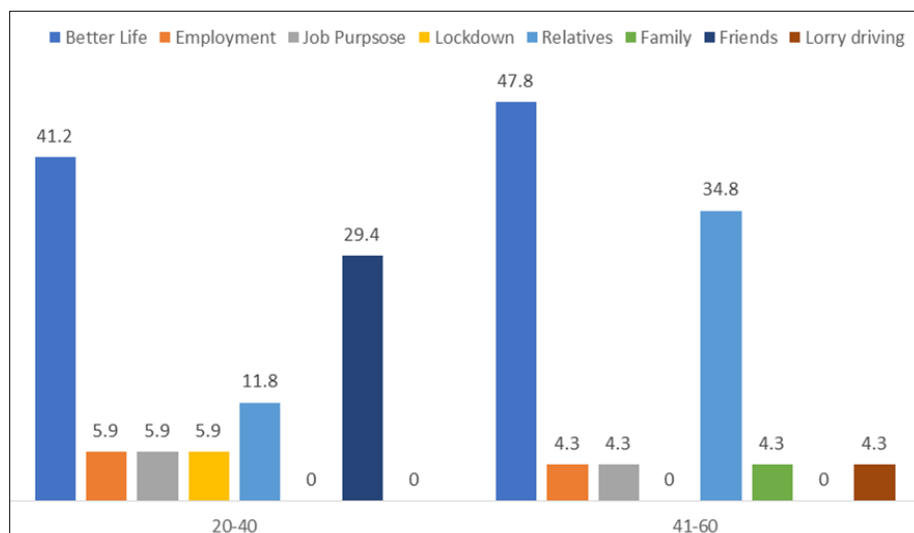


Figure 4 The reason behind choosing the migrant places, by age groups

The studied migrant group chose their migrant place for different reasons which are tabulated in figure 4. Receiving a better lifestyle is the major cause for both group of the population (41.2% and 47.8% respectively). For younger adults, friends residing in that place are another reason for choosing their migrant places. This reflects that they want to prefer live within their known circle from which they get help whenever they need it; whereas for the same reason mature adults chose the place where their relatives lived.

Figure 5 indicates the essential things in their new life according to their priority. It shows better life and a secure job are the two essential things in spite of age group. Matured individuals also think getting shelter is another important thing.

Figure 6 highlights the changes in their income structure after migration. It shows 50% of the migrant population earn more than Rs. 10,000-15, 0000 money after migration; 20% earn Rs. 15000-20000more. Only 10% get less than Rs. 5000 more after shifting their habitat. It indicates that by migration, overall, they are getting economically benefitted.

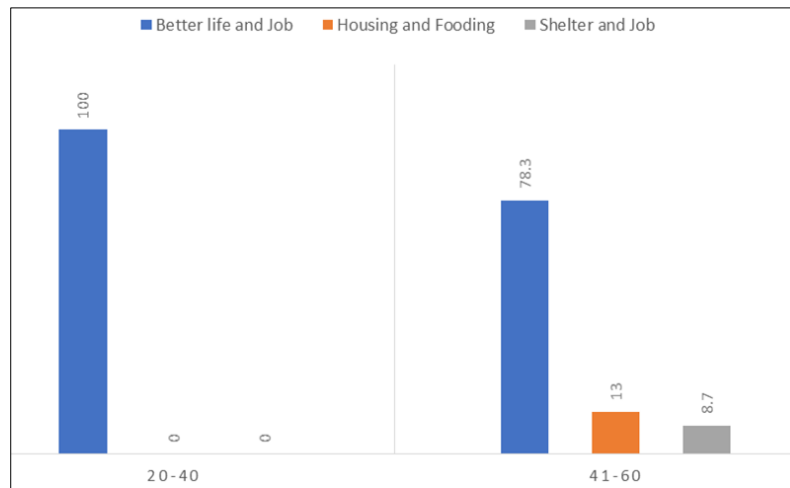


Figure 5 Essential things in their new life, by age groups

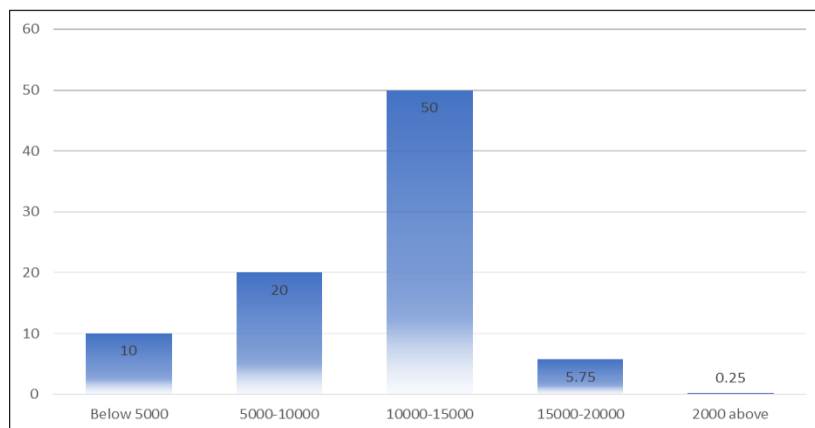


Figure 6 Changes in income structure

3.1. Case Study on a Migrant Labour

Ganesh Yadav belongs to the Schedule Caste (SC) community. In the past, he used to reside in Begusarai Bihar. When he was sixteen years old, he left his native place and came to the Howrah district, West Bengal. His uncle lived in Kolkata, so in the beginning, he came to stay at his uncle's house. After completing the fourth standard he left his school because he had to face an extreme financial crisis. There were six members in his family and his father left them at an early age. Due to such a prevailing financial crisis, they are unable to complete their basic needs of sustenance. His family had to face numerous difficulties after migration such as acquiring a job, struggling to maintain job priorities, lack of references, communication difficulties and lastly poor health condition. Earning is the ultimate priority in his life. He had faced joblessness many a time and, in such times, he did not have anything to eat. There were numerous days in his life wherein he survived with only a single meal a day. Currently, he is employed in a small company and is receiving ten thousand salaries on a monthly basis. Apart from this, he resides in a rented room along with his family. He had struggled a lot to survive. In his free time, he goes to his friend's house and consumes alcohol. In his leisurely time, he likes music and singing which somewhat fulfils his life's aspiration to become a Bhojpuri singer.

According to him health and education are equally important in someone's life. Due to migration and the financial crisis in his early days, his education was stopped. This restricted him to look for better opportunities. Regular working hours with no pay, or irregular payments etc. are the essential problems in his life that limit his ease of living. Further, limited resources and minimal wages are also important parts of his struggle.

4. Conclusion

The study which was conducted in 2021 for a short term discloses the declining importance of West Bengal over the years in pulling the migrants towards it as compared to urban India. Furthermore, the proportion of migrants to Kolkata is even lower, principally because of the contrasting value with the constant economic expansion of the cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, etc. (as per Census, 2011). Among the essential reason for migration, it was noticed that economic factor is the primary cause of migration. Besides this family, related problems are also playing a vital role in the migration of our studied population. Political issues came to the third position as a factor for migration. In due course, these individuals tried to cope with the present environment in various ways. Most of them in spite of age group prefer to consume liquor during their leisure time. However, chatting with friends and relatives is almost nil as reflected in the study conducted in 2021. This result indicates that the studied population severely suffers from loneliness, and insecurity and their silencing behaviour ultimately resulted in depression. This study also showed that they missed their village lifestyle and their traditional food pattern also. They felt very much nostalgic about their past life and their past environment friends' families all of these have a strong impact on their memories. Due to migration, they were facing regular challenges in day-to-day life. Most of them are unable to fulfil their basic daily needs which are food, shelter and clothing. This study reflects that migrant individuals want to live within their known circle. They have their own network from which they get help whenever they need it. The mature adult age group of migrants chose the place where their relatives lived in. However, this data reflects that migrant individuals believe more in their known circle compared with strangers in the new locality.

In the aftermath of COVID-19, it was observed that informal labours and migrants are facing tremendous challenges to earn their basic livelihood amenities. The state has not only abdicated its responsibility towards providing employment opportunities to its citizens but also turned a blind eye towards them in this time of crisis. Apart from these, permanent migration along with the severity of liquor consumption causes loneliness, and depression that correlated with the conceptual idea "Can the Subaltern Speak" (or Can the Migrant Speak in this case). This present study indicates that educational and cultural backwardness created a strong communicational barrier which affects their self-reflexivity. In some cases, young adult groups of migrants develop their own cultural groups. Thus, after complete analysis, these parameters point to the fact that they are "silenced masses of people" whose woes are shunned by almost every individual they encounter. In this context, if we delve into the question, "Can the Migrant Speak" then the answer is not simple. Because the answer is both Yes and No. Yes, they can speak if an individual is willing to listen to their woes, but the answer is also No. In view of this fact, no one is willing to listen to such individuals. To redress such social issues, in the near future, such short-scale research will be further extended to a larger scale with a better time frame to look into the macro-level and micro-level challenges of migration in India.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding this particular article. All the co-authors have seen and agreed with the contents of the manuscript.

Statement of ethical approval

Ethical approval and permission were obtained from appropriate authorities to carry out this research. However, no form harm mental/physical was done to any subjects by any of the authors.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the aforesaid study.

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