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Impact of Migration on Women's Life in Bankura District (1974–2025)

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Abstract

Migration has remained a persistent and defining feature of rural livelihoods in the drought-prone and economically marginalized district of Bankura in West Bengal. Since the mid-1970s, recurrent environmental stress, declining agricultural productivity, and limited non-farm employment opportunities have compelled households to adopt migration as a crucial survival strategy. While early patterns of migration were predominantly male-oriented, the gradual feminisation of migration has significantly altered the socio-economic landscape of the region. Women, who were once largely confined to domestic spaces and subsistence agriculture, have increasingly emerged as active participants in both seasonal and long-term migration streams, as well as primary managers of households in the absence of male members. This study examines the long-term impact of migration on women's lives in Bankura district over the period 1974 to 2025, with a focus on the interrelated dimensions of economic participation, social transformation, health, and psychological well-being. Drawing upon a qualitative and historical analysis of secondary sources, the paper traces how migration has simultaneously expanded opportunities and deepened vulnerabilities for women. On one hand, it has enabled greater income contribution, exposure to external socio-cultural environments, and a gradual shift in traditional gender roles, thereby fostering elements of agency and empowerment. On the other hand, women's engagement with migration—often within informal and unregulated labour markets such as brick kilns, construction sites, and agricultural fields—has exposed them to exploitative working conditions, wage disparities, health risks, and social insecurity.

Keywords

Migration, Women, Bankura District, Rural Livelihood, Gender, Empowerment, Seasonal Migration

1. Introduction

Migration has emerged as one of the most significant livelihood strategies in rural India, particularly in regions marked by environmental stress, agrarian stagnation, and limited industrial development. The district of Bankura, situated in the western part of West Bengal within the broader Rarh region, represents a classic example of such a landscape where ecological vulnerability and economic deprivation have historically shaped patterns of mobility. Characterized by lateritic soil, erratic rainfall, recurrent droughts, and a predominantly rain-fed agricultural system, Bankura has long struggled with low productivity and seasonal unemployment. In this context, migration has evolved not merely as an economic choice but as a structural compulsion embedded within the survival strategies of rural households since at least the mid-1970s.

Traditionally, migration from Bankura was predominantly male-driven, with men moving to nearby urban and industrial centres in search of wage labour, while women remained within the village economy, engaged in unpaid domestic work and subsistence agriculture. However, over the decades, particularly from the 1990s onward, there has been a gradual yet significant shift in this pattern. Women have increasingly become visible participants in migration processes, both as independent migrants and as co-

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migrants accompanying male family members. This transition reflects broader transformations in rural economies, labour markets, and gender relations, influenced by factors such as agrarian distress, the expansion of informal labour sectors, and changing socio-cultural norms. The growing involvement of women in migration has profound implications for understanding gender dynamics in rural societies. On one level, migration has created new avenues for women's economic participation, allowing them to contribute directly to household income and, in some cases, gain greater autonomy and exposure to external environments. On another level, it has also intensified existing vulnerabilities, as women are often concentrated in low-paid, insecure, and unregulated sectors such as brick kilns, construction work, and seasonal agricultural labour. Furthermore, for those women who remain in the villages due to male out-migration, the burden of managing households, agricultural activities, and caregiving responsibilities has increased significantly, often without a corresponding rise in decision-making power or social recognition.

The period from 1974 to 2025 offers a meaningful temporal framework to examine these changes, as it encompasses critical phases of economic and policy transformation in India, including the Green Revolution's uneven regional impact, economic liberalization in the 1990s, and the introduction of rural employment and welfare schemes in the 21st century. These broader structural shifts have directly and indirectly influenced migration patterns and the lived experiences of women in districts like Bankura.

2. Objectives of the Study

The study aims to:

- Examine the historical trends of migration in Bankura district.
- Analyze the changing role of women in migration processes.
- Assess the economic, social, and health impacts of migration on women.
- Evaluate the extent of women's empowerment resulting from migration.
- Suggest policy measures for improving women's conditions.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical research design to examine the impact of migration on women's lives in Bankura district over the extended period from 1974 to 2025. Given the historical depth and socio-economic complexity of the subject, the research is primarily based on secondary data, complemented by a thematic and interpretative approach to analysis. The

methodology is designed to capture both temporal changes and multidimensional impacts, particularly in relation to gender roles, labour participation, and social transformation.

The study relies extensively on secondary sources of information, including Census of India reports, District Human Development Reports, government publications, and reports from national and international organizations. In addition, peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and research papers focusing on migration, rural livelihoods, and gender studies have been consulted to provide conceptual clarity and empirical grounding. These sources enable a comprehensive understanding of long-term migration trends and their implications for women in Bankura district. The analytical framework of the study is based on thematic analysis, wherein the impact of migration is examined across key dimensions such as economic conditions, social structure, gender relations, health, and psychological well-being. By organizing the data into these interrelated themes, the study seeks to highlight both the positive and negative consequences of migration, as well as the contradictions inherent in the process.

4. Historical Evolution of Migration in Bankura

The pattern of migration in Bankura district has evolved significantly over the past five decades, shaped by changing environmental conditions, economic transformations, and policy interventions. What began primarily as a survival strategy for rural households has gradually developed into a complex socio-economic process involving both men and women. The historical evolution of migration in Bankura can be understood through distinct yet overlapping phases, each reflecting broader structural changes in the region and the country. In the period from 1974 to 1990, migration from Bankura was largely characterized by male-dominated, seasonal, and distress-driven movement. The district's ecological constraints, including poor soil quality, erratic rainfall, and frequent droughts, limited agricultural productivity and created chronic underemployment. As a result, male members of rural households migrated to nearby industrial and urban centres such as Kolkata, Durgapur, and Asansol in search of wage labour. During this phase, migration was typically temporary and cyclical, coinciding with agricultural lean seasons. Women, in contrast, remained within the village economy, assuming responsibility for household management, child-rearing, and assisting in agricultural activities. Despite their increased workload, women's roles remained largely invisible and undervalued, with little change in their socio-economic status.

From 2010 to 2025, migration in Bankura has entered a more complex and dynamic phase, characterized by both

continuity and change. Seasonal migration continues to be a prominent feature, particularly among economically marginalized communities, but there has also been a growing influence of government policies and development initiatives. Programs such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) have provided alternative sources of local employment, thereby reducing the intensity of distress migration in some areas. Additionally, the expansion of self-help groups and rural livelihood missions has created new opportunities for women's economic participation within the local economy. At the same time, migration has become more network-driven and organized, with established migration circuits and labour contractors facilitating movement to distant regions.

5. Impact of Migration on Women's Lives

Migration in Bankura district has had a profound and multidimensional impact on women's lives, reshaping their economic roles, social positions, health conditions, and psychological well-being over time. These impacts are neither uniformly positive nor entirely negative; rather, they reflect a complex interplay between opportunity and vulnerability, empowerment and marginalization.

One of the most significant transformations has occurred in the economic sphere. Migration has enabled women to move beyond their traditional roles as unpaid household workers and subsistence agricultural labourers, bringing them into the domain of wage employment. Women who migrate, particularly to work in brick kilns, construction sites, and agricultural fields, contribute directly to household income, thereby enhancing their economic visibility and importance within the family. Even in cases where women do not migrate but remain in the village, male out-migration often compels them to assume responsibility for financial management, agricultural decision-making, and resource allocation. This increased involvement in economic activities has, in some instances, strengthened women's bargaining power within households. However, such gains are often limited by the nature of employment available to them, which is largely informal, poorly paid, and lacking in job security or social protection. Wage discrimination, irregular income, and dependence on labour contractors continue to constrain the extent of genuine economic empowerment.

6. Social Impact of Migration on Women's Lives

Migration has brought about significant social transformations in the lives of women in Bankura district, influencing family structures, gender relations, community interactions, and cultural practices. These changes, however, are complex and often marked by a coexistence of progressive shifts and persistent traditional constraints. One of the most visible social impacts of migration is the

alteration of family dynamics. With the out-migration of male members, women who remain in the villages are frequently compelled to take on expanded roles within the household. They become the primary caregivers, decision-makers in day-to-day matters, and managers of agricultural and domestic responsibilities. This shift has led to a certain degree of functional empowerment, as women gain greater involvement in household affairs. However, this increased responsibility does not always translate into enhanced social status or authority, as major decisions—especially those related to land, finances, or marriage—often continue to be influenced or controlled by male members, even from a distance. Migration has also affected traditional gender roles and norms. Exposure to new social environments, particularly in urban or semi-urban areas, has gradually contributed to a rethinking of rigid gender expectations. Women who migrate for work often interact with diverse groups of people, acquire new skills, and develop a broader worldview. This exposure can lead to subtle yet meaningful changes in attitudes toward work, mobility, and independence. In some cases, it has encouraged greater acceptance of women's participation in paid labour and public life. Nevertheless, deeply rooted patriarchal values continue to shape social behaviour, limiting the extent to which these changes can be fully realized.

Another important dimension of social impact is the changing nature of community relationships. Migration often leads to the weakening of traditional community bonds, as seasonal or long-term absence of members disrupts collective activities and social cohesion. At the same time, new forms of social networks emerge, particularly among migrant workers and women's groups. Self-help groups and informal support networks among women have played a crucial role in fostering solidarity, mutual assistance, and collective identity. These networks can enhance women's confidence and provide a platform for addressing common issues.

The impact of migration is also evident in the sphere of education and upbringing of children. Women left behind are primarily responsible for managing children's education and socialization. While remittances from migration may improve access to educational resources, the absence of one or both parents can affect children's emotional well-being and academic continuity. In some cases, older children, especially girls, may be required to take on additional household responsibilities, which can interfere with their education and reinforce intergenerational cycles of gender inequality.

7. Gender Roles and Empowerment

Migration has played a crucial role in reshaping gender roles and influencing the process of women's

empowerment in Bankura district, though the transformation has been uneven and often accompanied by persistent structural constraints. Over the period from 1974 to 2025, women's roles have gradually shifted from being primarily confined to domestic responsibilities to encompassing a wider range of economic and social functions. This transition reflects both the pressures of migration and the adaptive strategies adopted by rural households in response to changing economic conditions. In the earlier phase, when migration was largely male-dominated, women's roles were predominantly limited to household management, childcare, and assistance in agricultural activities. Their contributions, though essential, remained largely unrecognized and undervalued within both the household and the broader community. Decision-making power was typically concentrated in the hands of male members, reinforcing traditional patriarchal structures.

However, the process of empowerment remains partial and context-dependent. Despite their increased responsibilities and economic contributions, many women continue to face limitations in terms of control over resources and strategic decision-making. Patriarchal norms and cultural expectations continue to influence the distribution of power within households, often restricting women's autonomy. For instance, major decisions regarding land ownership, large financial investments, or marriage arrangements frequently remain under male control, even in situations where men are physically absent.

8. Health and Well-being

Migration has had a significant and often underexplored impact on the health and well-being of women in Bankura district, affecting them both as migrants and as those left behind in rural households. The intersection of poverty, informal labour, and limited access to healthcare services creates a context in which women's physical and mental health is frequently compromised. While migration can improve household income and, in some cases, access to basic necessities, it simultaneously exposes women to new health risks and intensifies existing vulnerabilities. For women who participate directly in migration, the nature of work they engage in plays a crucial role in shaping their health outcomes. Most women migrants from Bankura are employed in physically demanding and unregulated sectors such as brick kilns, construction sites, and agricultural labour. These work environments often involve long hours, heavy workloads, and exposure to extreme weather conditions, all of which contribute to chronic fatigue, musculoskeletal problems, and general physical exhaustion. The absence of proper safety measures and protective equipment further increases the risk of injuries and occupational hazards.

Despite these challenges, there are also instances where migration contributes positively to health outcomes. Increased income from migration can improve access to food, healthcare, and better living conditions, particularly when remittances are used effectively. Exposure to urban areas may also enhance awareness about hygiene, healthcare practices, and nutrition. However, such benefits are unevenly distributed and depend on the stability and success of migration experiences.

9. Psychological Impact

Migration has had a profound psychological impact on women in Bankura district, influencing their emotional well-being, mental health, and sense of identity. These effects vary depending on whether women migrate themselves or remain in the village, but in both cases, the experience is shaped by a complex mix of stress, adaptation, resilience, and changing self-perception. For women who migrate, the psychological experience is often marked by a process of adjustment to unfamiliar environments and demanding work conditions. Migration typically involves leaving behind established social networks, cultural familiarity, and family support systems. In destination areas, women must navigate new social settings, often characterized by linguistic differences, cultural unfamiliarity, and insecure living arrangements. This transition can generate feelings of anxiety, insecurity, and social isolation, particularly in the initial stages of migration.

Social factors also play an important role in shaping psychological experiences. In some cases, women left behind may face increased social scrutiny or restrictions within conservative rural settings, which can affect their sense of autonomy and self-esteem. At the same time, the absence of male members may provide them with greater mobility and opportunities for social interaction, particularly through participation in community groups or self-help organizations. These interactions can serve as important sources of emotional support and collective resilience.

10. Discussion

The analysis of migration in Bankura district from 1974 to 2025 reveals that its impact on women's lives cannot be understood in simple binary terms of benefit or disadvantage. Instead, migration emerges as a deeply complex and dynamic process that simultaneously generates opportunities for empowerment while reinforcing existing structures of inequality and vulnerability. The discussion of findings highlights this dual and often contradictory nature of migration, particularly when viewed through a gendered lens.

One of the central themes that emerges from the study is the transformation of women's roles within both the

household and the broader socio-economic framework. Migration, especially male out-migration, has necessitated a reallocation of responsibilities, placing women at the centre of household management and economic decision-making. This has led to what may be described as functional or situational empowerment, where women gain authority and visibility due to necessity rather than structural change. While such shifts indicate a departure from strictly traditional gender roles, they do not always translate into sustained or institutionalized empowerment. Patriarchal norms continue to shape access to resources, decision-making power, and social recognition, thereby limiting the transformative potential of these changes.

Conclusion

Migration has been a defining feature of socio-economic life in Bankura district over the past five decades. Its impact on women has evolved from marginal involvement to active participation, leading to significant changes in their roles and identities. While migration has contributed to economic empowerment and social change, it has also exposed women to new risks and challenges. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive, gender-sensitive policies that focus on improving working conditions, enhancing access to education and healthcare, and promoting sustainable local livelihoods.

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