

## Learning from Life: Social and Cultural Changes in Migrant Households of West Bengal

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**Abstract:** A fatigue in studying economic remittance has prompted the scholars to look into the intangible changes by incorporating social and cultural remittances that are happening in the migrant community. Though larger body of research focuses on international migration to understand social remittance, the current study focuses on both international and internal migrants. There are two objectives of the paper, namely to highlight the remittance use behaviour of the households and to document the changes that are occurring in the social and cultural life of the migrants. The study is based on information collected through household survey covering 510 migrant households from 127 villages of 8 districts. The migrants use major part of their remittance for household expenditure and creation of fixed asset is very low in proportion. Migrants receive remittances in terms of kind namely food, clothes, electronic items, cosmetics etc. At the outset the migrants renovate their existing house and also purchase land or house. They also purchase two wheelers which improves their communication over a wider geographic region. The spending on education has been realised in the community. The extravaganza in celebration of marriage, religious festivals and local *mela or paravs* increased substantially. The demonstration effect of the changed life style may perpetuate migration further until local economic opportunities are improved.

**Key words:** Migration, social remittance, cultural change, remittance, West Bengal

### INTRODUCTION

Migrating out from rural areas in search of work is not a new phenomenon. However, it was aggravated after the initiation of economic reforms in India in early 90s.

Economic reforms brought several sudden changes in the rural economy and also initiated massive infrastructure development in the country. Those along with other initiatives created large employment opportunities in construction sector especially, in urban and peri-urban localities which increased the flow of migration from rural to urban areas. This is noticeable from the figures produced by the census of India. The percentage of migrants to the total national population was 27.4 per cent in 1991; later it increased to 30.6 per cent in 2001 to further 37.6 per cent in 2011 (Lusome and Bhagat, 2006; Census of India, 2011). Nearly 10 million people were added as intercensal rural to urban migrants between 2001 and 2011 to make a volume of 30 million. Thus every 28<sup>th</sup> rural population is a migrant to urban areas. This provides us sufficient justification to believe that it brings several changes in an individual's life and bears a strong demonstration effect among the rural community. So far migration literature is flooded with information on labour migration from rural areas, with a thrust on analysing the labour market, remittance sending behaviour, use of remittances (Rajan, 2004; Samal, 2006; Tumbe, 2011; Housen et. al. 2013; Dahal, 2019). However, scholars working on international migration has observed that migrants not only infuse money in their families, but ideas, information, philanthropy etc. also (Cliggett, 2005; Carling 2014). This flow of non-tangible is not confined to the household of the migrants but extends to the community including the non-migrants. Under this background, the present paper aims to document the striking changes brought out by the migrants in the households and in the community.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The effect of financial remittance has well been recognised in migration literature. In the study conducted by Chami, Fullenkamp and Jahjah (2003), they observed that the effect of remittance is non-unitary. Interestingly they have observed that a substantial proportion of remittance is spent on consumption goods rather than for asset creation or in savings and investment. At household level, it leads to reduction of poverty and improving wellbeing. Samal (2006), found that remittances from migrants provide financial support to households living with persistent suffering conditions. The end use of remittances in most households was primarily on human and social capital formation and on overall well-being.

The relationship of the migrants along with the left behind forms the basis for the remitting behaviour. A study on Ethiopia has found that remittances are sent to multilayer hierarchies varying from immediate family members to extended family

members and neighbours and also for community services that require money. It has been noted that money is being sent for altruistic, insurance and investment motives (Zewdu, 2019). With the increase in the volume of transnational migration, non-financial transfer started receiving attention from scholars of different disciplines. A transdisciplinary conference titled 'Following the Flows: Transnational Approaches to Intangible Transfers', held at Princeton University in September 2014. The conference indeed emphasised the remittance beyond money. The most important scholar whose name appears, again and again, is Peggy Levitt who has coined the term social remittance to understand the intangible flows. She has extensively studied the Polish migrant to understand the concept. So far whatever little people have worked on social remittances, it focused on transnational migration (Mukherjee 2017). It particularly reflects what migrants transmit while visiting their origin or when they come back permanently. However, the scholars hardly have tried to link the social and cultural changes brought by the migrants through financial remittances. Contemporary societies have observed tremendous mobility among people across national and international borders. As it has been rightly pointed out by Elliot et. al (2007) that home has become a borderland where ways of life, traditional culture come together and transfigured. The complexities of remittance studies have revealed that it is far beyond the transaction of money. The studies have revealed the remittance in kind that forms a prominent basis of the interaction and they are the core of composite transactions with material, emotional, and relational elements (Cliggett, 2005; Carling 2014).

## **OBJECTIVE**

In the light of the above, the present paper is an attempt to document the changes introduced by the migrants in the household and among the community. Firstly, the paper will highlight the remittance use behaviour of the households. Secondly, it will try to document the changes that are occurring in the social and cultural life of the migrants.

## **DATA AND METHOD**

Data for the present study has been collected under the project titled 'Demographic and socio-cultural consequences of male out-migration from rural West Bengal' under the scheme IMPRESS sponsored by MHRD-ICSSR. Under this project, 510 migrant households from 127 villages of 8 districts were surveyed by administering structured and semi-structured questionnaires. Other than that, photograph and observation diaries have been used to address the objectives more clearly. As the

title suggests, the data was collected from the village community as changes brought by them are more distinct to be attributed as changes brought by the migrants.

Typically, the paper is based on the analysis of the narratives of the households as well as the community heads. However, team members also have used observation as an important technique which reveals the demonstration effect more effectively.

The study was proposed under the scheme IMPRESS sponsored by the Ministry of Human Development, Government of India facilitated by the Indian Council of Social Science Research. The study design covered the rural male migrants as they are large in number, easy to find out to conduct a time bound survey. But they were not the only reason. It was understood that the demonstration effect would be more conspicuous when the volume of demonstrator is large. One of the important events that occurred during the study period is COVID 19 pandemic which along with many other effects, made the rural migrants' lives topsy-turvy. The life experiences that the migrants usually gain and what they have gained during the time period of March 2020 to May 2021 have also been reported in this paper. However, they are not of much significance as only one group was surveyed prior to the pandemic.

## **OBSERVATIONS**

West Bengal bears a dubious distinction in its socio-economic indicators. Its contribution to countries GDP was at the same level as of Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Gujarat at the time of independence. However, since late 70s, a steady fall in its economic achievement became obvious. Considering the dominance of agriculture in our economy, the communist government has steadily neglected the industrial sector during the major part of their 35 years of rule. Because of their policy, the state could not take the opportunity of globalisation process which was initiated during the 1990s. It also has failed to excel on the social front by introducing quality mass education and health care. Since independence, it was the only developed state in the eastern region. It used to attract a large number of migrants but rate of migrants deteriorated with time. According to 2011, census the state for the first time has sent out more migrants than what let in and thus recording a net negative migration.

## **PROFILE OF THE MIGRANTS**

Typically the people from West Bengal were less migratory as the opportunities in the states used to attract migrants mostly from the neighbouring states. The historical background suggests that population movement was mostly with the states which were earlier in the administration of Bengal Presidency. Over the years, with the

state lagging behind in economic development, long distance migration becomes a prominent phenomenon (Reja and Das, 2013). In the present survey long distance migration especially to southern and western states has occupied a prominent position. Inter-district migration has occupied less than one-fourth of the sample. The distribution is shown by religious category as each religious group live and interacts in their community and impact differently through migration.

**Table 1. Percentage Distribution of Migrants by place of migration and religion**

<i>Place of migration</i>	<i>Hindu</i>	<i>Muslim</i>	<i>Others</i>	<i>Total</i>
Migrated to another district	17.8	17.0	20.7	17.5
Migrated to northern states	20.9	18.8	24.1	20.0
Migrated to southern states	31.6	47.7	6.9	38.3
Migrated to western states	14.2	6.1	6.9	9.8
Migrated to other states	8.3	5.8	3.4	6.8
Migrated out of the country	7.1	4.7	37.9	7.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Social group namely as scheduled caste (SC), Scheduled tribe (ST) and other backward classes draws special attention. Due to extreme socio-economic backwardness among the Muslims in the state, the Government of India's high-level committee (2006) suggested for special intervention efforts for the Muslims. Accordingly, the Muslims in the state has been put under the OBC category to get the benefit of reservation. More than 50 percent of the migrants from the OBC category move to southern states (Table 2). Literature suggests that there is an established social network chain of Muslim migrants to Karnataka and Kerala for construction work and other menial work (Reja and Das, 2019).

**Table 2: Percentage distribution of migrants by place of migration and social group**

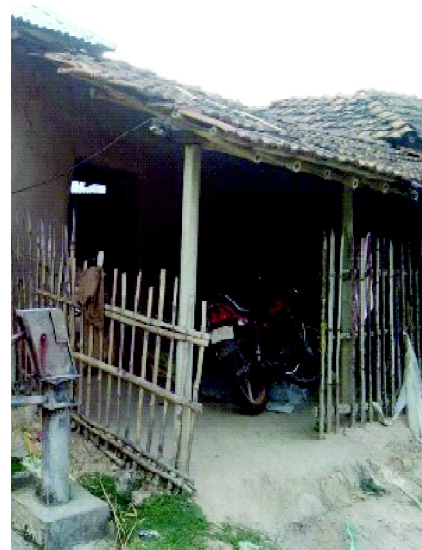
<i>Place of migration</i>	<i>SC/ST</i>	<i>OBC</i>	<i>Others</i>	<i>Total</i>
Migrated to other district	15.9	7.4	25.8	17.5
Migrated to northern states	25.0	9.9	23.6	20.0
Migrated to southern states	34.8	50.6	32.2	38.3
Migrated to western states	11.6	9.3	9.0	9.8
Migrated to other states	7.9	11.1	3.0	6.8
Migrated out of the country	4.9	11.7	6.4	7.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

## HOUSEHOLDS-THE PRIMARY UNIT OF CHANGE

Households surveyed in the study are very diverse. Life stories are diverse. However, there remain some commonalities in terms of the use of remittances which is a major game changer. The table 3 shows the remittance using behaviour of the study population. It has been observed that an overwhelming proportion of the respondents use their remittances for meeting the household expenditure and the remittance is helping them to mitigate the liquidity crisis in the households.

**Table 3: Percentage distribution of households by use of remittance**

<i>Purpose of Remittances</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
For Fixed Asset	63	16.8
For Liquid Asset	28	8.6
For Household Expenditure	256	78.5
Other Purpose	27	8.3
<i>Remittances used for Assets</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Bought Land or Building	26	15.6
Used for House renovation	85	50.9
Bought Agricultural Land	8	4.8
Bought Vehicle	29	17.4
Bought electronic items or jewellery	19	11.4





Majority of the household try to mitigate extreme poverty and they also try to renovate their house to improve their living conditions. All the districts of West Bengal have much higher proportion of households living in dilapidated houses than national average (Ansary and Das, 2018). At the very beginning, they convert their shanty kaccha houses to a semi-pucca or pucca house depending upon the amount of money they have received. They also invest to construct a bathroom, covered space for cooking, and toilet. Toilet construction has become more prominent with increased drive against open defecation. The migrants slowly construct a big concrete house which enhances their status in the community. Over the years road connectivity of these villages has improved but public transport system have not improved in commensuration with road connectivity. Purchase of vehicles is becoming common which is improving their connectivity to the urban centres. This is also making the life of the left behind easier as they can explore both economic and social opportunities over a larger geographic region. It is noteworthy to mention that investment in the creation of fixed assets is still very low among majority of the migrants. Only about 5 percent migrant household could purchase agricultural land and around 16 percent could buy land to construct a house or a house altogether.



### **SOCIO-CULTURAL CHANGES IN THE COMMUNITY**

The process of migration deeply impacts the political, social, and cultural setting of an area which is quite evident from the field survey conducted in the rural West Bengal. The economic remittances sent by the migrants have contributed in enhancing the food and clothing habits of the family members. Majority of the households has reported that their expenditure on the food has increased after migration wherein they can now afford non-vegetarian food items more frequently. Apart from that, the quality of food has also improved and the increase in food expenditure has enabled them to opt for nutrient rich food items with dietary diversity. They also have introduced several food items which are otherwise not local at all. Several changes in the food habits have been noticed among the migrant households. Households wherein the members have migrated to northern states have introduced *rajma* (red

kidney beans) curry in their diet. *Rajma chawal* (rice) is a famous north Indian dish, but is very much alien in rural West Bengal, so it can be conceived that these type of alterations in the food habits are induced by migration. Other evidences like consumption of *idli, dosa* in breakfast and *sambhar* rice in lunch are all examples of food habit change within the family. Momo (steamed dumplings) is a typical food from the Himalayan region has become quite loved one in other parts of the state.

Among the Muslim families in the rural West Bengal, more frequent intake of *Biriyani* (a non-vegetarian dish prepared with rice) is reported among those who have migration link with Uttar Pradesh. Otherwise *Biriyani* is a typical festive or party food as its preparation requires costly ingredients and rural people hardly used to prepare them.

**Table 4: Distribution of households by remittance receiving in kind**

<i>Remittances in other form</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Food	255	44.6
Furnishing Products	84	14.7
Personal care	71	12.4
Electronic Items	60	10.5
Clothes	102	17.8

In the Cooch Behar district, a migrant sends extra remittances for his wife's education. The woman currently is pursuing her Graduation from the local college. Her husband has migrated to Kerala to work in the construction industry there he met his co-worker who are from Kerala and their wives are pursuing higher education so that they can get better job opportunities which in turn will increase their standard of living. The inspiration from his co-workers brought a tremendous change in the life of the woman.

Table 4 represents the percentage of migrants' households that receive remittances in other forms, wherein the majority of remittances are in form of food items. It has been observed some migrants bring local food from the place of destination, for instance those who have migrated to Gujarat bring Gujarati snacks like *thepla* and *khakhra*. In Darjeeling district, there is a sizeable number of females who migrate to Singapore and work as house help or in the care economy. They often send local noodles from Singapore which is also an example of social remittance. International migrants from Malda and Dinajpur bring packaged food items, cosmetics (*attar, perfumes, oil, face cream*) and cloths from Middle Eastern countries.

Apart from food, changes in clothing pattern have also been noticed in some parts of the state. In West Bengal, the women usually wear *saree* in their daily lives but in the present day more women prefer to wear *salwar kameez* which is more



eminent in northern India. In some households, the male members bring *Zardosi saree* from Gujarat and silk *saree* from the south for their wives. The personal care products, and electronic items are mostly brought by the international migrants along with few internal migrants. These products are otherwise non-available from the local markets and also from the nearby urban centres. Furnishing products are part and parcel of the people dreaming of a good house. Once the house construction is done, the migrants pay attention for furnishing items to decorate the house.



Distinguishing changes in marriage ceremony have also been observed in the villages. Elaborate engagement ceremony, playing loud music in the marriage ceremonies were not very common in the rural areas but now adopted from different parts of the country by the rural community. The increased income has enhanced their capacity to spend more on marriage ceremony. All of them have a demonstration effect within the community.

Migration has played an important role in development of social capital in the community. It has been observed from the field survey that majority of the migrants send remittances for the purpose of education.

**Table 5: Distribution of households by receiving event specific remittance**

<i>Event specific remittance</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Education	132	28.4
Marriage	41	8.8
Repayment of loan	55	11.9
Hospital or Medical expenses	108	23.3
After death rituals	4	0.9
Festivals	124	26.7

After conducting a detailed discussion with the family members of the migrants it was revealed that migration has played an important role in changing the mindset of the people. After migrating from their place of origin they have understood the importance of education, especially those who migrated to the southern states. Now, more people want their children to pursue higher education as they believe it will

help them with better economic opportunities and future prospects. This type of change in the mindset and perspective among the people helps in the building of social capital.

In the cultural front, migration has again left a prominent footprint which is evident as a sizeable percentage of migrants send extra remittance during festivals. Gala festival celebration has become common practice after the migration process pumped up money in rural West Bengal. Eid celebration which was earlier only confined to family members and close relatives now has become extensive. Migrants send extra remittances to their families back home so that they can invite



more people and make the celebration grand. Even the Christian population has made their celebration grand and this all become possible as household income has increased due to migration. Changes in religious sentiments have been observed in some rural parts of the state. In Malda district, a part of the Scheduled Tribe population has converted from Hindu to Christian to avail the benefits provided to the Christian community by the local missionary. People from this community also take part in migration process and the remittances received from these migrants have been used in the construction of a Church in a Muslim majority village. *Badna Porob* is very famous festivals celebrated among the local Christian community. The migrant members return to their home especially in the occasion and contribute generously to make the event grand. In the Hindu community, along with *Durga puja*, *Saraswati Puja*, *Kali Puja*, which are some of the grand festivals, *Ganesh puja* is also celebrated in some villages. West Bengal popularly known as the worshipper of goddesses and *Ganesha* (a male God) is quite unfamiliar to their culture. But celebration of *Ganesh festival* is a state festival in Maharashtra and migrants from Maharashtra introduced this festival in their place of origin. Other local religious events like *Mansha puja*, *Dhavel Mela* has become big after receiving remittances from the migrant members of the village. As high as 73 per cent of the migrants donate money to celebrate these religious events. Earlier celebrations were more confined within the family members but now the community gets involved and it becomes a community festival. New clothes, wide array of foods and cultural

nights on all occasions shows the extravaganza in these otherwise dull and sleepy villages of the state.

The migrant and non-migrant family of once of similar economic strata has developed a unconformity and cleavage as the migrants started climbing up in the economic ladder while the non-migrants remained at the bottom and relative deprivation has increased within the community. The underlying tensions are often expressed in terms of religious and political intolerance.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

A fatigue in studying economic remittance has been observed and scholars have started paying attention to understand social remittance by using ethnographic methods. The present study used a mixed method in the analysis where both qualitative and quantitative information have been collected. This study is a large-scale study where field work was conducted across the districts and communities.

Literatures have stated that changes in the social and cultural arena are happening through international migration. International migration from rural areas is a new phenomenon to the state of West Bengal. Overall there was a phenomenon of brain drain mostly from urban areas. The increased internal migration also offers several reasons to study the phenomenon. The country itself is extremely vast and offers a wide variety of social and cultural spectrum to the population who have been exposed to that through migration. Inter-state migration especially to far away and culturally very different Southern and Western states form a substantial proportion of migrants from the state. The financial remittances bring several changes, both tangible and intangible. At the outset they invest in their house and either renovate or construct new parts of the building. The villages are well connected through all-weather road but there is a lack of public transport. The purchase of two-wheeler has become quite common among the migrant households in the village. Most interestingly, the families are undergoing several changes in terms of diversity in their food items which has become more diverse. Celebrations especially marriage and religious festivals have become more assertive with their community identity. All these celebrations are showing more extravaganza.

West Bengal is the perfect example to show how migration has strongly impacted the lives of the rural people and contributing generously in social and cultural change processes. All these changes are not only affecting the life of the migrants but also effecting the life of non-migrants through the demonstration effect. It is quite evident

that migration may perpetuate among the non-migrants in near future if local employment opportunities remained the same, bringing some more changes.

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