Research in Progress: Rural Out-Migration and its Impact on Caste, Family and Gender: A Study in a Nepali village in Assam

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Abstract

Assam has witnessed a spurt of rural out-migration to the various metropolises in the recent decades. While in the past such rural out-migration was mainly confined within the state, the recent stream of rural mass exodus is largely to the outside of the state. Though it is seen that people from across communities have migrated out of the state, it is the immigrant communities who had pioneered the process and subsequently the indigenous communities also followed suit. This ongoing research paper mainly focuses on the various ramifications of such large scale out-migration on caste, family and gender relations in Nepali society.

Key words: Caste System, Family, Gender Violence, Nepali, Out-migration

Introduction

In the recent times, one witnesses a mad rush of out-migration of rural population of Assam to the major cities of mainland India. While the immigrant communities like Muslims from erstwhile east Bengal/Pakistan, and Nepalis pioneered this process in the 90s, later the other indigenous communities also followed suit. This paper seeks to examine the impact of out-migration on the traditional caste system, gender relations and family structures in a Nepali village of Assam.

Oxford Dictionary of Sociology defines internal migration as population shifts which occur within nation states as labour migrates towards the growth poles in the economy (Scott & Marshall, 2009, p. 367). According to 38th and 43rd Rounds of the National Sample Survey Organisation, in India a migrant is a person whose place of enumeration is different from his/her usual place of residence. The usual place of residence is the place where the person stayed continuously for six months before moving to the place of enumeration. The place of enumeration is the place (village or town) where the person is being enumerated or surveyed.
The economic history of mankind shows that the material progress has been usually associated with the process of transfer of the economic agents from the traditional rural economy to the modern urban industrial sector (Reimeingam, 2016). People usually migrate from low productivity rural agricultural sector to a high productivity urban industrial sector. While the various studies (Cote, 1997) in Britain show that the tendency to migrate increases with the increase in educational qualification, in India, however, the trend is different from the Western-counterpart. In India, the majority of the migrants to the big metropolises are illiterate, semi-literate peasants, who have been absorbed in the informal sector (Breman, 2012). The Economic Survey 2016-2017 shows that the labour mobility in India is at all time high with female migration at twice the rate compared to the male migration in 2000s. It states that, ‘there was an average outflow of around nine million migrant workers between the states during 2011-16’ (Jha, 2017).

The magnitude of internal migration in India is much larger than the official statistics because it does not consider the full extent of migration, particularly short-term migration, seasonal migration or circular migration. All the major sectors of the economy are highly dependent on these migrant workers. These migrant workers are the source of cheap labour that stimulates the growth of the economy (Ghosh, 2012).

Recently, the Northeastern region of India, has witnessed a massive rural exodus towards different destinations such as Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Chennai and various south Indian states like Karnataka, Kerala, etc. (Reimeingam, 2008, 2011; McDuie-Ra, 2012; Talukdar, 2012). Interestingly, the majority of such rural out-migrants from the region are youth. The Census of India, 2001 reflects that half of the Northeastern migrants to Delhi belong to the age group of 15-29 years. The various studies on Northeastern migrants to Delhi reveal that the youth in the age group of 15-29 constitute above 90 percent of the total migrant population (Reimeingam, 2011; Ramesh, 2012). These Northeastern migrants often face racial prejudice and discrimination in the destination site (Haksar, 2016).

Field Area and Methodology

The Nepali speaking people popularly known as Nepalis or Gurkha constitute one of the important population segments in the region. The colonial regime
facilitated such massive Nepali migration from Nepal and to some extent from Darjeeling and Sikkim to work as herdsmen, porters, soldiers, marginal farmers, etc. (Sharma, 2012).

The present study is part of an ongoing study on the impact of inter-state rural outmigration among the Nepali community in Assam. Nepalis had migrated to Assam during the colonial period in the 19th century. The study is based on field work conducted in a Nepali village named Telia Gaon for a period of one year during 2017-18. The village is located about 35 kilometers west from the Tezpur town, the district headquarters of Sonitpur district, Assam. There are many communities such as Nepali, Bodo, Assamese and a tiny section of ex-tea garden labour communities (also called the Adivasis) inhabiting the area. However, the Nepali is the largest community followed by the Bodo tribal community. The main occupation of the villagers is agriculture and dairy farming. The village falls under the ambit of Thelamara revenue circle and Borgaon Gram Panchayat, respectively. The total area of Telia Gaon is about 2,886 bighas and it is located on the northern bank of the river Brahmaputra. (Source: Thelamara Revenue Circle). The study is qualitative in nature and various methods of data collection have been used such as observation, interview schedule, focus group discussion, etc.

Caste Groups in the Region

It is a well known fact that Nepali society is a caste hierarchical society. Caste system is very rigid in the Nepali society (Subba, 2007, p. 55). The Telia Gaon region is demographically a Nepali dominated area, and from the field study it was found that the village is, by and large, an upper caste dominated village though a small section of the villagers also come from the lower caste. The highest ranked caste group in the village is the Brahmin. However, within this group there are two sub-castes, viz. Upadhyay and Sharma. Traditionally the Upadhyay caste group used to engage in priestly works. They never used to engage in agricultural and other allied activities. On the other hand, the Sharma caste group generally do not perform priestly works. Their traditional occupation is dairy farming and agriculture. The Upadhyays consider themselves to be superior to the Sharmas. An octogenarian villager, Hikmat Adhikari said, ‘Brahmins are socio-economically an advanced caste group in comparison to other Nepali caste groups. The literacy rate is higher among them. Traditionally Upadhyays are considered to be a superior sub-caste than the Sharmas. If a person
of Upadhyay sub-caste elopes with a girl of lower caste, then that person degrades from Upadhyay to Sharma.’

Telia Gaon is mainly an upper caste village and most of the people belong to the Chetry caste group. However, various lower caste groups also exist in the village, though small in number. The largest caste group in the village is Chetry caste group which is a Kshatriya caste group. The lowest caste group in the village consists of the untouchable caste groups such as the Damai (also known as Dorjee), Kami, Sarki, Bhujel, etc. Traditionally the people from Damai caste used to do tailoring works. Similarly, the Kamis were traditionally engaged in smithery. The traditional and primary occupation of the Sarki caste was leather work.

Many inter-caste restrictions are prevalent in the Nepali society. During the study, many villagers commented on the caste regime and its functioning in the village. An elderly villager mentioned that in the past, upper caste people never interacted socially with lower caste people. The members of the upper caste did not invite the lower castes as guests to their family rituals and marriage ceremonies. The involvement of the lower caste people in these ceremonies was only as labour. The Brahmins generally used to accept all kinds of food prepared by the Chetry caste except rice. Yuvraj Murula, a middle aged villager expressed that though the caste system is still present in the village, it is not as rigid as it was earlier. The elderly villagers still exercise age old caste practices, though it has been in decline among the young generation. Some of the lowest castes even today are engaged in their traditional liquor business. Murula further added, ‘My mother still has inhibitions about the untouchable caste groups and disdains the sight of them.’

**Out-Migration and its Impact on the Caste System**

Various studies have looked into the relationship between the phenomenon of out-migration and the caste system. Studies on the caste pattern of out-migrants in Bihar have revealed that the migration rate is higher among the Muslims and OBC households. On the other hand, the caste groups which are engaged with agriculture, be it cultivating own land or leasing-in of land, such as Yadavs and Kurmis, have lower propensity to migrate out of village. In terms of land ownership, migration is higher among the people who have the highest as well as least in terms of land entitlement (Karan, 2003; Rodgers, Datta, Rodgers, Mishra & Sharma, 2013).
The present study finds that the trend of large scale out-migration of villagers to the various metropolises has a negative effect on the traditional caste regime in the village. Narayan Basnet, a 50-year old migrant, states, ‘Though Nepali society is based on a rigid caste hierarchy, now-a-days it is mainly confined to the marriage. Our society still prohibits inter-caste marriage. Otherwise, caste has minimal effect on our everyday life.’ Basnet is one of the early bird migrants from the village, who migrated to Delhi in search of livelihood in 1991. He said that there is no caste hierarchy or discriminations among the migrants in their places of destination, where the migrants across castes live in a single room and there is no restriction on food and any other social interaction. Basnet, however, added that the elderly villagers still adhere to the traditional caste practices and make effort to ensure that the younger generations also follow them, although the latter seem to be somewhat reluctant in this regard. But changing economic landscape of the village has inevitably triggered a change in its caste scenario. Due to livelihood compulsions, the migrants across various caste groups are working and staying together in the site of destination and this has tempered the caste relations among them significantly. Raju Karki, a 30-year old migrant, who is working in a garment factory in a suburb in Bangalore said, ‘I married a Bodo girl in 2015. Although initially my family was unhappy with my marriage, gradually they have accepted it. Probably twenty years back, I couldn’t have imagined marrying a girl outside of my caste or community.’ Another migrant Hom Bahadur Chetry, aged 51, said that caste is not a factor among the migrants. He revealed, ‘During 1990s I was in a relationship with a Nepali lower caste girl from the village. But my family didn’t accept it and later compelled me to marry a girl from my caste. But the things have changed drastically. Though our society still sticks to caste practices in matrimonial relationships, it is not as rigid as it was earlier.’

Though the study finds that the villagers from all the caste groups have migrated out of the village, the lower caste migrants usually get job in the security sector or in the manufacturing sector as unskilled workers. Sadananda Adhikari, a villager aged 45, explained that the migrant’s caste identity does not seem to be a factor in their choice of jobs. However, many upper caste migrants find jobs in the hospitality sector which needs relatively better educational qualification, like some speaking ability in English, which is rare among the migrants from the lower caste. It was also found that the income in the hospitality sector is higher than the security or the manufacturing sector.
Changing Structure of Family System

The study finds that the large-scale out-migration of villagers has disintegrated their traditional family structure. Due to the out-migration, an evident impact has been observed on the traditional joint family system within the Nepali community, where there has been a gradual disintegration of the family system into a ‘bi-locational’ or ‘multi-locational’ household. A study on out-migrants in Bihar argues that,

The sex and age selectivity of labour migration in Bihar implies a massive out-migration of males, especially of young men from the rural areas, while the women, children and elderly are left behind in the village. This leads to a spatial distribution of the household. It results in a bi-locational or a multi-locational household, whereby the members of the household live in different locations; the household has one foot in the village and the other outside (mostly in the city). (Datta, 2016, p. 218)

The present study finds many such joint families where multiple members have been working as migrant workers in the different metropolises, leaving behind their family in the village. There has been migration of members from a single family to diverse locations, abandoning their home which is temporary and marked by the yearly visit by them to their native village. The example of one such family will illustrate the changing structure of household. Padma Kharka, a 42-year old migrant, narrated his family’s migration story. Besides his father Vir Bahadur Kharka, aged 70, he has four younger brothers, who are all married and presently working in Bangalore, Chennai and Arunachal Pradesh along with their families. However, their father Vir Bahadur stayed at the village with their extended family. On the other hand, Hari Khanal, a 35-year old migrant, has abandoned his village home along with his 28-year old wife Kaushila Khanal and their two kids. They visit their village home once a year. It may be mentioned that they are not permanent residents in their host location. The study finds many such families where all young male members have migrated out of the village and their elderly parents live alone in the village. Many of them battle with old-age health problems without anyone to look after.
Out-Migration and Women: Empowerment or Increased Vulnerability?

Datta and Mishra (2011) argue that out-migration of male villagers creates a gender imbalance where women out-numbered men in such villages, and thus it has its ramifications on women’s work within and outside the household. Women have to conduct all the household activities from raising children to managing financial matters in the household. It is also seen that the presence of women has increased in the public sphere as a result of male out-migration.

Renuka Devi, aged 38, the wife of a migrant who has been working in Bangalore as a security guard said, ‘I have been staying along with my two school going children for the last four years. I have two brothers-in-law who are also employed in Bangalore. I have to perform all household chores in the absence of the other male members. At present there is no financial insecurity and I have to take all the decisions for my family, be it the education of my children, health related issues, visiting relatives, etc. However, in the absence of male members, I often feel a sense of insecurity. But I have also learnt to live with it.’ Lakhima Devi, aged 32, the wife of a migrant worker who works in Bangalore says, ‘I am staying in the village along with my six year old daughter. My husband is an alcohol-addict and spends bulk of his income on it. Thus he seldom remits any money, which compels me to work as an agricultural daily wage-labourer.’

However, in many cases it was seen that the patriarchy has resurfaced as a result of out-migration. The role of women in household matters as well as their visibility in the public domain depends on the number of able-bodied male members, besides the husband, in their households. The presence of male members in a family puts restrictions on the movement of the women in the family. Several villagers said that, in the absence of their husbands, the other family members have imposed more restrictions on their movement.

One significant implication of such large scale migration from the village is the increasing number of violence against women. There have been a number of cases of rape, molestation and intimidation against women in the village in the last couple of years. Dil Bahadur Karki, the village headman of Telia Gaon, said that noticeable changes have happened in the village in recent years, such as the increase in number of violence against the female members. The perpetrators hail from both within and outside the community. In one incident in 2016, a man from a different community was caught while trying to barge into the house of a lonely
woman and was lynched by the villagers. The incident was reported in the media. However, the villagers today avoid any discussion on the issue. Women, who do not have many male members in their families today, spend the night together in one house out of fear and apprehension. Moneshwar Bodo, a socially active villager said that there were several public meetings held in the village on this issue. In these public meetings, there was a consensus that there should be a voluntary village security committee which would work as a vigilant group in the village at night. Now due to this monitoring of the village at night, these kinds of incidences have reduced.

Besides the above, there has been a significant increase in the incidences of theft and robbery in the area in the recent years. The villagers allege that the immigrant settlers in the nearby riverine islets (chaporī) are involved in these incidences.

Conclusion

The villagers opt for migration to the metropolises as a livelihood strategy to cope with the declining livelihood opportunities in the village. However, the large scale out-migration has resulted in various ramifications on their traditional caste, family system and gender relations. Though these migrants have contributed largely to the development of the host locations, the rural economy has to bear the cost of production and reproduction of labour (Datta & Mishra, 2011). The process of out-migration has reduced the intensity of the age old caste hierarchy and transformed the organisation of the traditional family system. On one hand, it increases women’s vulnerabilities and on the other hand, empowers women by facilitating more movement in public domain as well as giving them a voice in the household decision-making process. It would be worth mentioning that the process of male rural out-migration has not culminated in the feminisation of work, as most of the women have engaged only in the unpaid household chores.
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