

Status of Rural Women, Left Behind for Male Labour Circulation: an Empirical Study of Cooch Behar District, West Bengal, India

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Abstract

Circulation, being a typical component of migration creates dynamic and complex social process through the constant interaction with economic, demographic, social and political elements of a particular society in a space time lattice. The term 'circulation' refers to temporary cyclical movement of a person or a group of person with no declared intention of permanent change of residence. It always ends in the place of origin. The study area, Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, India ranked 11 out of 19 districts (HDR, 2004) of West Bengal proves its incredible backwardness in every aspect. Inadequate employment opportunity due to industrial backwardness, inherited fragmented landholdings, minimum returns from agricultural activities, growing price of necessary commodities and increasing consumerist ideology have compelled simple rural male of the district to migrate in search of work elsewhere. In rural society of Cooch Behar district; women generally participate in food processing, child care, nursing, gossiping, and intensive agricultural task as helper. Temporary absence of man affects social status and life style of the women who are left behind both positively and negatively. In present paper, an attempt has been made to highlight the status of women who are left behind, in terms of gender division of labour, woman empowerment, social insecurity, and economic perspectives to provide few strategies for the policy makers.

Keywords: Circulation, Gender division, Empowerment, Backwardness, Agriculture

1. Introduction

Requirement of basic needs like food, shelter and clothing, have compelled human being to move one place to another throughout the year since their origin. Such movement of human being is dynamic and complex social process encompassing a broad flexible scale for its varying types, patterns, natures and causes. This process of movement of humans is generally referred in terms of Migration, which has various shade of meaning (Trewartha, 1969). The concept of circulation as defined by Zelensky (1971), is a typical pattern of migration and according to him, it refers to a great variety of movements usually short term, repetitive or cyclical in character, but all having common lack of any declared intention of a permanent or longstanding changes of residence. Labour Circulation thus may be defined as a pattern of circulatory migration where individual or a group of people move away from their home to other places in search of work, then return to the place of origin over the courses of time. In the present paper, 'Male labour circulation' refers agricultural male labourer, who are the head of their family. Status of agricultural labour of the study area is associated with irregular employment due to seasonal character of agriculture of this region, over time of work, low wages and marginalisation (Thorner, 1974). Shankar in 1993 observed that 42% agricultural labour of the study area have no land and land possessed by the remaining portion is very poor (Som, 2001). Development of technology, changing political standpoint, and several steps taken by the Government have altered the dimensions of agricultural labourer but over all socio-economic condition remain the same as compared to the previous. In every year, a large number of male agricultural labourers leave their family member at home and move out for *Bidesh*¹ in search of work from Cooch Behar district. During his field work *Bijay Bihary Som*, in the year of 1995 to 1996, at Tufangang subdivision of Cooch Behar district, observed that, males are going out the villages for work in different states of India like Rajasthan, Hariyana, Maharashtra, Tamilnadu, Bihar, Delhi and Arunachal Pradesh. Researcher finds similar condition during his field study at Poaturkuthi Enclave surrounded by Cooch Behar district.

Male labour circulation from the study area has been altering the entire social and economic circumstances to a large extent. It is a matter of concern to social scientist that, the extent of such circulation is not recorded in the census or in the National Sample Survey, even not by any Government official, elected persons or by Panchayets.

Although, women contribute half in the history of human civilisation, men always label their supremacy in the forehead of women. Human rights of women have been snatching away and they have been tended to be imprisoned within the barriers of familial activities, norms, rules and regulation throughout the history of human civilisation. Casually, wives of absentee husband who are circulated in search of work, have an opportunity to be the *de facto*² head of the family (FAO, 1999). Consequently, male labour circulation has much importance in the life of rural women who left behind at home in the study area.

2. Objectives

The main objective of the study are-

1. To find out the status of *de-facto* headship of female due to male labour circulation.
2. To find out the nature of gender division of labour of rural women who are left behind.
3. To find out the status of decision making power of rural women who are left behind.
4. To find out the nature of freedom of movement and social security of the women who are left behind.
5. To find out the nature of empowerment of women who are left behind in the study area.

3. Literature Review

A lot of researches have been done in the field of migration by lot of exponents since long past and Gender has been incorporated in this field in last twenty century. But the main focus has been concentrated on the women who migrated herself (Grasmuck and Pessar, 1991; Pedraza, 1991; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992; Salazar, 2001; Gamburd, 2002; McKay, 2005). The women who are left behind have been bearing the negligence by the researchers. In comparison to the number of studies on men and women who migrate, there are fewer studies on the women left behind (Pedraza, 1991; Posel, 2001). Even though, women are totally affected by such migration process, rather they are not migrants themselves (Hugo, 2000). Truong Thi Ngoc Chi et al, in 2001, significantly worked on impact of male migration on female hardship's time allocation and inputs in a village of Vietnam. McEvoy, Jamie, P. in 2008, studied empirically the impact of male out-migration on the women left behind as a case study on a small farming community in south eastern Mexico. He used data from semi-structured qualitative interviews to assess the effects of male out-migration on women's live in three areas: household's financial and material situation, issues of infidelity and women's vulnerability to abandonment, and the gendered division of labour. From Indian perspective Desai and Banerji in 2008, have been contributed significantly in this field on the basis of Human Development Survey 2005. They focused on two dimensions of women's live: (a) Women's autonomy and control over their lives; (b) Women's labour force participation. They conclude that, household structure forms the key mediating factor through which absence of husbands affects women. Massey in 2009, focussed on the women's experiences in India and Bangladesh when husbands move out leaving them behind at home.

4. Methodology

The study is completely based on empirically collected data as the database related to the topic are not recorded by any Governmental or Non Governmental Organisations. A sample of 50 households have been selected randomly and for the purpose of relevant data collection, wives of absentee husbands who are circulated in search of work, aged between 15 to 49 have been interviewed with structured questionnaire containing appropriate indicators. To measure the status of women who are left behind due to their husbands circulation, the techniques followed by Desai and Banerji (2008) have been used to calculate various indices like Female work participation in agriculture index, Decision making index, Freedom of Movement index, Women empowerment index, have been calculated with the help of following formula-

$$i = \frac{P \cdot A}{P}$$

Where-

i= Index value

P= Number of total observation of each category which is multiplied by the number of indicators have been taken ($P = N \times I$).

$A = x_1 + x_2 + \dots$

here the value ranges between '0' to '1'. Lower the value indicates higher the degree of power and vice-versa.

5. Study Area Description

Before the attachment with Indian dominion in 12th September, 1949, Cooch Behar had been ruled by the KOACH DYNASTY for 450 years as a feudatory princely state. It was 1st January, 1950, when Cooch Behar became the part of West Bengal as a district. Presently, Cooch Behar is located in between 26 ° 32 ' 46 " N to 25 ° 57 ' 6 " N latitude and 89 ° 52 ' E to 88 ° 45 " 02 " E longitude. The district is surrounded by Jalpaiguri district in north to west, Bangladesh in south, Assam in east. The total geographical area is 3386 Km² and the total population of the district is 28, 22, 780 (Census Report, 2011). The population density of the study area is 833 per km². Cooch Behar is a backward district³ of West Bengal and does not have any remarkable industrial back-up. Agriculture is the primary occupation⁴ of the inhabitants which remain at primitive subsistence level with low productivity (Chakravarty, 2008).

6. Result and Discussion

6.1 Female Oriented Activities in Agriculture vis-a-vis Gender Division of Labour of the Household

In every human society, different works are distributed according to the age, class, capability, caste and also according to traditional social norms, beliefs and rituals. Such division of labour reflects the cultural heritage and stability of a particular society. Different works are also assigned to different genders, which strengthens the society's evaluation of status (Lorber, 1994). In the study area females, generally get up as early as possible and enter into the cycle of their duty. They are traditionally engaged in food processing, house cleaning, caring of children and other family member, looking after domestic animal and cloth washing. Besides male are assisted by women during crop rising through weeding, transplanting, harvesting and thrashing of crop (Chaudhuri, 1903). In the third world countries like India female participation in agriculture is very high due to its intensive subsistence nature. But very few, participate as agricultural wage earner as wage labourer (McEvoy, 2008). Women are considered as agricultural helper and naturally expected to fill the gap (Arizpe and Botey, 1987). Husbands circulation in search of work have altered the circumstances and women typically become farm manager and perform many extra agricultural tasks spending more hours (Truong et, al. 2001). To assess the female participation in agriculture of the study area of the household where male head are circulated in search of work, female agricultural participation index has been calculated on the basis of five indicators.

6.2 Decision Making Power of the Women, Left Behind

Various studies on women autonomy and empowerment pointed out that the decisions taken by women are neglected by the family members in India. In the study area, generally the women are more intelligent and better informed in all matters than the men (Chaudhuri, 1903). Male labour circulation from a family creates an opportunity to exercise the decision which is taken by women in different familial matter. To judge reality, the decision making index has been calculated on the basis of 5 relevant parameters which are applied frequently in the daily life in a rural family.

6.3 Status of Freedom of Movement of the Women

In 1903, Harendra Narayan Chaudhuri, the then Settlement *Nayib Ahilkab* of Cooch Behar state, in his documentary work entitled 'Cooch State and its Land Revenue Settlement' wrote, '*the women have almost full liberty both within and without the house. In a fair or market-place the sellers' are mostly composed of women, and when a sight is to be seen the females rush out of the house and crowd the street or public place along with the men*'. But after partition of India in 1947, due to the huge influx of people from Bangladesh, the entire demographic and social condition has been changed to a large extent (Pramanik, 2005).

6.4 Social Insecurity

Social security of rural Indian women is male-concentrated. Male member of a family provides to women physical security during illness and pregnancy, food security, income security, and protect them from violence. So, when husbands are circulated to another place in search of work women who are left behind become helpless to encounter the violence committed against them and theoretically feel more insecure. Although, in several reports it is revealed that West Bengal is a more secure place for women in India but the domestic violence plays a significant role against

women, which is reflected in Human Development Report of West Bengal (2004). Here insecurity index has been calculated on the basis of five selected indicators of violence committed against rural women.

6.5 Status of Satisfaction of Women who are Left Behind

The financial outcomes that are resulted for male labour circulation to the women who left behind are mixed. Being separated from their husband, the conjugal happiness of the women of absentee husbands becomes grey. In addition, over responsibilities to their family members bend their backbone. In such condition, their happiness depends on the improvement of their socio-economic status through remittance received from their males who are circulated. If the remittances get reduced in any circumstances, the women who are left behind become like a captain of sinking ship. In the present study, satisfactory index has been calculated based on five selected relevant indicators.

6.6 Empowerment of Women, who Left Behind

The wheel of development of any society has equally been drawn by both men and women. But the decisions taken by women for well being of the society is abandoned by male. In spite of their hard work, they remain in the status of ever unskilled, less paid and less significant. Male labour circulation brings opportunities for the women to take on new tasks, new responsibilities and learn new skills to prove their capabilities which transform gender relations and gender ideology to improve women status and empowerment (Connell, 1984; Chant and Craske, 2003; Mahler and Pessar, 2006). The overall status of empowerment of the women who are left behind has been calculated with the help of composite score considering 5 parameter like Satisfactory index, Freedom of movement index, Decision making index, Female agricultural work participation index, and Social insecurity index. The scale of composite score ranges from 0 to 5. It is common assumption that higher will be the value lower the women empowerment and vice versa.

7. Conclusion

In earlier, while Cooch Behar had been ruled By the Koch Kings, the rural women enjoyed more liberty in every aspect of life. In that period, society claimed massive hard work from the inhabitants for living as they were uneducated and primitive agriculturally dependent. Consequently, people had no time; rather they must have to take assistance of women in every sphere of their activities. Later, continuous invasion of southern people brought the *Bhadrolok*⁵ culture which transformed the gender ideology of Cooch Behar. The traditional history of tears of women has been started. But male labour circulation from the district offered women who are left behind, an opportunity to escape from patriarchal domination. But this opportunity is fruitful only for the mature young women belonging to the age group of 30-44. Youngest women belonging to the age group of 15-29 never solely left at home by their husband. They remain under the headship of aged women or men. So, the circulation of male labour gifts them pain of separation and less responsibility to their home. The aged women get all the opportunity to establish her as *de facto* head of the family but, lack of education, lack of confidence and obviously age prevent them from their capabilities. Although the decision of the said women is executed in much respect but actually, they are directed by her husband through Telephone. In spite of these, rural women of Cooch Behar who are left behind at home due the male labour circulation have built self confidence, bringing a sense of independence and have generated capability to defend against discrimination imposed by the male dominated society. Thus, ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them have been obtained through the male labour circulation process which, partially enable women to take right decision at right time in every sphere of their social, economic, political, life ranging from daily household activities to local extent. At present, the decision which is taken by the women gets respects and values equally from the male of their counterpart.

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Notes

1. Rural residents of Cooch Behar refer destination place of migration.
2. A *de facto* female-headed household refers to a situation where a husband is temporarily absent due to labour migration, but the couple maintains contact and the wife receives remittances from her absentee husband, however sporadic these may be (Chant 1997).
3. HDI ranking 11th out of 19 district of West Bengal (HDR West Bengal, 2004)
4. 80% to 90% person depends on agriculture
5. Gentleman culture of Southern part of West Bengal

Biographical Notes

Dulon Sarkar, born on Jan. 19, 1986 (W.B, India), is an M.A in Geography and a student of doctorate degree in Geography (PhD Geography) in the Department of Geography, Visva-Bharati, Santineketan, West Bengal, India. He is currently engaged as a Guest Lecturer in Department of Geography, Alipurduar College, West Bengal, India. He has to his credit few research papers in reputed journals.

Table 1, Female Agricultural Work participation Index

Age group	Surveyed females (N)	In sowing (x1)	In weeding (x2)	Manuring (x3)	Harvesting (x4)	Field visit (x5)	$A = x1 + x2 + \dots$	$P = N \times I$	$\frac{P - A}{P}$
15-19	04	0	0	0	0	0	0	20	1
20-24	03	1	3	0	0	3	7	15	0.53
25-29	08	4	6	0	5	4	19	40	0.52
30-34	10	5	10	2	6	9	32	50	0.36
35-39	03	3	3	2	3	3	14	15	0.06
40-44	07	6	7	1	6	7	27	35	0.22
45-49	15	10	15	5	5	15	50	75	0.33
total	50	29	44	10	25	41	149	250	0.40

Calculated by the Researcher on the basis of field survey in 2012

It is clear from the table: 1, that female agricultural work participation index value is the lowest in age group of 35-39 (0.06), which indicates the highest actual participation. It is found that the index value is the highest in age group of 15-19 which indicates no actual participation. On the other hand, two age groups i.e. 20-24 and 25-29 have the moderate values i.e. 0.52 and 0.53 indicate moderate participation. While, other three age groups of 30-34, 40-44,

35-39 have comparatively lower values i.e. 0.36, 0.22, and 0.33 respectively indicates comparatively higher actual participation in agricultural work. The total female agricultural work participation index value is 0.40 which represents the higher participation in the study area.

Table 2, Decision Making Index

Age Group	Surveyed females (N)	Which crop should be cultivated (x1)	What should be bought (x2)	In which school children should go (x3)	What should be sold (x4)	From where and in which amount money should be lended (x5)	$A = x1 + x2 + \dots$	$P = N \times I$	$\frac{P - A}{P}$
15-19	4	0	0	2	0	0	2	20	0.9
20-24	3	2	2	2	0	0	6	15	0.6
25-29	8	3	6	8	4	2	23	40	0.42
30-34	10	7	7	9	7	5	35	50	0.3
35-39	3	1	3	3	3	2	12	15	0.2
40-44	7	7	7	7	7	4	32	35	0.08
45-49	15	6	3	2	9	4	24	75	0.68
Total	50	26	28	33	30	17	134	250	0.46

Calculated by the Researcher on the basis of field survey in 2012

Age group wise Decision making index shows that, the women belonging to the age group of 15-19 has the highest value (0.9) that indicates the lowest decision making power, while the age group between 40-44 has the lowest value (0.08) that indicates the highest decision making power. On the other hand, two age groups of 20-24 and 45-49 have higher values i.e. 0.6 and 0.68 that represent comparatively lower decision making power. Rest three age groups of 25-29, 30-34, 35-39, have comparatively lower index values i.e. 0.42, 0.3, 0.2 with comparatively higher decision making power. The total decision making index value (0.46) indicates the higher decision making power of the women who are left behind at home due to their husband's circulation.

Table 3, Freedom of Movement Index

Age group	Surveyed females (N)	Friends house (x1)	Father's house (x2)	Cinema (x3)	Shopping (x4)	Catch fish (x5)	$A = x1 + x2 + \dots$	$\times I$	$\frac{P - A}{P}$
15-19	04	0	0	0	0	2	2	20	0.9
20-24	03	2	1	2	1	2	8	15	0.46
25-29	08	8	3	3	4	5	23	40	0.42
30-34	10	10	5	8	8	6	37	50	0.26
35-39	03	3	2	3	3	3	14	15	0.06
40-44	07	7	7	7	7	7	35	35	0
45-49	15	15	15	2	15	10	57	75	0.24

Total	50	45	33	25	38	35	176	250	0.29
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Calculated by the Researcher on the basis of field survey in 2012

Table: 3, highlights that, women belonging to the age group of 40-44 enjoy the highest freedom of movement as the calculated index value is very low (0). On the other hand movement of women belonging to the age group of 15-19 is restricted much as freedom movement index value is the highest (0.9). Other age groups like 20-24, 25-29, 30-34, 35-39 and 45-49 score 0.45, 0.42, 0.26, 0.06 and 0.24 index value respectively and enjoy comparatively higher freedom of movement. The total freedom of movement index value i.e. 0.29 indicates the women who are left behind at home enjoy unrestricted movement.

Table 4, Insecurity Index

Age group	Surveyed females (N)	Disturbed by young chap (x1)	Disturbed by family member (x2)	Disturbed by other women (x3)	Any problem while shopping (x4)	Problem faced in road (x5)	$A = x1 + x2 + \dots$	$\times I$	$\frac{P - A}{P}$
15-19	04	3	2	4	1	2	12	20	0.4
20-24	03	2	1	3	1	1	8	15	0.46
25-29	08	0	8	8	0	0	16	40	0.6
30-34	10	1	5	6	0	0	12	50	0.76
35-39	03	0	3	3	1	0	7	15	0.53
40-44	07	0	5	4	0	0	9	35	0.74
45-49	15	0	12	5	2	2	21	75	0.72
Total	50	6	36	33	5	5	85	250	0.66

Calculated by the Researcher on the basis of field survey in 2012

It is found that, age group of 15-19 feels the most vulnerable as the calculated index value (0.4) is the lowest while the age group of 30-34 feels the least in this regard. On the other hand, age groups like 20-24, 25-29, feel higher insecurity, as the index values are 0.46 and 0.6 respectively. Age group of 35-39, 45-49 and 40-44 score 0.53, 0.72 and 0.74 respectively, which indicates that women of this age group feel comparatively lesser vulnerable.

Table 5, Satisfactory Index

Age group	Surveyed females (N)	Fooding (x1)	Enough remittance (x2)	Developed dressing (x3)	Developed housing (x4)	Children's education (x5)	$A = x1 + x2 + \dots$	$\times I$	$\frac{P - A}{P}$
15-19	04	4	2	2	1	0	9	20	0.55
20-24	03	1	1	1	1	2	6	15	0.6
25-29	08	8	0	2	3	2	15	40	0.62
30-34	10	10	5	3	5	6	29	50	0.42
35-39	03	3	0	3	3	2	11	15	0.26
40-44	07	7	3	5	4	3	22	35	0.37
45-49	15	12	4	6	13	12	47	75	0.37

Total	50	45	15	22	30	27	139	250	0.44
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Calculated by the Researcher on the basis of field survey in 2012

From the table: 5, the women of 35-39 age group are the highly satisfied as the satisfactory index value is the lowest (0.26) while, in age group 25-29, having the highest index value (0.62) women are the least satisfied. On the other hand, in another age group i.e. 15-19 women are less satisfied. In case of rest four age groups viz. 30-34, 35-39, 40-44, 45-49 have the calculated index values 0.42, 0.26, 0.37, 0.37 respectively which indicate that the women belonging to these age groups enjoy comparatively higher satisfaction. Overall satisfactory index value (0.44) indicates the women who left behind are comparatively higher satisfied.

Table 6, Composite Score of Women Empowerment

Age group	Satisfactory index (0 to 1)	Freedom of movement index (0 to 1)	Decision making index (0 to 1)	Female agricultural work participation index (0 to 1)	Social insecurity index (0 to 1)	Composite score (0 to 5)
15-19	0.55	0.9	0.9	1	0.4	3.75
20-24	0.6	0.46	0.6	0.53	0.46	2.65
25-29	0.62	0.42	0.42	0.52	0.06	2.04
30-34	0.42	0.26	0.3	0.36	0.76	2.1
35-39	0.26	0.06	0.2	0.06	0.53	1.11
40-44	0.37	0	0.08	0.22	0.74	1.41
45-49	0.37	0.24	0.68	0.33	0.72	2.34
Total	0.44	0.29	0.46	0.40	0.66	2.25

Calculated by the Researcher on the basis of field survey in 2012

From the result, it is revealed that, the women belonging to the age group of 15-19 enjoy the lowest empowerment facility as the composite score value (3.75) is the highest among all and also higher than the total composite score value (2.25). On the other hand, the women belonging to the age group of 35-39 have the lowest composite score (1.11) that indicates the highest empowerment status of them. Besides two age groups i.e. 45-49 and 20-24 score higher than the total composite score value i.e. 2.65 and 2.34 respectively indicating that the women belong to these groups enjoy lower empowerment, while three groups i.e. 25-29, 30-34 and 40-45 score 2.04, 2.1 and 1.14 respectively those are lower than the total composite value and indicates that the women belong to these category enjoy higher empowerment status in the study area. The total composite score i.e. 2.25 lies below the mid-value of the scale of composite score (2.5) indicates the women who left behind in spite of several obstacles enjoy higher empowerment facility.

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