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CASTE, MIGRATION, AND EMPLOYMENT **DYNAMICS: A STUDY OF BIHAR** **MIGRANTS IN PUNE**

AUTHORED BY - RIYA KUMARI

Abstract

Caste-based migration remains a significant socio-economic phenomenon in India, reflecting deep-rooted inequalities and structural disparities within society. This research paper delves into the dynamics of caste-based migration, focusing on its causes, patterns, and implications. Utilizing a qualitative research approach, data were gathered through interviews and questionnaires from migrants representing diverse caste backgrounds, primarily residing in Pune.

The findings underscore the enduring influence of caste on migration patterns, particularly evident among individuals from lower caste groups. Many are driven to migrate in pursuit of better livelihood opportunities due to historical marginalization, discrimination, and limited socio-economic mobility in their places of origin.

This research attempts to contribute to a nuanced understanding of caste-based migration dynamics in India, shedding light on the multifaceted challenges and implications associated with this phenomenon.

Keywords

Caste-based migration, Socio-economic mobility, Discrimination, Rural-urban migration.

Introduction

The idea of India embodies a rich tapestry of diversity, each thread contributing its own unique hue. Caste, an integral part of Indian society, predates even the Manu Smriti and holds significant sway. Entrenched in the fabric of our society, the caste system maintains a static nature, having endured since time immemorial. In ancient Vedic times, society was divided

into four varnas: Brahmins (priests and scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (merchants and traders), and Shudras (labourers). This classification, based on occupational roles, led to the stratification of society into upper and lower castes, with the former enjoying economic and social privileges, while the latter faced adversity.

This social stratification has given rise to economic disparities, prompting migration. Migration occurs when individuals cross established administrative boundaries, either temporarily or permanently, driven by various push and pull factors such as employment opportunities, improved civic amenities, or enhanced lifestyles. The rapid pace of industrialization has spurred a surge in worker migration. India's diversity is further enriched by migration, fostering cultural exchange and diversity by introducing new ideas, traditions, and perspectives. This infusion can fuel creativity, tolerance, and mutual understanding among diverse communities. Caste-based migration specifically refers to the migration of disadvantaged caste members who relocate to other states or regions in search of better employment prospects and living conditions. This movement is propelled by factors like discrimination, social exclusion, and limited opportunities based on caste identities. In contemporary India, caste continues to influence patterns of discrimination and employment, shaping the trajectory of migration for many.

Methodology

The method employed in this research paper is qualitative, utilizing questionnaires as the primary tool for data collection. The sample size for this research comprises 80 individuals, all of whom were residing in Pune and had migrated from Bihar. The selected participants represent a diverse range of occupations, chosen to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic. Predominantly male interviewees from Scheduled Castes (SC), Other Backward Classes (OBC), and the General Category were included, with occupations such as construction workers, mess and hostel cooks, and industrial labourers being the focus.

The research primarily centers on how caste influences employment. The questionnaire included inquiries about the participants' education level, age, living conditions, salary, land ownership, family size, and caste affiliations. Through an analysis of these factors, the study aims to illuminate the socio-economic dynamics shaped by caste concerning migration and employment in Pune.

Findings from the Field: Analyzing Caste and Land Ownership among Migrant Workers

The sample size for my research consisted of 80 people who have migrated from Bihar to Pune, Maharashtra. Most of these migrants are permanent residents. The average age of these workers ranges from 20 to 45 years old. They are primarily employed in construction work as daily wage workers, in roles such as cooks in restaurants and hostels, and as domestic helpers.

Daily wage workers

All these migrants have left their homes and families behind for their sustenance. Of the 28 workers I spoke to, 22 belonged to lower castes, mainly Scheduled Castes (SCs) and a few Scheduled Tribes (STs), while the remaining were from Other Backward Classes (OBCs). A few workers owned a small section of land i.e. "dedh kattha" (0.046 acres), while others did not even have that, possessing only the home they lived in. This illustrates the limited power they hold, a division that is not new. It has been evident for a long time, dating back to the zamindari system when people of the upper castes controlled the land and power.

These workers are the sole breadwinners for their families, each supporting four to five people who are completely dependent on them for survival. Due to their tough financial situations, most of them had to leave school at the age of 13 or 14 and start working to support their families. For them, working was not a choice but a necessity. As daily wage workers, they earn as little as 400-500 rupees per day, with one day off per week, resulting in a monthly income of approximately 10,400 rupees.

Their living conditions are poor, as all the workers are given a single shed in which they have to live together. With no medical assistance or food provided, they have to manage on their own. Monthly food costs add up to 3,000 rupees per person, so they save only a meager amount of 6,000-7,000 rupees. Children growing up in such conditions, having faced financial crises from a young age, also start working for the family early, creating a vicious cycle of poverty that is difficult to escape. Another important issue is that these migrants have no source of information about government schemes designed for their upliftment. Out of the 28 workers, about 25 were not even aware of MGNREGA.

Cooks

For my research, I conducted interviews with 32 cooks in and around my area. Approximately 60% of them belonged to the Other Backward Classes (OBC), while 40% were from the General Category. Surprisingly, there were no Scheduled Castes (SCs) or Scheduled Tribes (STs) employed in this line of work. The salaries of these cooks ranged from 15,000 to 25,000 rupees, and they were provided with free meals. However, they had to manage their own accommodation, which typically cost a maximum of 5,000 rupees. The remaining money was either sent back home or used for personal expenses.

All the cooks had completed at least primary education, with some having passed the 10th or 12th standard, and a few even holding graduate degrees. Interestingly, many of the General Category workers owned agricultural land, averaging around 6 acres, which provided them with additional income and stability. Despite being the sole earners for their families, they did not face food shortages due to their agricultural pursuits.

Most of the cooks had families consisting of 4 to 7 members, and many were the sole earners. They had been residing and working in Pune for several years, with some having stayed for a minimum of 10 years and others for over 20 years. When asked about visiting home, the responses were similar—they rarely visited, with some not having gone home for as long as 7 years.

These findings reveal stark contrasts between the living conditions of daily wage workers and cooks. While cooks enjoy relatively better salaries and living conditions, daily wage workers face dire situations. The caste composition of these occupations also reflects systemic inequalities, with few SCs employed as cooks. The socio-economic differences based on caste are evident, with more individuals from the general and OBC categories securing stable and secure employment opportunities.

Industrial workers

I spoke with approximately 20 industrial workers in the area, most of whom were from the General Category, with a few of them belonging to the OBC category, and four being SCs. These workers are employed in an iron industry and receive a monthly payment of 18,000 rupees, which can increase to 28,000 rupees if they work overtime for a 12-hour shift. Unfortunately, they are not well-informed about their rights under labor laws, and the working

conditions are far from safe. Despite the hazardous nature of their job, they are not provided with safety gear.

It's concerning to note that these workers live away from their families to save more money and send their earnings back home. Interestingly, among the SC workers, some of them own their homes in the name of land, while the General Category workers own agricultural land. Similarly, the OBC workers also have some land ownership. This reveals a diverse economic background among the workers in the industrial area.

Analyzing the Labour Landscape: Insights from Industrial Workers, Cooks, and Daily Wage Labourers

From the results obtained from the research conducted, we can rightly conclude that there exists inequality in income, opportunity, and overall living conditions among migrants. None of the migrants we spoke to came with their family; each one had to leave their family behind and move alone to a new place in search of better opportunities. Even if they could afford to live in a better place, they chose to live in a cheaper place to save more and send money back home where it is needed.

The people belonging to lower castes migrate solely with the aim of having a better source of income and livelihood, not for better education or business opportunities. This shows that even after seventy plus years of independence, we are not yet free from the evils of caste inequality. The people belonging to lower castes still have the mindset of sustaining themselves and their families rather than contributing to the economy and growth of India. They are still struggling to attain basic necessities, which hampers not only their personal growth but also that of India. In Bihar, the dominant upper castes (Rajputs, Bhumiyyar, Brahmins) mostly hold agricultural land. The lower castes or weaker sections do not hold much agricultural land, and what they do hold is insufficient for their sustenance. Recently, in 2023, the Bihar Chief Minister demanded a caste-based census in the country. This census could help in formulating better schemes and policies. The last caste census was held in 1931, over 90 years ago, and we still rely on the caste system for the upliftment of the weaker sections of society. If better employment and livelihood opportunities were created in their own state, they wouldn't have to migrate thousands of kilometres in search of mere livelihood.

In India, several laws and policies aim to protect the rights and welfare of migrants, both within the country and those coming from other nations. Some key laws and policies related to migrants in India include the *Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979*, which regulates the employment and working conditions of inter-state migrant workers to protect them from exploitation. The *National Policy on Migrant Workers and Strengthening of Nodal Points on Inter-State Borders, 2016*, focuses on improving access to social security, healthcare, and education for migrant workers and their families. Additionally, various state governments have enacted specific policies and schemes to address the needs of migrants within their jurisdictions, including measures related to housing, healthcare, education, and skill development.

It's important to note that while these laws and policies exist, challenges remain in their implementation and enforcement, particularly concerning the protection of the rights of vulnerable migrant populations, such as unskilled labourers, domestic workers, and refugees. Additionally, there is ongoing debate and advocacy for comprehensive reforms to address the evolving needs and challenges faced by migrants in India.

Key Takeaways	
<i>Nature of the Challenge</i>	<i>Description</i>
<i>Economic Disparities Among Migrant Workers</i>	Migrants face significant income and opportunity disparities, impacting both personal and national economic growth.
<i>Caste Dynamics and Migration Patterns</i>	Caste inequalities drive migration motivations, shaping regional demographics and socio-economic landscapes.
<i>Need for Updated Demographic Data</i>	Calls for a caste-based census highlight the necessity of current demographic insights for effective policy formulation.
<i>Legal Safeguards and Migrant Welfare</i>	India's legal framework aims to protect migrant rights but faces challenges in implementation, necessitating improved support mechanisms.
<i>Socio-Economic Impact of Migration</i>	Migration's impact on individuals and India's economic development underscores the need for local economic opportunities.

<i>Advocacy and Reforms for Migrant Rights</i>	Ongoing advocacy efforts seek comprehensive reforms to address evolving migrant challenges and ensure equitable treatment.
<i>Need for Data-Driven Policies for Inclusive Growth</i>	Informed decision-making based on current demographic data is crucial for targeted interventions promoting inclusive growth.

Measures and Recommendations

- I. **Establishment of a Regulatory Body:** There is a crucial need to establish a dedicated body in every state to oversee the effective implementation of policies designed for migrants and workers. This body would ensure close monitoring by the government to guarantee effective implementation. Its primary objectives should include regulating minimum wages, ensuring access to basic health facilities and nutrition, and providing a safe working environment in accordance with the Occupational Safety and Health Working Condition Code, 2020.
- II. **Addressing Social and Economic Disparity:** It is imperative to eliminate social and economic discrimination against migrant workers based on their caste. This entails ensuring equal employment opportunities regardless of caste affiliations and equitable wages for all, irrespective of caste backgrounds.
- III. **Promoting Education:** Education serves as a vital tool for instigating change within any society. It holds significance for both employers and employees. Educated employees are more aware of their rights, fostering a conducive work environment. Similarly, educated employers are likely to prioritize skills and abilities over caste affiliations when hiring, promoting fair employment practices and fostering a merit-based approach to workforce management.
- IV. **Enhancing Awareness through Programs and Workshops:** Implementing more awareness programs, campaigns, and workshops is essential to educate workers and encourage them to use their financial resources efficiently. These initiatives can empower workers with knowledge about financial management, promoting responsible spending and investment practices.
- V. **Enhancing Local Employment Opportunities:** It is crucial for the government to assess and improve employment prospects in migrants' native areas. This includes providing better employment opportunities and ensuring effective implementation of upliftment schemes at the grassroots level.

Conclusion

While the conditions of lower castes have undoubtedly improved and discrimination has reduced, there's still much room for improvement. The research clearly shows that occupations offering security and better pay still have fewer lower-caste individuals, highlighting a persistent issue in developing India. Additionally, during interviews, it was observed that employers often withhold workers' payments for months to discourage them from leaving.

Despite strides in social equality and economic development, lower-caste individuals largely remain in low-paying, insecure jobs with subpar working conditions and limited social support. This perpetuates a cycle of poverty and marginalization, hindering their progress and autonomy. The research further reveals systemic barriers that prevent lower-caste migrants from accessing better job opportunities and advancing socially. This lack of stable employment not only impacts their economic well-being but also reinforces caste-based divisions within society.

Addressing the root causes of caste-based discrimination among migrating communities is crucial. Bihar, being an underdeveloped state with mainly seasonal employment, prompts people to seek opportunities in other states rather than within the state. It's essential for state governments to establish a dedicated department to monitor migrating communities, ensuring their living conditions are adequate and that labour laws and migrant-worker policies are effectively implemented.

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