Migration redefines socio-economic scenario

By Deepanshu Mohan, March 25, 2019

Geeta, is a 48-year-old woman working as a gardener on daily wages of Rs 250 at a private university campus, closer to Sonipat (Haryana). Every morning, around 7:30 am, she walks down from village Atali to visit her workplace, the university campus, and stays till 5:30-6 pm. In a long walk to campus, she is accompanied by a group of another 85-90 women — mostly from other neighbouring villages.

Most women, like Geeta, are married and involved in extensive household work in hours before coming down to the campus (early in the morning), and after work. On inquiring Geeta more on how and why she moved to Atali, she shares her story of migration after marriage from a small village near Unnao in Uttar Pradesh.

For her, the reason to come down to Atali (and Haryana) had less to do with her own agency or choice to become a gardener but was part of an involuntary requirement to be with her husband and in-laws. Over time, to manage household expense needs, she started work as a gardener in a school first and now at a university campus.

At the same time, others with Geeta cite lack of decent employment opportunities with poor conditions of livelihoods-as key reasons for leaving their native villages to come thus far.

Kamala, 32, a friend of Geeta, mentions how as a young girl, she was tired of working for hours on small farming lands in rural Bihar — where she worked with her family as marginal farmers — earning very little. With improving transportation connectivity and a chance to be mobile with women from her village, she sought an opportunity to migrate with her family to Haryana. She now earns a monthly income of around Rs 7,500 (calculated on daily rates), assuming she works the whole month (with one weekly off).

From interactions with most women gardeners, it turns out that more than 80% qualify themselves as migrants from other villages and towns. More than 55% of the migrated women cited reasons of marriage for their
migration while the rest 45% did so in quest for a better standard of economic livelihood and opportunities.

In an election season, even when rivers of propaganda ink and digital campaigns is spread over by political groups, influencing average rural and urban voters, it is critical to acknowledge that most discussions around the current (and future) state of social policy in India - in terms of affordable access to decent jobs, healthcare, housing, education - need to be seen in context of the increased scale of inter-state and inter-regional migration of people – which otherwise grabs very little discursive attention (beyond academic eco-chambers).

The case of Geeta and Kamala (along with other women) are representative of the strong narrative of migration that is now (re)defining India’s social, political and economic landscape, especially in urban and semi-urban spaces.

At the same time, the personalised notion of what is perceived ‘home’ for some (including Geeta and Kamala) remains deeply under contention, including those used to migrating as landless farmers to one area — as street vendors to some city — or as gardeners to another area (to mention a few).

In a two-year old study on the governing dynamics of unorganised employment in markets (via interviews of street vendors) across Delhi and Kolkata, we made a similar observation on the Importance of studying migratory patterns of street vendors — calling them floating entrepreneurs — who often come to a city with a product to sell over a period (in weekly/local markets) and return back to their home, once the stock is sold.

From what one can see now, the (perceived) quest for seeking upward social and economic mobility in the presence of improved connectivity (rail and roadways) are subsequently resulting in waves of internal women migration across the country.

Further research studying the nature of internal female migration wave patterns, requires a closer scrutiny of four key areas, in explaining why women like Geeta, Kamala (amongst others) migrate to other regions, either adapting or shaping to new preferences over time.
The first area warrants an in-depth understanding of the conjoint relationship between marriage and economic mobility — seen as interrelated factors driving women migration in and across states.

The second area involves a need to understand how structurally embedded regions of cultural patriarchy affect women (im)mobility and how patriarchal household expectation around domestic work (in addition to paid work) exploit women — even once they migrate from their native village homes. This was observed in almost all responses of women gardeners on campus spending an average of six hours of domestic work in addition to 11 hours of paid work per day-gardening.

The third and fourth area revolve around “circularity” of internal women migrants, that is between spaces of residence-workplace-home, and the development of informal women networks, formed to help and cooperate with each other in each of these spaces.

**Women networks**

Geeta and Kamala — like many other women gardeners — work together on campus and circularly help each other on a daily basis with both, domestic (cooking, washing clothes) and paid work (gardening). Formation of micro- informal women networks (or collective efforts) help women migrants — despite being in deeply patriarchal set ups — to cooperate and continue adding economic value as per the expectations of seeking higher economic mobility (that made them to migrate in the first place).

With increased feminisation and expansion of workforce, in both domestic and outside (paid) work, there is a critical need to see the subject of internal migration as a policy matter (and line of scholarship), especially in the context of linking it with other debates/issues around social policy where women are migrating to work within deeply patriarchal systems.

Further, understanding migration in all its various forms (inter-state, intra-state, overseas, inter-regional) is vital to knowing the deeply fragmented extent of our social, economic and political landscape both-now and in years to come.

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