

Middle Class Women's Migration in Post-liberalized India

Abstract

The much prevalent notion of Indian women's social or non-economic nature of migration is gradually being challenged by several micro-level studies in recent years (Neetha, 2004; Banerjee & Raju, 2009). The relatively scant literature on women's labour migration in India is, however, centred around the migration of economically and socially disadvantaged women, which mostly bears an image of a poverty/deprivation-driven process involving low or unskilled work. In the wake of the post liberalization boom in service sector jobs, particularly new economy jobs in Indian cities, academic research is slowly being directed towards analyzing women's presence and role in these sectors, and the growing visibility of educated middle class women in medium to high skill jobs in these emergent sectors is undeniable. However, very little academic research has, so far, been directed to study how women's migration has responded to these new economic opportunities. Recognising this glaring gap in the migration literature, I have set out to investigate how the post-liberalization changes in India's economic and socio-cultural arena have influenced the migration dynamics of women, and particularly, of middle class women.

Using Giddens' (1979) structuration theory as a conceptual framework, the research problem has been studied from both the macro and micro level to get a holistic view of the migration situation of middle class women. Beginning with some major methodological issues in macro data analysis, I have looked into the macro-level trends, patterns, determinants and characteristics of middle class women's labour migration to Indian cities. The secondary database on migration, as provided by the National Sample Surveys (from 1983 to 2007-08), has been utilized for this purpose. With the background of the macro-level results, the processual and consequential dimensions of middle class women's urban migration have been studied using field data collected in the city of Kolkata. I use the multiple case study method as a research strategy for collecting, analyzing and presenting the findings of the field study.

The analyses illustrate how a common but critical methodological inadequacy, that is, use of the lifetime migrants instead of the current migrants, yields erroneous and misleading results about the current, and over time migration dynamics. The macro-level analyses establish the

growing economic nature of educated middle class women's migration to urban India post economic liberalization in 1991. A sharp decline in the labour migration of undereducated middle class women and a significant rise among their educated counterparts indicate the recent urban job market being favourable to the educated pool of women. Middle class women's urban migration turns out to be largely independent and high-skilled, as against that of lower class women's migration which continues to be largely associational and low-skilled. The majority of middle class labour migrants get absorbed in regular salaried service sector jobs in the urban labour market while their lower class counterparts end up being in unskilled jobs in construction, mining and manufacturing. The multivariate regression analysis shows that the labour migration of educated middle class women to cities becomes more probable for single, scheduled tribe women, aged 21-59 years, having a certificate or diploma, having worked as a regular salaried employee at the origin, and coming from rural areas of another state. Evidence from field data establishes that the migration process of middle class women to cities in India is dictated by various structures- facilitating and constraining, yet simultaneously mediated and appropriated by women's agency. The post-migration life of a middle class migrant woman in a new destination remains quite challenging despite her relatively better economic standing compared to her poorer counterparts. The issues related to safety and security in the city and hassles in getting proper accommodation turn out to be the major challenges faced by the migrant women of my field data.