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WHERE “EVERYONE” HAS MIGRATED
**EXPLORING SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION UNDER THE IMPACT OF
LABOUR MIGRATION**

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Abbreviations:

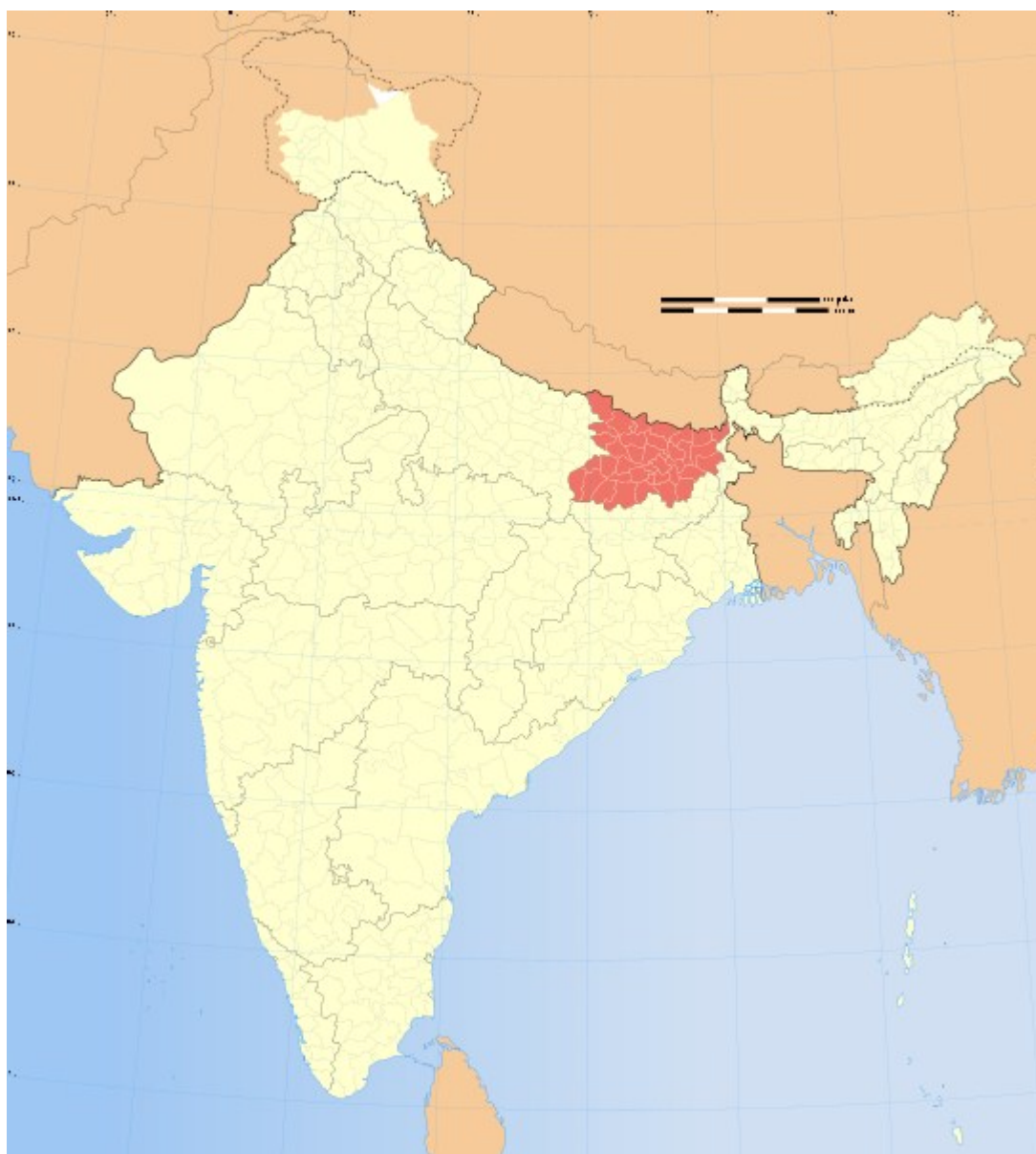
BPL- Below Poverty Line

OBC- Other Backward Classes

NSSO- National Sample Survey Office

Abstract: In this thesis, I have attempted to understand what meaning the phenomenon of labour migration holds for members of the sending communities and what are the contours of change in the social structure and cultural imagination of the sending community as a result of this migration. The primary field work was carried out in Palasi village of Araria district in Bihar, India. I have employed Portes' (2010) model of culture and social structure to shape my analysis of social transformation. There are two core arguments in my analysis: i) that the lived experience of migration in this sending community calls for a rethinking of the categories and binaries within the existing literature on migration studies and ii) that sustained outmigration of labour has caused significant changes in the agricultural organization and in other visible aspects of social relations although the essential value system and power structure of the community remain entrenched.

Map showing state of Bihar in India¹



¹ Sourced from Google Images accessible at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:India_Bihar_locator_map.svg

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Note on Identity of Participants:

I would like to note at the onset that names of all individuals mentioned with respect to primary data have been changed for the purposes of protecting the identities of the participants. Imaginary names have been used instead of abstract anonymity, in order to enhance the narrative quality of the thesis. The names of communities/caste groups have not been changed since these are generic names/titles that are commonly encountered in the studied region and do not give away the identity of the participants in specific. I have chosen to call my study village Palasi, a common name for villages in eastern Bihar.

1. Introduction

On the day I arrived in Palasi, I met with one of my key informants Vasudev Jha. He was close to sixty and had lived in Palasi all his life. “How many people from here migrate for work?” I asked him, and his answer was “Everyone”.

Simple as this response may sound, it is not literally true; but in its symbolic and metaphorical meanings it holds the key to several issues concerning the non-permanent migration of labour within India.

First of all, Jha’s response reveals that to him the volume of migration from Palasi was so overwhelming that it was negligible to count those who were excluded from this flow. This is not something that is corroborated by official statistics on labour migration within India. As the following sections will show, data from the Census of India and the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) indicate that “short-term” or “temporary” migration for work is found among such small fractions of the labour force that it does not merit separate study or policy considerations. However this has been challenged vehemently by not just grassroots level narratives such as that of Jha, but also by reports and independent studies commissioned by organizations such as the UNDP and the ILO. Thus, despite the State being in denial about the volume of flow of labour within India, it is now well-established in academic discourse and the popular imagination that the movement of labour within India is rampant and in socio-economic terms, a force to reckon with.

This brings us to the second aspect of Jha’s response, that is, who are the people whose exclusion from this abstract “everyone” is negligible? From a glance at the existing statistics and literature, the bulk of these excluded ‘no-ones’ would be women. According to a NSSO (2007-08) report on Migration in India, less than fifteen per cent of “short-term labour migrants” were women. In the case of the district of Araria, where Palasi is located, a study by ILO and IHD (forthcoming 2012) has placed the percentage of males among labour migrants at 95 per cent. Thus Jha’s “Everyone” obviously does not include the women residents of his village. This is telling not only in terms of revealing the extent to which women’s identity and agency as workers outside of the household is absent; but also in terms of indicating that because of their absence from the ‘labour force’ they are also assumed to be absent from the impact that this phenomenon of migration may have. This is important in defining the goals and disposition of this thesis.

The rubric of migration studies has been large and fluid. In the recent times, there has been a call to focus on the study of social transformation within migration studies. Stephen Castles (2010), Alejandro Portes (2010) and others have opined that the true nature, impact and outcome of migrations can be understood only by studying the social change or social transformations brought about by them. This is discussed in greater detail in the subsequent sections, but it is necessary to state here that given the extra-ordinary volume of labour migration within India, it is crucial to respond to this call within migration studies and to attempt to understand the socio-cultural changes taking place as a result of this phenomenon. It is within this rubric that I would like to place this thesis.

Having said that, I would like to flag a final issue here, before moving on to outline the research problem and making way for the following sections of the thesis. This issue is the question of what constitutes social change in the context of India. It is hardly debatable that social life and cultural beliefs in India are determined by a number of factors of inequality. However there are two factors that have emerged as most dominant, occupying the greatest interest of social scientists and leading to political mobilizations and social organizations around them. These are the factors of caste and gender. It is along these lines that I have attempted to analyse and understand socio-cultural change.

The central research problem of this study may be articulated thus:

This study seeks to explore the nature of social and cultural change; specifically in terms of gender and caste relations; brought about by the phenomenon of labour migration at the site of origin of labour i.e. the sending communities.

The primary field work for the study was carried out in Palasi village of Araria district in Bihar, India. In this thesis I have argued that:

- i) The lived experience of labour migration in Palasi defies classification into any of the existing analytical categories within migration studies and calls for a new form of enquiry.
- ii) When studied from the perspective of social change, the impact of migration in Palasi is quite visibly found in the way agriculture is organized and the institutions that govern its organization. There is also visible emergence of new social and economic roles that have unsettled traditional status hierarchies. However the

ascendancy and assertion of the middle castes (OBCs) is taking place at the expense of women's work outside the household and women's mobility. The core value system and overall power structure have remained unaltered with the Dalits, especially Dalit women, experiencing a longstanding stagnation in their life experiences and position within the social structure.

The research has been conducted from a constructivist standpoint using methods of data collection and analysis that are thoroughly informed by the tradition of inductive qualitative research.

In the section underneath I have laid out the theoretical and empirical context of the study in terms of the discourse on migration studies and the study of migration within India. In the third section I have briefly discussed the originality and relevance of the study. The fourth section elaborates on the methodology of data collection and analysis. The fifth section elaborates the conceptual model of culture and social structure by Portes (2010). The sixth section presents the analysis and inferences from the primary data, guided by the framework of this model. In the last and concluding section I have attempted to contemplate the future of social change under the impact of migration and comment on the required direction for future research.

2. Migration Studies and Labour Migration in India: A Contextual Overview

2.1 Setting Foot into Migration Studies

The field of Migration Studies has been constantly met with shifting research frontiers over the past several decades. The earliest studies of migration were attempts at explaining the reason and direction of migration through economic models concerning wage differentials, development deficits and the like. Examples of this would be numerous push and pull factors based models (Lee 1966 cited in King & Skeldon 2010: 1620) and Todaro's (1969) model based on unemployment in a dual sector economy.

In the following decades a large number of both inter-connected and disparate issues came to fall within the purview of this field. One of the results of this expansive research frontier has

been the fragmentation of the field into neatly defined binaries such as forced migration vs. voluntary migration, temporary migration vs. permanent migration, internal vs. international migration and several others. While each of these sub fields has its own body of work and conceptual, theoretical and methodological underpinnings, such a fragmentation has also been challenged in the recent times. Stephen Castles (2010: 1566) has argued that the “quest for a generally accepted theoretical framework for migration studies remains elusive.” He further suggested that the “conceptual framework for migration studies should take social transformation as its central category” (ibid).

In the upcoming section I present an overview of migration within India. This is followed by an overview of the particular state of Bihar and the district of Araria where the primary fieldwork was carried out. In the following sections the conceptual framework for the study is outlined and the methodology is explained in detail along with foreseeable shortcomings.

2.2 Migration in India

To begin with, the official statistical sources in India such as the Census of India and data collected by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) largely do not differentiate between labour migration and migration of other kinds such as migration of women due to marriage. The NSSO report on Migration in India (2007-08) defines a migrant as any member of a household “whose last usual place of residence (UPR), at any time in the past, was different from the current place of enumeration” (NSSO 2007-08: 11). In contrast, the definition of short-term migration did not involve change of UPR at all. Any member of a household who had stayed away from his current place of enumeration for a period of one month or more but less than six months within the last 365 days, for the purpose of employment or in search of employment, was counted as a short-term migrant (ibid). This definition of short-term migration is significant because it takes into account the purpose behind such temporary movement i.e. employment or search of employment. While this category of “temporary” or “short-term” is something I wish to contest in due course, for the time being this gives us an insight into the numbers and scale of labour migration within India.

According to the report, short-term migration is not of empirical significance in India because the rate of short-term migration was only 1.7% in rural areas and negligible (less than one per cent) in urban areas (ibid: H-iii). However these rates are calculated as proportion of entire population. Since the definition itself takes into account the purpose of migration, the rates

should be calculated as proportion of the workforce (population between the ages of 15 and 59)². Although the NSSO study is not a census, the sampling size and strategy are aimed at making generalization of the findings reliable (ibid: 1). On the basis of these facts, the following deductions can be made: the absolute number of short-term migrants in rural areas is 1.7% of the total rural population which is approximately 14.5 million individuals³, this number when seen as a proportion of the rural workforce⁴ constitutes 3% of the total rural workforce. Despite being large in absolute terms, the figure is still quite small as compared to the proportions revealed by some other small-scale studies by independent researchers discussed shortly. One of the reasons for this could be the fact that the NSSO study is a household based study rather than an individual based one. It is likely that many short-term migrants may be living as individuals rather than as part of households. While the Census regards such individuals as households in their own right, the same is not true of the NSSO study. Moreover, short-term migrants are not counted in the out-migrants category which makes the estimation of their exact number further difficult.

In their background paper for the Human Development Report of India, Deshingkar and Akter (2009) have identified the industries and services that employ the largest numbers of informal workers and through a large number of regionally focused case studies have arrived at the estimate of 100 million for the number of migrant labourers in India (ibid: 39). A survey by Banerjee and Duflo (2007) carried out in rural area of Udaipur shows that “60 percent of the poorest households report that someone from their family had lived outside for a part of the year to obtain work” (Banerjee & Duflo 2007:153). A study carried out by Dayal and Karan in 12 villages of Jharkhand has demonstrated that 30% of rural households have at least one temporary migrant (cited in Deshingkar 2005:31). Thus it is relatively well established in the existing literature that migration of labour in India, especially of the non-permanent kind, is a common phenomenon and the volume of flow involved is considerable.

Another aspect of this phenomenon that has been widely recorded is the socio-economic profile of the migrant labourer in India. Incidentally in this respect, the official data sources and the academic studies concur. The socio-economic profile of the short-term migrant

² Workforce in the Census of India 2001 is defined as the population between the ages of 15 and 59 who are either employed or are willing to be employed. Due to absence of data and purposes of simplification here it is taken to be all population within the age-group of 15 to 59.

³ The population of India is 1.2 billion of which 72% or 850 million is rural population. 1.7% of this is 14.5 million. See Census of India, 2001 available at <http://censusindia.gov.in/>

⁴ 57% is the national average for population in this age group and the numerical equivalent for rural population would be 485 million.

thrown up by the data from the NSSO study is quite telling. First of all, for every 28 male short-term migrants, there were only 5 female short-term migrants indicating that short-term migration is nearly six times more prevalent among males than among females (NSSO 2007-08: Table15 Appendix A). Secondly, when the sample was divided into deciles on the basis of Monthly Per Capita Expenditure (MPCE) the incidence of short-term migration was seen to be increasing in deciles of decreasing MPCE (ibid: 94). Deshingkar and Akter (2009: 1) assert that historically disadvantaged communities like the Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBC) are heavily represented in migrants. This can be further verified in the overview of migrants from Bihar.

2.3 Migration from Araria, Bihar

Bihar amongst all the states of India has the second lowest net rate of migration at -31 per 1000 population and the second highest rate of outmigration at roughly 3.45 million (NSSO 2007-08 cited in ILO & IHD 2012). In terms of its HDI, Bihar ranks the lowest among the fifteen big states of India and it is the lowest among all states of India in terms of per capita income. This section relies heavily on primary household survey data collected by the Institute for Human Development (IHD) in New Delhi from twelve purposively sampled villages of six districts of Bihar in 2009-10. The findings of the survey are forthcoming in a compendium (ILO & IHD 2012).

The survey revealed that 57 per cent of the sampled households had at least one family member who had migrated in the past one year for employment. Furthermore, four out of every five migrants were male. While thirty per cent of the migrants were non-literate, thirty per cent had received education up to secondary level or above; thus revealing that the conditions leading to and the nature of migration were diverse. This is important to note and has significant bearing on the results of this study.

The survey by IHD defines short term migration as migration for a period of up to three months or between three and eight months in a year. Amongst long term migrants, the survey distinguished between those who were out for more than eight months but their spouse was resident in the village, those who were out for more than eight months and their spouse was not resident in the village and those who were out for more than eight months and were unmarried. While IHD and associated researchers have found these categories to be useful for

analysis, they did not seem to be relevant in the context of the village in Araria district where the primary fieldwork for this study was carried out. Hence without further analysis of the survey data based on these categorizations, it would suffice here to conclude with the observation that the levels of outmigration for employment were one of the highest in the country and several kinds of migration co-existed in the region.

Araria is the fifth least developed district out of the thirty three districts of Bihar, according to a composite index ranking developed by the Indian Institute of Population Sciences (2006).⁵ It is one of the six districts of Bihar where the household survey by IHD was conducted. The survey data suggests that in this particular district 66 per cent of the surveyed households reported at least one migrant member. 95 per cent of the migrants were male and 72 per cent of them were between the ages of 15 to 35 years. 44 per cent of the migrants had received no education and 82 per cent of the migrants engaged in casual wage labour at the site of migration. This presents a broad overview of the situation of migration in the district.

3. Originality and Relevance of the Study

As I have earlier mentioned, the idea of studying social transformation as a key objective of migration studies is relatively new (Castles 2010) to the ever-evolving research agenda of this field. While Castles suggested this approach as an alternative to the missing metanarrative in migration theory, I find it particularly relevant to the case of India. There are several reasons for this.

India, as is commonly known, is a highly composite society and culture. At the same time, there has been widespread concern about the rising levels of inequality within Indian society and economy. Caste and gender are the two most binding, pervasive and widely written about factors of inequality in India. One of the issues that have emerged strongly in writings on labour migration within India is the importance of what has been termed as “seasonal” and “circular” migration (Deshingkar & Akter 2009, Srivastava 2012, Deshingkar & Farrington 2009). This refers essentially to recurrent movement of labour from site of origin to site of migration either temporally (seasonal) or/and spatially (circular). The focus of most works has been on the need to accurately measure the volume and extent of such migration

⁵ Report available online at http://www.jsk.gov.in/bihar/bihar_composite.pdf

(Srivastava 2012), the importance of understanding this kind of migration as a household livelihood strategy and a livelihood securing mechanism (Deshingkar et al 2009, Joshi & Khandelwal 2009, Massey 2009 etc). The other issue that has been studied closely is the creation and use of migration networks to sustain this livelihood strategy (Banerjee & Duflo 2007, Haberfeld et al 1999) and the terms of labour and working conditions at the sites of migration (Bremen 2009). What remains to be studied is the impact of such large movements of people on long standing social relations such as those prescribed by caste and gender, especially at the rural sites of origin. Thus if social transformation is to break new ground in migration studies, the Indian case is full of potential to steer research in this direction.

In terms of methodology, labour migration within India has been largely studied from a quantitative standpoint through the analysis of macro level data sets like the Census of India, NSSO surveys and other surveys commissioned at various stages by different agencies like the UNDP, the ILO and others. It is only recently that a small number of qualitative case studies and ethnographic village studies have been conducted for insights into the lived experiences of individual migrants or groups of migrants (e.g. Shah 2009, Llewlyn 2009). This is an important development in the context of the call for greater “interdisciplinary integration” (Boswell 2008) within migration studies. With the research frontier shifting to bring within its fold such objectives as social transformation, the qualitative approach towards understanding the impact of labour migration on social relations has assumed newfound relevance in India.

An important point of departure of this study is the fact that it focuses on the site of origin or the sending communities rather than the host or receiving communities and spaces. This is primarily for the reason that in India caste and gender relations are more pronounced and rigid in the rural or sending communities and they lend themselves better to qualitative observation as opposed to urban spaces where caste identities become less traceable. Another reason for this departure is that the projected rate of urbanization for India in 2011 was roughly 33 per cent (Registrar General of India 2006)⁶. With over 65 per cent of its population living in rural areas, any attempt at understanding social change in India has to be rooted in the villages which are the sending communities.

⁶ See report available at http://finmin.nic.in/WorkingPaper/Urbanissues_reforms.pdf

Having introduced the context, the research problem and its relevance, this section now leads to a discussion of the methodology adopted and the conceptual framework employed in the analysis of the primary data.

4. Methodology

4.1 Navigating the “field” and constructing the “story”

The original objective of this study, as indicated in the research proposal stage, was to understand the role of migration in livelihood diversification and as a livelihood security strategy for households. These concerns stemmed from the review of the available literature and were informed by the New Economics of Labour Migration. The methodological approach was embedded in the meta-theoretical tradition of constructivism. Thus, when I left for Palasi, Araria in early October 2011, it was with a clear idea to “get out of the way of the participants or informants and let them talk” (Bernard 1995 in Dewalt & Dewalt 2002: 120). In order to track developments and diversifications in household livelihood strategies over a period of time, a choice was made to gather life histories of migrants and their family members as an appropriate data collection strategy.

One of the traditions of enquiry that came to inform my study profoundly was that of grounded theory. Although in this thesis, I have not put forth a new grounded theory in the conventional sense of the term, the process of data collection and in-field analysis was guided by an understanding of how a grounded theory study is carried out. The outcomes of this process were later found to align well with an existing analytical framework and thus further analysis and writing was done in the nature of an inductive qualitative study.

After a few days of failed attempts at trying to elicit life stories that were pertinent to my research question, I realized that I had made the “emotive” mistake (Gubrium & Holstein 1997) of taking for granted the reality of the phenomenon of changes in the livelihood matrix to be the central essence of migration. While this was true at some levels, it could by no means be taken to be the invariant structure that governed this phenomenon. For many, changes in caste and gender relations acted as much as the central essence of the experience of migration as did the issue of livelihood. In order to elicit more details on these themes, I

found myself adapting my research design to accommodate interviews and FGDs while constantly revising the research questions.

I was exploring how interactions between individuals transformed in the face of migration of labour and trying to place these interactions within an evolving scheme. The actors in this process included men and women from different caste groups, landlords and landless labourers and small farmers involved in share cropping, informal moneylenders and rural people who had no ties with agriculture. Each actor/participant in the research process was selected after careful consideration and subject to their consent. Each interaction threw up newer questions and the next step of data collection was planned accordingly. The ultimate aim was to bring together all pieces of the puzzle i.e. the perspective all stakeholders involved and thereby construct the story as seen through their collective vision.

The task of a researcher in a grounded theory study is to constantly code and create “categories” of information till saturation has been reached (Cresswell 1998: 58). In keeping with this, I selected my interviewees for a day only after having gone through the interviews from the previous day. I was trying to put together the “storyline” and going “zigzag” (ibid: 59) back and forth between information from the field, analysis, back to the field for more information and back to the room for more analysis. Eventually I reached saturation when I felt I had spoken to all actors involved in experiencing the phenomenon of labour migration.

My interviews and FGDs progressed from being entirely informal towards the beginning of my study to being largely semi-structured by the end. In the initial interviews I tried to “follow the lead of the participant but ask occasional questions to focus the topic or to clarify points” (Spradley 1979 in Dewalt & Dewalt 2002: 122). From these initial interviews, when I had framed my categories of information and segregated the themes I was more interested in (and that fit into the “story”) I began to conduct interviews that were more specific to these themes and categories. Often I had no control over an interview turning into an FGD with several onlookers and bystanders spontaneously turning into active participants. The summary of all my data components is presented in Table 1.

Much of the analysis took place while I was still in the field. I wrote “memos” (Charmaz 2006: 73) quite frequently, that helped me to internalize and condense all the information. At a later stage of analysis, it became increasingly evident that the codes and categories that I had created and the relationships that were emerging between them, fitted very well into an existing schematic model of culture and social structure that has been presented by Portes

(2010). Therefore in the final stages of analysis I decided to use this model as an analytical tool to lend greater structure and support to my observations and arguments. (See Section 5)

Data Component	Brahmin	Mandal (OBC)	Dalit
Key Informant Interview	1, 1 (2)	1	-
Life Histories	2, 2 (4)	3, 2 (5)	-
Semi-structured Interviews	3, 2 (5)	3, 2 (5)	4
FGDs	-	2	2

Table 1. Summary of Data Components by Caste group and Gender; (Male, Female)⁷

4.2 Limitations and Ethical Considerations

I must begin this section by stating that my arrival at Palasi was met with much curiosity along with a generous dose of suspicion and scepticism. The village had been previously been part of the sample for a timeline study based on household and village level data, conducted by IHD and ILO. I had expected the community to be well-acquainted with the idea of non-partisan, independent, academic research. However this was not the case. I was frequently mistaken to be a government official or a representative of government agencies. Repeated attempts on my part to convey the idea and purpose of student research largely failed. My entry into the community was facilitated by Vasudev Jha, one of my key informants for the study and also an Economics graduate who had been associated with the IHD studies as well. Luckily, Jha enjoyed the respect and trust of the community including all caste groups. This meant that despite not having clarity on the purpose behind my research, many participants agreed to be part of the study based on Jha's recommendation and assurance. They mostly agreed because they had "nothing to hide even if you are from Delhi" (implying the central government based in Delhi).

Although the study was conducted with explicit consent from all participants, this was not the ideal scenario for me. I had wanted to stay in the village and participate extensively in the daily lives of the residents. However I could manage to find accommodation only in the

⁷ The data component categories are mutually exclusive and participants from one component were not repeated in others.

under-construction government hostel for girls, at the edge of the village- thus losing access to the daily life of the village as a whole. Most of my participant observation was carried out within the households of a few Brahmin and a few Mandal families whose homes I frequented for meals. I did not take field notes in their presence but wrote about my observations in detail at the end of each day. I was invited on several occasions for social events and life-cycle ceremonies. I accepted some invitations but could not accept them all and this might have led to some resentment on the part of some residents of the village.

Overall it will not be wrong to claim that all participants contributed to the study with their explicit consent. However the purpose of the study perhaps still remains unclear to most of them and I do take this to be a significant failure on my part.

5. Conceptualizing Social Change: An Analytical Framework

Before proceeding to analyse and present the findings and outcomes of the primary field work, it is essential to outline the theoretical framework within which this analysis will be carried out. The most compelling need at this point is to theoretically shape and define the concept of social change, which is foundational to the aim of this study. Within the existing literature on migration and social change, I have found Portes' (2010) notional framework of the elements of culture and social structure to be the most useful in guiding my own analysis of primary data. This framework segregates the components of culture and social structure and arranges them in a hierarchy that expresses their susceptibility to transformation in the face of forces such as large scale labour migration.

In his 2010 article titled *Migration and Social Change: Some Conceptual Reflections*, Alejandro Portes has deconstructed the elements of social life and placed them in a hierarchical order to elucidate what constitutes social change and to what degree. The hierarchy is based on what Portes terms as "causal influence" with the elements at the top being the most "deep" and resistant to change and the ones lower in the hierarchy being progressively "surface" or "readily evident" in terms of changes. The framework according to Portes is "not new or improvised" but "part of a legacy dating back to the classics" (2010: 1542). Indeed Portes has frequently quoted and cited from Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Gramsci in his conceptual framework. While many of the elements recognized by Portes have been discussed and theorized to great lengths in classical Sociological writings, what is

pioneering in this particular form of theorization is their “analytic separation” from what appears at first glance to be “like an undifferentiated mass” (2010: 1541). In other words, Portes has picked up ideas that had been long existent and crystallized them into definite bricks within a larger edifice of culture and social structure, as seen from his perspective. I wish to describe here all the elements identified by him and conclude with the pictorial depiction of this concept of social change as presented in Portes (2010: 1542).

According to Portes, the deepest element of culture is “values” while the corresponding element of social structure is “power”. He defines values as “general moral principles” that are “not invoked in everyday life” but underlie aspects of everyday behaviour “that are not unrestrained self-interest”. (2010: 1540) Power is the factor that enables the perpetuation of particular value systems. Portes borrows both from the Marxian idea of power as control over productive resources (means of production) and the Webberian concept of power as the ability to have one’s own will despite resistance. He adds that power is exercised not only through the above mentioned means but also through propagating a particular value system. Thus according to Portes values “motivate or constrain” and power “enables”.

At the next level of the framework lies the element of “norms” and “skill repertoire” constitutive for culture and “class” constitutive for social structure. Norms are the embodiments of values, the directives for action or non-action. They may be documented or implicit but are less abstract than values and find manifestation in everyday life through “roles”. Norms are accompanied by ‘skill repertoire’ or ‘cultural capital’ in Portes’ hierarchy of causal influence. These are skills, ‘style’ or ‘knowledge’ that are instrumental for the enactment of the norms through roles. Class on the other hand is the result of power differentials between different social actors. Portes exerts that class “need not be subjectively perceived by its occupants” (2010: 1541) in order to be operational. What class manifests itself in is what he terms as “status hierarchies” which correspond to “roles” in the hierarchy of elements.

Roles and status hierarchies are the first level of elements that according to Portes undergo ‘visible’ change in the process of social transformation and can be located on individual actors. All changes above this level are either ‘intermediate’ or ‘deep’ and cannot be located easily. The most superficial level of elements is composed of “institutions” in the case of culture and of “organizations” in case of social structure. Changes at these levels are visible and can be located collectively on social actors. Portes defines ‘organizations’ as “what social

actors normally inhabit in the routine course of their lives” (2010: 1543) and ‘institutions’ as the codified or uncoded rules that govern the interactions between role occupants within the organizations. Thus institutions and organizations are the most visible manifestations of power and value systems that constitute a culture and a society. The following diagram streamlines this conceptualization of culture, social structure and the level of causal influence of each of the constitutive elements.

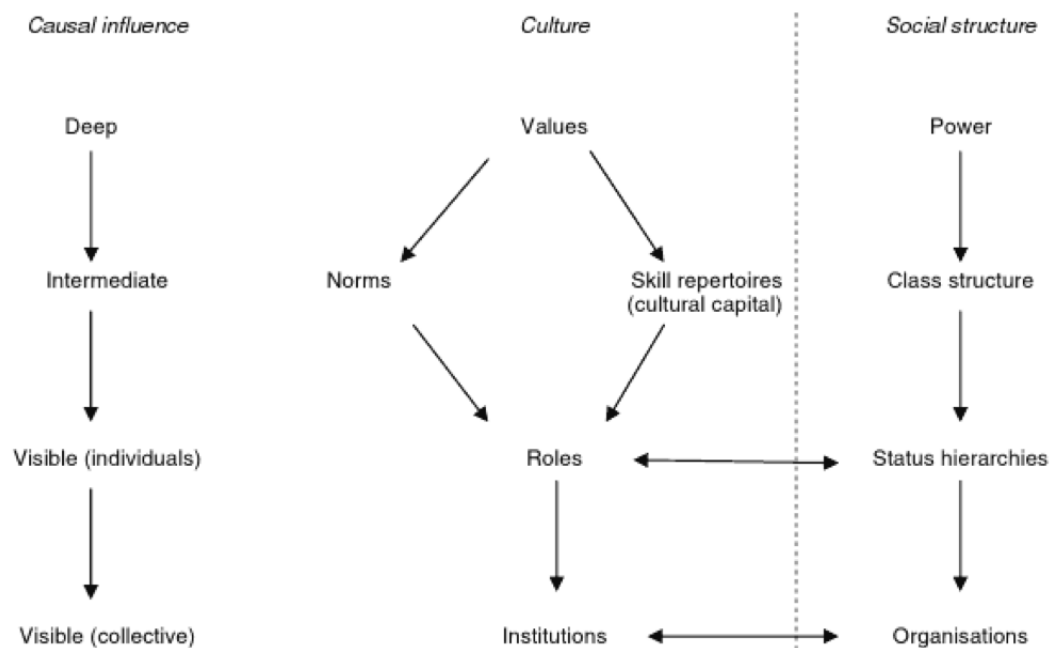


Figure 1. Elements of Social Life from Portes, A. (2010: 1542)

This conceptual framework has been developed and implemented by Portes for studying the impact of migration on social change in host societies in the United States. On the basis of his analysis Portes argues that even “telluric movements” of large numbers of migrants of a permanent or long term nature have resulted only in visible or superficial levels of change in culture. In fact, he argues that migration might have reinforced the underlying social structure in the United States rather than changing it.

In the case of the present study, I will be employing Portes’ conceptual framework to analyse social change in the sending rather than the receiving society within India. In this context it is possible to identify the elements of Portes’ model with the various levels at which caste and

gender relations operate. For instance, the operational aspects of caste relations may be identified with the formulation of “organizations”, “institutions”, “roles” and “status hierarchies” in Portes’ model. The caste profile of landholding, political participation, representation in positions of decision-making and entitlements in social life are some of these aspects. These have been studied thoroughly by several scholars (Kothari 1965, Rudolph & Rudolph 1967, etc.). Indeed many of the policy directives against caste-based discrimination and efforts within the anti-caste movement itself were directed towards these operational and ‘visible’ aspects of caste relations. Some examples would be the affirmative action to give representation to Dalits and OBCs in higher education and government employment, the movements in southern and western India by Dalits to gain entry into ‘upper caste’ places of worship and the emphasis placed by the anti-caste movement on accessing community resources (such as wells etc.) and co-dining with the ‘upper castes’ as an act of assertion against untouchability. Similarly in the case of gender relations, there are aspects that relate to the levels of high causal influence in Portes’ model which are more susceptible to change than others. It is these aspects that constitute the more successful of the state’s and the women’s movements’ attempts to change gender relations in the country. Examples of this would be affirmative action for political representation of women in local governing bodies, involving women in micro-finance and small scale entrepreneurship etc.

At the same time, there are aspects of caste and gender relations that are implicit and so ingrained in the psyche of communities that they have been rendered invisible over time. Examples of these are the basic notions of purity and pollution that Rege (2008) has argued to be the most essential basis for caste-based discrimination and also the notional connect between oppressions stemming from caste and gender. Indeed, efforts to address some of these aspects of caste and gender relations by the state as well as the social movements have largely failed. Examples of this would be the high prevalence of female foeticide, dowry deaths, child marriages and domestic violence against women in the case of gender and the near-universal practice of intra-caste marriages in the case of caste.

This is not the opportune forum to discuss and deconstruct in greater detail, how caste and gender relations have unfolded in India over the past several centuries. However it suffices to say here that these social relations exist in multiple layers some of which are more susceptible to change than the others. This has been argued before (Beteille 2012, Chakravarthy 2008, Rege 2008) and it is through this observation that I would like to establish the appropriateness of Portes’ model to the Indian situation. The model hereby acts

as an analytical instrument to structure and categorize aspects of change and continuity in social relations, in this case, as a result of outmigration of labour. How this instrument is used will be elaborated in the following sections. It is important to note here that Portes' model is not a predictive theory of change. It is only an indication of how change might be measured and understood. The following section elaborates on the core findings of the thesis.

6. Exploring Migration and Social Transformation

6.1 Migration in the Popular Imagination and Everyday Life

The very first question that begs resolution is the question of what kind of migration is found to be in existence in the community being studied and what meaning it holds to the social actors involved. I argue in this section that migration as experienced in Palasi defies logical classification into any of the existing categories into which migration studies has divided itself. Furthermore, migration in this community is a flexible livelihood strategy that plays a definitive role in shaping the aspirations of individuals and households.

To begin with, the term in the local dialect used by the relevant social actors in describing the phenomenon of frequent and sustained migration of members of the labour force is "*palayan*" which translates roughly as "fleeing", "escaping" or "running away". Although labour migration within India has never been theorized as a form of forced migration, the term does indicate an element of coercion or at least helplessness involved in the act. What is more interesting is that older individuals from all caste groups (above the age of fifty years) often referred to the "beginning of *palayan*" or to a time when "there was no *palayan*". Thus there exists a decisive point of break in the collective memory of the community, when this phenomenon took off. Life histories and narrative analysis of discussions indicate that this point can be approximately dated back to about twenty to twenty five years ago. Chronologically this refers to the beginning of the 1990s. It is no small coincidence that 1991 was the year when the Indian economy liberalized and the much documented expansion of the unorganized sector of services and small manufacturing started to come into being.⁸ It is easy to imagine that this point of break actually represented the opening of a window of opportunity to find gainful employment outside of the immediate physical space of the village or the region. It has been established in earlier studies that the roots of outmigration

⁸ See Working Paper No. 2 of the Report of the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector, 2008 available at http://www.cnisbss.org/Newsline/PDF/LJR_03022009/contributionNCEUS.pdf

from the state of Bihar were in extreme poverty, agrarian stagnation and widespread unemployment/underemployment (Deshingkar et al 2009). Thus the fact that migration from the area started off as distress driven is well-known. Therefore this form of migration resists easy categorization as either forced or voluntary.

The second observation in this regard is the manner in which the destinations of migration are perceived and represented by the relevant social actors. Deshingkar et al (2009) have documented several streams of migration within the same village and the list of destinations is varied in terms of distance and socio-cultural dispersion. Migrants from Palasi have sought and found work in small urban centres within the state, in the farm sector in neighbouring Uttar Pradesh, in farm and rural non-farm sectors in richer and agriculturally advanced states like Punjab, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh, in informal services in Delhi and other large urban centres, in small and medium scale enterprises in Assam and West Bengal and in brick kilns across the border in Nepal. In the popular discourse within the village, when asked where one had gone in search of work or where one's (male) family member is, the most common refrain was "Delhi-Punjab". It turned out several times that women who said their husband had gone to "Delhi-Punjab" at the beginning of the interview, revealed in due course that he was in fact working in a cloth mill in Haryana or in an apple farm in Himachal Pradesh. However the term "Delhi-Punjab" was perfectly acceptable to them as an honest response to where their family member/s had migrated. Indeed to someone uninitiated into Indian geography, the response "Delhi-Punjab" would convey a singular space- a city, state or area that was 'the other'; identified as such because of its difference from the space that was the village. Several young men asserted that they had become more worldly-wise ("*hoshiar*") following their stint in "Delhi-Punjab" and one of the key informants in his extended interview elaborated that there was a lot of difference between those who had "been to Delhi-Punjab" and those who had not. Youth prided themselves on having "seen it all in Delhi-Punjab" and women conveyed their sense of distance by using terms like "not as far as Delhi-Punjab". Based on this I argue that whatever the actual destination of migration, in the cultural imagination of the social actors it constituted a foreign land with a palpable degree of alienation that separated the "here" from "there" and the "ours" from "theirs". However within the present forms of classification, migration across the border from Araria to Nepal would be counted as international migration, to be studied within frameworks relevant to the same; while migration across more than 1000 kilometres to "Delhi-Punjab" (and neighbouring areas) would be considered as internal migration, with a framework mostly

bereft of issues of cultural alienation and identity. Clearly the separation of internal from international is not consistent with the cultural alienation experienced and articulated by the social actors in both cases and hence this form of migration defies classification into yet another existing binary within migration studies.

In terms of duration of migration, the categories of 'short-term' and 'long-term' have been quite arbitrarily defined and assigned by various agencies in India. As mentioned before, the NSSO considered all migration longer than one month and shorter than six months to be 'short-term'. The ILO-IHD combined study on the other hand differentiates between migrations shorter than three months and those between three to eight months. There are no available rationalizations of these selected time-frames. If at all, segments of the existing research may lead one to believe that migrations take place for fixed and pre-decided terms and this warrants such classification. However this is completely invalidated by the life experiences of migrants from the study village. Most migrants at the time of migrating do not have a planned date of return. For the same individual the periods of migration have vacillated between three months and two years at different points of time. For some others, the period of migration has been consistent at eight months a year but has been repeated for the past twelve years. At times the duration depends on the availability of work or health factors. At times it is simply the amount of money that needs to be earned. The only common factor that runs through all these different kinds of migration is the idea of non-permanence. All the actors involved do not view themselves as "permanent" migrants in the sense of re-settling or moving permanently to another place.

In recent times, the concept of "circular" or "seasonal" migration has gained currency within the literature on labour migration within India. The crux of the concept may be described as "a great variety of movements, usually short-term repetitive or cyclic in nature, but all having in common no declared intention of permanent or long-lasting change in residence" (Zelinsky 1971 cited in Deshingkar & Farrington 2009: 5). While this quite closely describes the meaning of migration as it occurs in the popular imagination and everyday lives of the people of the study village, it still requires some qualification. For instance the seasonality of this "seasonal" movement is not fixed as is not the loci of the circle in the "circular" movement. There were instances of workers who alternately joined the agricultural and the construction sectors depending on the season, but both at destinations away from the village. Thus their work was seasonal although their movement was not. There were also workers who had migrated for two spells of a few months each within a span of three years and had each time

migrated to a separate destination and separate job. Thus the tags of ‘seasonal’ or ‘circular’ even though more appropriate than most other classifications, are still not entirely accurate or wholesome. On the whole, the aim of this discussion is to expose the inadequacy of existing conceptual categories in understanding and analysing the forms of labour migration in Palasi (most likely replicated in similar socio-economic sites) and the need to create new space within migration studies for less regimented models of labour migration. The following sections present further analysis of findings in adherence to the scheme of Portes’ model.

6.2 Migration and Social Transformation in Palasi: Organizations and Institutions

In Palasi, as in most villages in Bihar, if not all of India, the dominant economic organization is the practice of agriculture. It is within this organization that the institutions of caste and gender come into operation. Additionally the social organization of the household or the family is also an important site for understanding changes within the institution of gender.

6.2.1 Agriculture

Palasi consists of two dispersed settlements each of which is homogeneous in terms of caste composition- one consisting entirely of Brahmin (“upper caste”) households and the other consisting entirely of Mandal (OBC) households. For the purposes of studying all aspects of caste relations a third dispersed settlement, consisting entirely of Mushahar (Dalit) households was also included. Although not technically a part of village Palasi, this settlement/community is an organic part of the agricultural organization inhabited by the Brahmins and Mandals and participates in full measure in keeping the organization alive.

Nearly all of the agricultural land surrounding the three settlements is owned by Brahmin households. The Mushahar community is completely landless. Among the Mandals, only three out of the fifty households qualified to be marginal landowners. This landholding pattern is typical of the state of Bihar. Historically the organization of agriculture consisted of Mandal and Mushahar labourers working in the fields of the Brahmins. Members of the Brahmin households only supervised agricultural work and especially the women from Brahmin families never performed any labour in the fields.

The pattern of landholding remains largely unchanged till date. However it is possible to note some very visible changes within the organization of agriculture as a result of outmigration (mostly Mandals and Mushahars but increasingly also Brahmins) and the manifestation of the change is through transformed everyday interactions between castes and genders. According

to key informants, outmigration in some form or the other was universal in the Mandal and Mushahar settlements meaning that at least one member from every household in these settlements had engaged in migrant work at some point of time.

The foremost change in the organization of agriculture has been significant downfall in the supply of labour and women workers have come to occupy the foreground of labour relations in the village. According to both Brahmin landlords and Mandal women labourers, the wage rate for agricultural labour has gone up from 100kg of grain per worker for an entire season of work twenty years ago, to daily wage of one meal and 20 INR⁹ per worker up to three years ago, to daily wage of one meal and 60 INR at present. The money wages are average sums and differ according to the season and nature of work. There is also a large wage differential between men and women's work but this is not highlighted by most participants due to the fact that men are largely absent from the agricultural organization during most parts of the year. On the whole it is tenable to argue that migration has pushed up the wage rates in both direct and indirect ways. For instance the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, one of the welfare schemes of the central government which is not functional in the village, stipulates the minimum wage for rural labour to be 100 INR per day. This information was accessed by migrant workers at their destinations and used by them to leverage their negotiations for better wages within the village.

The more fundamental change from the point of view of this study is however not in the increased wage rate but in the transformed shape of everyday interactions between the caste groups. Shashikala Devi, one of the more enthusiastic participants in a group discussion elucidated this point with a telling example. When asked how things had changed between the Brahmins and the Mandals over the years she responded that when she had first arrived in the village as a newly-wed eighteen years ago and started working in the fields as hired labour, the Brahmin landlords would not allow her breaks between her work as and when she wanted them. They spoke to her rudely and sarcastically if she took a moment to rest in the shade. As opposed to this, during the latest sowing season, the Brahmins had taken care of her and her "batch-mates" by not only offering them water, *bidis* (local cigarettes) and chewing tobacco but also complying with their requests for separate brands of tobacco even if they had to visit the neighbouring village to procure these brands! While this is one of many anecdotes shared by Mandal and Mushahar women, it is possible to detect an overall

⁹ 1 US \$= 50 INR approx.

agreement among all participants that the extremities and rigidities of day-to-day interactions between the castes have reduced and migration is to be held responsible for the same. This is exemplified in the words of Chandan Sharma, a young Mandal entrepreneur with five years of migrant work behind him

“Now nobody is beholden to nobody. They (the Brahmins) have realized that they have nothing to hold us at ransom. We have nothing to ask of them and so we are no longer obligated.”

This brings us to the second important change within the organization of agriculture. This refers to investments made by a small but growing proportion of Mandal migrants in share-cropping. Share-cropping is a system of cultivation wherein land is provided by the landlord who also bears the cost for half of the water requirements for cultivation. The remaining investment for water, seeds, fertilizers and labour are borne by the share-cropper and the harvest is equally divided between the two parties. Several Mandal migrants have invested in share-cropping small plots of land. The savings from migrant work are invested in water, seeds and fertilizers and family labour is used for cultivation. This is seen as more respectable and as a step above wage labour in the social hierarchy. Some of the Mandal share-croppers have started hiring labour themselves but the labour relations in such cases assume a tenor much different from the traditional labour relations with the implicit politics of caste involved. Mostly Mandal share-croppers are both buyers and sellers of labour, with each family working for other families on different days of the sowing or harvesting season. Thus share-cropping is one of the ways in which earnings from migrant work have enabled the reshaping of labour relations, caste dynamics and the functioning of the agricultural organization of the village.

These changes have primarily played out between the Brahmins and the Mandals. The Mushahar participants reported an overall story of longstanding stagnation not only with regard to their position in the agricultural organization but also in terms of general living conditions. They have always been landless labourers and continue to be so. However there are two points of change that need consideration within the framework of this study. The first is that their physical proximity to a settlement of Yadavs (socio-economically better-off OBC caste) has allowed them to switch employers if the need be. The Yadavs, like the Mandals, have invested in share-cropping or have even succeeded in purchasing land. This along with the general rise in wage levels has improved the position of negotiation for the Mushahars. In fact the Mushahar women concurred that working as hired labour was better for them than

entering into a share-cropping arrangement because they did not have the means to invest in share-cropping. A few times some Mushahar men had attempted to share-crop but went into debt for making the necessary investments and had to give away the entire produce to settle the debts. Their sole source of borrowings is the same Brahmins and Yadavs whose fields they work in.

The other point of change is that like the Mandal women, it is now the Mushahar women who are the actors in the labour and caste relations because the men are absent from the village for the better part of the year. This holds relevance for the issue of change in roles and skill repertoire which will be taken up shortly. In their own articulation of how they perceive caste and labour relations, the women maintained a picture of stagnation, stating that “nothing has changed...we work for them and they give us money...and that is all.” This is in stark contrast to the change experienced and articulated by the Mandal women. This will be interrogated further in the section on status hierarchies.

6.2.2 Household

The other organization under inspection here is that of the household. While it was difficult to gain deep insights into intra-household flows of resources and decision-making processes there were a few detailed life histories of women that can be analysed for understanding change within the organization of the household.

Bhama Devi is a thirty five year old Mandal woman. Her husband works as a rickshaw puller in the outskirts of Delhi. They are landless and she lives with her four children. Her husband is usually home for only two or three months in the year and this is how it has been for the past eight years. A few years ago, Bhama wanted her husband to invest in share-cropping a small plot of land. She wished to hire labour and supervise the cultivation herself. She saw this as a livelihood securing mechanism for herself and her children in case her husband failed to remit sufficiently. However the idea was vehemently turned down by her husband, who was opposed to her involvement in activities outside of the household.

In the following years, a new government scheme was introduced in the village under which a hostel was constructed for girls from Dalit, Muslim and BPL families. Bhama took up a job as the caretaker of the hostel. Since this was a “respectable” government job, she could make a convincing case for herself to her husband. The job involved staying the nights at the hostel and the others involved in the management of the hostel did not allow her children to sleep over at the hostel along with her. Eventually she gave up the job and started working as a

day-time cook at the same hostel. This was a less paying position but to Bhama it was “the source of security I had always been looking for”.

While it is unknown as to how commonly one might see Bhama’s story being replicated within the village or the region, it is evident that her husband’s physical absence allowed her some agency in being able to make decisions for herself and her children. The potential for change within the household is heavily contingent upon supporting and facilitating conditions. In general women from households with migrant members reported having regular contact with their migrant family members through mobile phones and consulting them for all decisions. Another commonly stated point was that from every family at least one male member (often the oldest one) was asked to stay back as the “guardian” of the women and children. Some Mandal men also reported that they arranged for grocery supplies for their family for the entire period of their stay before they left, so that the women would not have to “face the difficulty of going out of the house”. It was not possible to decipher much about the intra-household dynamics of Dalit families and changes therein because the participants were less keen to talk about it. For them the macro-level issues of poverty and relative deprivation were the fundamental talking points. When household level issues were probed into, they preferred to respond in wide, sweeping comments such as “everything is good” or “what could go wrong?”

In essence it is possible to argue that changes within the organization of agriculture are more visible and better articulated than those within the organization of the household. The ways in which the institution of caste plays out in day-to-day life seems to have undergone considerable transformation. Whether the same is true of gender cannot be ascertained at this point, but it is beyond doubt that it is largely women now who occupy the space of caste and labour interactions. This brings us to the discussion on changes in roles and status hierarchies.

6.3 Migration and Social Transformation in Palasi: Roles and Status Hierarchies

According to Portes’ model, change in culture and social structure is most visible at the level of roles and status hierarchies. In Palasi, there were a few social roles that had visibly come into existence in the aftermath of outmigration of labour. In this section I discuss each of these roles. Thereafter I draw inferences for the dynamics within status hierarchies that result from these new roles.

The first social role that merits attention is that of the labour contractor who is responsible for leading the group of migrants, allocating work to them, brokering and negotiating wage rates and organizing their stay and survival at the destination. This is an important role that has come to be occupied predominantly by middle aged men from the backward classes, in this particular case, the Mandal community. The importance of this role lies in its power to facilitate migration and as the window to an opportunity that is widely deemed to be valuable. Thus the contractor is an important and powerful figure in the life of the migrant workers as well as their families. Often addressed as “*Guruji*” or “*Masterji*” (roughly corresponding to Teacher or Benefactor) the contractor is someone who has had prolonged association with the labour market at the destination and functions on the basis of a well-cultivated social network. In Palasi, Ramdev Mandal was the sole contractor and his caste identity was integral to the ramifications that his newfound role held for the community around him. This is especially true in the light of the second new social role that has emerged- that of the Brahmin labourer. Historically Brahmins in this region have not been involved in manual labour and with the initiation of Brahmin men, mostly youth, into the process of migration, the Brahmin labourer has come to occupy a certain space in the imagination of the community.

The main reason behind Brahmins’ migration is fragmentation of land through generations of inheritance till the holdings become too small to sustain a household. In a few cases selling off or pawning away of land was also reported. While on the part of the Brahmin labourers this new role was viewed as a compulsion or a necessary evil, for the Mandal contractor and indeed for his entire community, this was a sign of vindication of their many years and many generations of hard toil. Ramdev Mandal expresses this eloquently in the following quote,

“My father used to work in their field, now they won’t find work unless I help them. Such is the way of life. They feel ashamed of manual labour. It is not something they are used to. But unless they work how will they earn money. Sometimes I have to be very gentle with some of the Brahmin kids...have to be very patient and gentle to make them work...that’s why now when I walk down the street they (the Brahmins) all acknowledge me and greet me politely. If I make one missed call they will all come running to me...”

The dualities arising from this new role were articulated by some Brahmin labourers themselves. Mithu Mishra, a fifty five year old Brahmin man who had been working in the stone quarries of north India for the past fifteen years said “*I lost all my land to paying off*

debts. Now I am earning an honest living, there is nothing to be ashamed of. I am still a Panditji in the village and when I come back here I get a lot of respect but in the quarries I am just the same as any other man."

On the other hand the perceived incongruity of a Brahmin performing manual labour was also not allowed to pass unnoticed and unresented. Vasudev Jha, a sixty year old graduate Brahmin entrepreneur who had never migrated despite loss of land commented *"right in this moment you will find twenty Brahmins toiling away at the neighbouring brick kiln...they also go to Delhi-Punjab when they need to....but we are a community of intellectuals, I am a college graduate...it is not possible for me to carry bricks on my head."*

The overall outcome of these new roles, in my opinion, is the aspirational movement up the perceived status hierarchy for the Mandals in Palasi. This became most evident to me during an interview with a Mandal family of three brothers who were all migrant labourers as well as share croppers but not contractors. Throughout the interview, the oldest brother and head of the household, Shivanand Mandal kept insisting that I stay back for lunch at his residence after the interviews. Initially his refrain was that I should not just "take all the *jaankari*" (information) and leave them, but also give them something in return in the form of an opportunity to host me. However in the end he unwillingly but somewhat proudly revealed the real reason for his insistence

"Where do you eat normally? With them, right? (he had assumed I eat with the Brahmins because I was introduced to him by my Brahmin key informant) These days there is no difference between us. There is no untouchability. They are just Brahmins by name and we are Mandals by name. There is no other difference. These days we make good food in our homes."

He eventually postponed the invitation to another day when I informed him that I was in fact being fed by Bhama Devi, a Mandal, who worked as the cook at the government school.

New roles had emerged for women too but not as strongly or decisively. Women farm labourers from both the Mandal and the Dalit communities reported taking on the role of leaders and organizers in negotiating a wage-raise. Data from all sources triangulated the claim that there had been a significant raise in the average wage rates since the year 2009 and that this was brought about by organized bargaining and small scale labour strikes by the women. This leadership role was new and emerged in the context of the absence of traditional

male leaders. However the role lost relevance once the immediate goal of wage-raise was attained. The improved status of women as farm labourers has been discussed in the previous section but I would withhold myself from inferring this as a general improvement for women within the all-encompassing status hierarchy due to the absence of any evidence of improved status within the household or in other social circles apart from the site of labour. In fact for Dalit women the situation seems to be of stagnation again in terms of position within the status hierarchy. The key reason behind this may be pinned down as recurrent indebtedness to the traditional moneylenders and dependence on politically well-placed individuals for benefits from government schemes and programmes.

All Dalit participants were unanimous in their assertion that they had no surplus savings despite fifteen to twenty years of recurrent migration by male family members. Earnings from farm labour and migrant work were exhausted in paying interests on loans which were exorbitantly high at the rate of five per cent per month. On being asked if the relations between the Dalits and the Brahmins and other landed communities (like Yadavs) had improved, Rukmi Devi, a forty two year old Dalit farm worker responded

“How will anything improve? They are blood-suckers and continue to suck our blood. If I don’t pay the instalments on my loan they will call a Panchayat meeting. What do you think the Panchayat will say? Will they exempt me from paying interest? I have to take my children and go to their house and work all day for free. We do it every time they have a celebration or wedding or festival.”

The situation is however more complex than just informal bondage resulting from indebtedness. The Dalit women reported a growing tendency among Dalit men to “sit and eat” when they were not working at migrant destinations. In several narratives women claimed that their husbands or sons sent either no money or very small and erratic sums of money as remittance. As mentioned earlier the Dalit men seemed to be migrating for longer periods during the years, not returning even during the major festivals. Several women mentioned that they (both the migrant worker and the family) “ate and sat at home as long as the money lasted.” There seemed to be an indication of a new emerging social and economic role- that of the Dalit male consumer. The impression is boosted by Brahmin narratives which claim that Dalits are unable to pay off their debts because they “spend all their money” on immediate gratification of “luxuries” such as mobile phones, non-vegetarian food, new clothes and the like. While none of the above items were mentioned by Dalit women

themselves in their list of major expenses, they did refer several times to “just sitting and eating”.

My inference here is that the Dalit men and perhaps also the women place a premium on leisure which indeed seems to be newfound in the light of migrant work which allows them to afford intervals of relaxation unlike the traditional forms of labour in which they were engaged in both farm and household work by the landlords. However with the passing of this period of interval the men return to the migrant destinations while the women and children continue to face different variations of the traditional forms of bondage. This, along with the fact that the Dalits, at least in Palasi, have no significant political representation, has resulted in their continued dependence on the landlords. This has resulted in a status stagnation for them. The general tone and temper among the Mandals with regard to their position in the status hierarchy is one of aspiration and assertion. Among the Dalits it is quite to the contrary.

6.4 Migration and Social Transformation in Palasi: Norms, Skill Repertoire and Class Structure

The concept of skill repertoire or cultural capital was surprisingly well-understood and well-articulated by the Mandals and the Brahmins alike, although in a vocabulary entirely different from Portes'. The main component of this for them was schooling or formal education. In the words of Vidyanand Mandal,

“I send my son to school because my parents couldn't send me to school. He should learn to act and behave, to sit and walk, to live and talk like a real human being. He should study and become someone.”

Thus the value of education to him was not merely in terms of better employment and income prospects but in terms of the perceived refinement and sophistication that he had so far seen in and associated only with the Brahmins. Migration has facilitated this realization and aspiration to a great extent. Incomes from migrant work enabled children from Mandal families to remain in school longer and even attend supplementary coaching classes. These were greatly valued by the Mandal parents. Bhama Devi ensured that her twelve year old daughter Arati attended all her coaching lessons even if it meant going without a helping hand in the morning chores like grazing the cow or cleaning the open space around their hut. Kishan Mandal, a young migrant worker with experience of working in both agriculture and construction said,

“They (the Brahmins) find work in shops and private security agencies quite easily. You see for yourself how well they speak. Their tongue is so clear/light (indicating a clear diction). Who will not want to hire them? You teach us to talk like that and we will also get many such jobs. And if you go to the Mushahar Tola, you will not understand anything they say. Their language is even more heavy (indicating a coarser dialect).”

The sentiment is reciprocated by the Brahmins. Prerna Jha, the young wife of a Brahmin migrant and local volunteer for women’s health education said,

“I am responsible for both Brahmin Tola and Mandal Tola. I have to go there regularly and many people in my community talk about this. They (Mandals) are not like us. They talk loudly, swear often and break into fights for no reason. Sometimes I feel scared but it is part of my job, what can I do?”

As opposed to the valorisation of formal education by the Mandals, the Dalit women spoke of an entirely different attitude. Lutri Devi, a thirty five year old mother of five, said

“The children here don’t study. They go to school but they play around all day along. They play all day and when they come of age they go away to work. This is our life. We work in the fields all day, come back and cook and go to sleep. There is nobody to make them study. That’s why they just play.”

Perhaps what the experience of migration has most successfully done is to make the Mandal community self-conscious of the deficits in its cultural capital leading to an acute desire to meet this gap through whatever means possible. One of the means frequently resorted to by them in this enterprise is the replication of Brahminical gender norms. It was clear from the narratives that in the generations prior to migration, the entire family including all the women worked as labourers in the fields of the landlords. However with the emergence of share-cropping, Mandal women’s legitimacy in performing labour has dwindled. Shambhu Sharma, a thirty four year old migrant labourer who had recently invested in share cropping elaborated on the issue of women’s work quite candidly.

“If you go to the Mushahar Tola you will find that every woman in the tola goes to work in the fields. They have no land. They are helpless and compelled to work. But here it is not like that. Every woman who goes to work, goes out of choice. If say her husband has not sent money, or their condition is really bad, only then she will go. Otherwise the women stay at home.”

I asked him if it is okay for Mandal women to supervise agricultural work such as share-cropping in the absence of men. He responded,

“How will she supervise? They don’t know anything. And there are so many children to take care of. It is too much work to look after the children and the household and then supervise. It is better that they don’t do it.”

Such an attitude is also corroborated by Bhama Devi’s husband’s reluctance to let her share-crop a small plot of land for subsistence production. In general there was a de-valorisation of women’s work outside of the household among the Mandals. It served to position themselves higher in the status hierarchy as compared to the Mushahars while also likening them to the Brahmins, among whom women’s work outside of the household had never existed before. Photu Devi, a Brahmin woman in her mid-thirties, narrated her experience of supervising agricultural work in their small plot of land while her husband was away.

“I usually receive help from my neighbours. Everybody here is very helpful. But I am a woman after all. Of course I won’t travel too far searching for more labour or better seeds or to hire a tractor. I have to make do with whatever is available within the village. Then it is not so profitable. I do it sometimes but how long can you carry on like that? It is better to give it out to other share-croppers.”

When asked about what kind of work she felt was appropriate for her she said,

“I am always on the look-out for some government vacancies; say in the primary school or the day care centre or as a health education volunteer or something like that. I have studied up to secondary level. I can get a job like that. Then even if it is in the city I can take it up.”

There obviously exist norms regarding women’s work and women’s mobility. The norms are most pronounced among the Brahmins and it is the emulation of these norms that paves the way for the Mandals to stake claim on a higher position in the status hierarchy, even enabling them to view themselves as belonging to the same “class” as the Brahmins. Indeed Portes has observed that “individuals with very different resources and life chances frequently identify themselves as members of the same ‘class’” (Portes 2010: 1541). In Palasi, a few Brahmin women have found employment as teachers or volunteers for various government schemes, thanks to their basic formal education and cultural capital/skill repertoire. This has, independently from the impact of migration, given rise to new norms around women’s work and mobility. In the absence of the same skill repertoire, Mandal women have been deprived

of similar opportunities. But increased earnings and better opportunities from migrant work has allowed some Mandal families to withdraw their women from wage labour. It has also meant the application of Brahminical gender norms on them as a move to assert new-found or newly perceived class identities. From this I deduce that the ascendancy of the Mandal community within the status hierarchy and within the perceived class structure has taken place at the expense of Mandal women's legitimacy to work and access spaces outside of the household.

6.5 Migration and Social Transformation in Palasi: Values and Power

Portes (2010: 1543) has argued that "the deep character of power seldom comes to the surface of social life" and the essential value system of a community reveals itself through "the continued stability of basic elements of culture and social structure". In this section I discuss two such elements that the participants talked extensively about and that to me explicate the core value system at work in this culture and the resultant power structure that upholds the social structure.

The first element is the longstanding commitment of all migrants across caste lines to keep their family in the village no matter how often or for how long they stayed away from it. The second is the continued and stable culture of paying dowry to the groom's family, present among all caste groups and households across the income spectrum. These two concepts are intrinsically connected and together constitute the basis for the perpetration of the caste-based patriarchal social and cultural life that this community is an example of.

Rege (1998, 2003) has argued that the very basis on which the caste system thrives is the sacrosanct nature of the idea of endogamy which is strictly upheld in Palasi as in most parts of India. Thus caste propagates itself by controlling the bodies and sexualities of women and constructing women's bodies as the bearers of community prestige and caste pride. (Chakravarthy 2000, Rege 1998) Gopal (2011: 224) has argued that although some forms of reproduction of caste have been broken down or altered by shifts in traditional occupations or moving out of original places of residence, but strict control over women's bodies and their social markings continue to be the gateway to the caste system and patterns of marriage play a crucial role in sustaining and reproducing caste.

As observed in the previous section, women's mobility and control over their labour formed an important aspect of assertion of status and identity. This is taken a step further in men's articulation of why their women needed to stay on in the village and never be allowed to

move out. In all narratives across the castes, men upheld the idea of protecting their women and keeping alive the tradition of living in the village. The following extracts from interviews make this point more cogently.

“I have never even thought along those lines. Even if we starve to death, I will never take my wife and family out of the village. Such thoughts never cross our minds. We are not such people.”- Vidyanand Mandal, 40

“We never think about taking the women and children with us. Who will protect them there when we are out for work. This is a tradition of many years. Here they live with our parents and our community. It is good and safe. This is how it should always be.”- Visu Ram (Mushahar), 34

“When the woman stays here, she is safe. Who would think of taking her to the city? There all kinds of people live together. All the labourers live together. How can you take your woman there? If she stays here she doesn't even need to go to the weekly market. There is always someone to run errands for her. How will she live in the city?”- Bablu Jha (Brahmin), 25

There is a clear indication here in these quotations, that the core anxiety over moving the female body to a space out of the village which is accessible to men from different castes and communities is that of violation or pollution of what she stands for- the purity and goodness of her community. The emphasis is therefore more on “what kind of people” would do such a thing to their women as opposed to the real dangers and threats involved in women's lives outside of the village. It is useful to mention here that there were a few instances of women and families traveling and settling with the migrants at the destination but all of these instances were from the neighbouring Muslim settlement. Although this did not find explicit mention in most of the narratives, Bisokanand Jha (Brahmin, 65) indirectly referred to this when he said *“those people there might do such a thing (pointing in the direction of the Muslim settlement) but here in this village I challenge you to try and find one such household. I bet there are no such people here.”*

The core value that can be inferred from this overall attitude and disposition is that of identifying women with community and family prestige. This value is also reverberated in the idea that daughters are “wealth belonging to others” (*parayi dhan*) and a “burden on the natal home” that the groom's family relieves them of. It is in this idea that the seed of dowry lies.

The payment of dowry is ubiquitous in the village. In the words of Mithu Mishra (Brahmin, 35):

“The family starts saving for dowry from the moment the daughter is born. These days the rates for dowry have gone up very high. One has to sell off land or incur very high debts to be able to afford it. But nobody wants to fight against it, because every family also has a son.”

Indeed several life stories mentioned “sudden crisis” (*aafat*) as the trigger for migration. When probed further the most common explanation was either daughter’s or sister’s wedding (and hence payment of dowry) or the death of a close male relative leading to loss of livelihood. When asked how the incomes from migration had helped them, the Dalit women in an FGD said,

“We are poor and we have always been poor. But now if somebody falls sick or dies, or if we have a daughter’s wedding coming up, we know there is some place to go where we can work and earn money.”

Dowry too is a site for asserting caste ascendancy at the expense of women’s self-worth. As put by Ramdev Mandal, *“we (the Mandals) are not like the Brahmins....they maintain a register for their sons and keep note of every penny spent on his education to earn it back from the bride’s family as dowry money; but these days we are also able to work and pay good dowries to our daughters so that they get married into a good household and stay happy.”*

Thus the central values that lend credence to the existing power structure remain intact in Palasi. In fact incomes from migration have contributed to consolidating the values to a certain extent by making adherence and participation easier for the Mandals and Dalits. Aspirations for better positions within the structure are articulated in terms of better adherence to the core values and thus uphold the existing power structure. Since the values are centred around notions of gender, there has emerged an impasse between gender and caste interests leading to a situation where the challenge to the power structure is only more deeply entrenching the value system and thus perpetuating a self-defeating cycle.

7. In Place of A Conclusion: Contemplating the Future of Social Transformation under the Impact of Migration

I have attempted in this study to understand what meaning the phenomenon of migration holds for members of the sending communities and what is the shape of change in the social structure and cultural imagination of the sending community as a result of this migration.

In the first part of my analysis I have argued that the lived experience of labour migration and the place that the act of migration holds in the popular imagination of the sending community is at odds with the way in which the phenomenon of labour migration has been theorized in the existing literature. The experience of migration has defied the existing categories of knowledge and analysis with regard to migration. This calls for a rethinking of our fundamental understanding of how migration plays out in the lives of sending communities.

In the second part of my analysis I have attempted to understand if and how this form of migration may result in some form of social change with regard to social relations of caste and gender. In doing this I have employed Portes' model of components of social structure and culture. I have argued that aspects of caste and gender relations that relate to the lower levels of the hierarchy in the model have shown considerable change in the face of migration. Specifically, these include the organization of agriculture, the terms of labour and the economic roles accessible to women. However with regard to components of social relations that are higher in the hierarchy, the phenomenon of migration has changed little, in fact by some measure enabling these components to be more firmly entrenched. This is exhibited in the continued prevalence of the practice of dowry and absence of women's mobility outside of the village/caste-homogenous settlement. In particular I have argued that there exists a conflict of interest between caste-based ascendancy and gender-based emancipation that leads to an impasse, preventing the phenomenon of migration from exerting its influence on the further layers of culture and social structure; instead turning it into a means for consolidating the same.

I am aware that this understanding is in its nascent stage. It may be extendable to other similar contexts within the district or the state; but the sheer vastness of the country and the diversity in the existing caste and gender matrices makes it difficult to argue in favour of casting this understanding as a typology of sorts. To fully realize its potential for replication,

similar studies need to be carried out at multiple sites and over longer periods of time, perhaps within the framework of a timeline study.

The future of social transformation under the impact of labour migration is uncertain but full of potential. The purpose of this study was never to pass judgment on the change-creating potential of labour migration or to qualify this change as good or bad. The study gives an indication of what is the nature of change that has been brought about by the phenomenon and what aspects remain unchanged despite of it. This understanding can now pave the way for informed policy-making with regard to migrants and migrant-sending communities. It is also possible that the degree and nature of change itself will be transformed within a few decades or that the phenomenon of migration itself will take on newer forms. Nonetheless, I am hopeful that this study will be successful in introducing new insights and perspectives into the overall study of labour migration within India.

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