



Research Article

THE TREND OF SPATIAL LABOUR MOBILITY IN INFORMAL SPATIAL CLUSTERS IN WEST BENGAL: ALTERNATIVE REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT PARADIGM

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ABSTRACT

The present study is an effort to focus on the nature and process of spatial labour mobility in case of informal sector occupations. In this sense, the study objects to detect the factors that determine labour mobility processes and their influences on the processes. To reveal this, the study is confined to a particular informal sector occupation, namely the Gems and Jewellery industry. For this, the study has selected a specific site, i.e. Domjur in Howrah district, due to its significant position in the map of migration in West Bengal. The study further attempts to detect whether spatial migration in Domjur shows a J-Curve effect in migration. To reveal this, the logical argumentation of the study is based upon literature support, case studies conducted, and the sample survey results. The micro-level field studies, sampling design and data analysis are based on the standard model approach in order to avoid spatial homogeneity.

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INTRODUCTION

The present paper focuses on the nature and processes of labour mobility in case of a few selected informal sector occupations in West Bengal. The study objects to detect the factors and their influences to the labour mobility processes to a few employment-generating informal sector occupations in South Bengal, namely the Gems and Jewellery industry, the Zari and Embroidery industry, the Clay Pot Making industry, the Hosiery industry and the Bag Producing industry. For this, the study has selected a specific sites selected in several districts in West Bengal, namely Domjur and Panchlaln Howrah; Bowbazar in Kolkata; Belhgaria, Bidhannagar, and Sinthi in North 24 Paraganas; Bhawanipur in South 24 Paraganas; and Daspur-Ghatal in West Midnapore due to their significant position in the map of labour migration in the respective industries in West Bengal. The study further attempts to detect whether the migration processes are contributing the growth of the industries, thereby influencing regional growth by larger employment generation. The logical argumentation of the present study is based upon the support of migration literature, case studies conducted, and the primary survey results.

The micro-level field studies, sampling design and data analysis have been approached on the basis of the standard model in order to avoid spatial homogeneity.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The logical argumentation of the study is based on literature support, case studies and primary survey results. The survey process is exhaustive. The survey is based on qualitative purposive sampling with semi-structured questionnaire and indirect interview method. The micro-level field studies, sampling design and data analysis are based on the standard model approach.

The implication is that the selection of any sampling region does not depend on data availability (or non-availability) and avoids spatial homogeneity. The study also assumes that the producing firms within a cluster of any industry are non-homogeneous in nature. However, the spatial distribution of production units of a single industry is cross-sectional, given and known. Sometimes an ethnographic study has been approached due to data non-availability and data non-responses in the sample survey area.

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THE MICRO PERSPECTIVE OF MIGRATION

The study may be started with the origin of the literature on labour mobility attributing to geographer Ravenstein (1885, 1889), to whom the major cause of labour mobility is rather economic. In his “laws of migration”, he saw the process of labour migration and economic development as inseparable. It is observed that the primary objective behind migration of several informal industrial workers is rather economic, i.e. to earn higher income at destination. To follow the “laws of migration”, in the early stages of its development, the industrial regions attributed the process of labour migration as a major weapon to generate economic development of the region.

To view the validity of the law, later the neo-classical migration literature has been developed which views the aspect of migration both at the micro and macro perspectives. At the micro-level, the theory observes migrants as rational individual agents who decide to move spatially on the basis of their own cost-benefit calculations. Borjas (1989a, 1990b) argues that such mobility depends upon skill-specificity of the labourers and specific characteristics of the labour market structure of the industry - which is further intensified in case of informal sector occupations due to their inherent heterogeneity in skill and labour market structures of any particular industrial site, assuming free choices and full information access in the labour market¹.

In the process of spatial labour mobility, usually skill is considered to be a (human) capital - which is earned by investment of social capital² and now is invested as a (physical) capital in the informal labour market in order to earn higher wage earnings from the far distance areas of the. Here, accumulation of skill is actually considered to be as accumulation of (human) capital that results in higher wage earnings - mobility of physical or financial capital may exist there, however, their magnitude and role is much insignificant to explain labour mobility processes in case of informal sector activities.

In an ‘industrial district’ in informal sector activities,³ “the mysteries of the trade become no mysteries”; and “children learn many of them unconsciously”, as Alfred Marshall (1890, 1892) points out. This is why specialized abilities has been transmitted from one generation to another from their teen age and has become an important characteristic of the area. In this way, skills are embodied within one from his/her childhood or teen-age - he/she may become unconscious regarding incorporation of this skill within him/her from the childhood, however, may possess some specialized skill after a particular age (usually teen age). For this, an informal mode of skill formation process appears at the local level. Since it appears for majority of the people of the area, the area has become renowned for specialized skill and knowledge in that specific informal industrial production and has acted upon as an important determinant for concentration of firms requiring this hereditary skill in production in the area. With specialized skills, high division of labour appears within the firms due to differentiated skill possession by different individuals with their differentiated abilities. This leads to product specialization and innovation with labour-intensive techniques of production.

The reason may be found on the fact: in an “industrial district”, good ideas are promptly adopted into the production process because good ideas are in the “air” of the district, which works well into the well-established social networks with well-developed bonding and tie-ups at the local level. In this way, the localized industry offers “a constant market for skill”, particularly when the production of the “industrial district” is skill-based. The employers become assured with supply of skilled workers since there is always a supply of skill in the local market.

One major cause behind such a spatial labour mobility in informal industries lies in the fact that skill has always a tendency to flow in absence of much paper works and conditionality regarding the recruitment of labourer. Skill usually attempts to find a market for its own; therefore, skill always shows the tendency to flow at destination(s) for earning higher incomes. Here, social capital plays the role of a guarantor at the time of recruitment of labour in the informal labour market - however, such informal bonding and belongingness becomes insufficient to tie up labour at a particular place. For this, spatial mobility of informal labour becomes inevitable.

To explain the process of spatial labour mobility, the micro-foundation aspect may be approached. Here, worker is often trained in the local informal labour market at their teen-age. After completion of their training, most of the workers become semi-skilled who either work for higher wages and experiences at the local level or move to other far distant physical destinations to earn higher wages and to find out market for their skill inherited and acquired. In this way, the semi-skilled and skilled workers make their skill marketable by finding out new physical location(s) even. The spatial mobility of the informal sector labour provides him/her the scope to sell their skill at higher prices. The workers usually accept the costs and risks of physical out-migration if their probable income at destination becomes higher than their earnings at the local market. Here, a cost-benefit calculation at the micro level approaches a stochastic behaviour for the labourer and makes horizontal mobility of the informal labour a reality.

Here the question may arise: why skilled informal labour flows spatially? It is due to the actual wage differentials across locations. A skilled labour would decide to migrate spatially if there lies a spatial wage differential between the two locations. The amount of wage differential should be sufficient to cover the cost and risks of migration. Let us consider that the wage at origin is w and the wage at destination is w^* . Let c is a fixed cost type of component which includes all the major costs of migration (such as the cost of fooding and lodging at destination, mental cost of staying outside home, travel expenses etc.) and informal risk premium r (which include familiar contacts at destination, ensured job, better work conditionality etc.). Then a skilled worker would decide to migrate if the wage differential is higher than the cost and risks of migration, i.e.

$$(w^* - w) > (c + r).$$

It is to be noted here that the informal risk premium r would be high enough if the supply of social capital to the migrant worker is higher at destination.

Further, the supply of social capital also influences costs of migration c to a certain extent – higher is the supply of social capital; the lower is the costs of migration for the migrant labourer.⁴ To the human capital frame, developed by Becker (1962) and Sjaastad (1962), considers migration as an investment decision. They provide the theoretical explanation of consideration of migration beyond costs consideration. Since individuals differ in terms of personal skills, knowledge, physical abilities, age, sex, and so on - such differences are reflected in terms of expectations over diverging returns on migration investment. Hence, such expected differentials are actually considered to be partial explanation over inter-individual properties to migrate.

THE LEE HYPOTHESIS

Later, the migration literature founds to have an enriched and varied field of enquiry when Lee (1966), an important contributor to migration literature, revised Ravenstein's 19th century laws of migration and proposed several determinants of migration associated with the area of origin, the area of destination, the intervening obstacle variables such as distance, physical barriers, immigration laws etc., and individual factors. In this, the Lee Hypothesis becomes relevant to explain the urban-urban migration which is common in several informal sector activities.

The Lee Hypothesis lists out factors determining migration other than wage differentials. To Lee, migration takes place within well defined "streams", i.e. from specific places at the origin to specific places at the destination, not only due to the fact that opportunities tend to be highly localized but also because the flow of knowledge back from destination facilitates later migrants. Lee stated that migration is selective with respect to individual characteristics of migrants due to response differentials to the "plus" and "minus" factors by the migrants at origins and at destinations. To Reniers (1999), in these cases, abilities also vary between migrants to cope with the intervening variables. Therefore, migrants are rarely representatives of their community of origin. This appears to be consistent with the neo-classical idea of migration selectivity by individual differences in human capital environments and cost and risk differentials associated with migration.

The analytical frame of Lee, also known as the "push-pull" model, works well to explain mobility of informal sector workers other than income differential variables. To Passaris (1989), it is basically an individual choice and equilibrium model. Two main forces are typically distinguished to create the pushes and pulls here:

- Rural population growth causes a Malthusian pressure on agricultural and natural resources, and pushes people out of marginal rural areas, and
- Economic conditions lure people into cities and industrialized destinations.⁵

However, modification continued later to the inclusion of other factors other than unemployment that influence expected income gains that can be achieved through migration. To the later migration economists, the potential gain in the form of higher wages is balanced with factors such as the opportunity

costs of migration, the cost of travel, temporary unemployment while making all installation at the destination, and the physiological costs of migration. In fact, the costs and risks associated with migration, particularly in case of international migration, explain why it is generally not the poorest of the region in case of informal sector activities to migrate and why social networks in the form of social capital are so crucial in lowering psychological costs of migration in the region.

The selectivity aspect of migration detects that the selection of migrants also depends on the specific background of skills of the migrants, depending on the specific type of labour demand in migrant receiving areas. This theoretically explains why the likelihood of migration is age-specific (it is observed that actually it decreases with age) and skill specific (individuals with higher skills exhibit higher migration propensity). Therefore, as Bauer and Zimmermann (1998) point out, we have to take into account the internal structure and segmentation of labour markets as well as individual socio-economic characteristics and capital also to consider real migration scenario of informal labour market.

THE NEW TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE MIGRATION LITERATURE

To explain why people of the informal sector tend to migrate between particular places and why they migrate in a spatially clustered concentrated non-random pattern, the spatial model, as developed by geographers and demographers, analyzes migration within the context of well-defined streams and localized opportunities. This appears due to individual characteristics and differential abilities of individuals of any particular space to intervening variables (King and Schneider, 1991; Schwartz and Notini, 1994; Skeldon, 1998; Bauer and Zimmermann, 1998). To Reniers (1999), the flow of labour becomes area-selective due to individual characteristics (e.g. community preference) and differential abilities of the individuals to address the intervening variables. Here, labour mobility facilitates information flow back from destination to origin, thereby contributing to later mobility from the origin (Lee, 1966). The already "settled" migrants function as the "bridgeheads", thereby reduces material-psychological costs and risks of later migrants by providing them information, remittance, feedback and higher standard of living for their family members through the formation of a migrant community or network⁶. Here, the network connections are considered to be a form of social capital that people of the space draw upon in order to gain access to employment at destination. At the receiving end, social capital (in the form of migrated kin) influences to legal, political and financial obstacles to immigration and at the sending end it reduces the costs and risks of migration.

In this way, the skilled and experienced workers of any special informal industrial location try to utilize their social capital possession and move to the informal and formal labour market of other cities in India and even to other countries in order to earn higher incomes. Higher is the skill, higher is the probability for inter-state and international migration, thereby enhancing higher (expected) income earnings and other considerations such as better work condition, higher education for their children, better health care facilities for their family

members etc. This ‘stochastic’ pattern of skill-deterministic labour mobility strictly depends upon individual characteristics to cope with the costs and risks of migration at destination.⁷

Once such “chain” (network) migration brings network connections at a critical level at the origin, migration appears to be self-perpetuating since it caters the entire social structure to sustain the process. To Lee, this forms an established migrant community at destination and increases probability of subsequent migration. Such social bonding and feelings of being part of one (transitional) community explains why migrants tend to remit substantial money to non-migrants (Djajic, 1986; Taylor, 1999). The migrants here are referred as restrictive “gatekeepers” who are unwilling to assist prospective migrants beyond the community (Appleyard, 1992; Massey et al, 1993; Bocker, 1994; Waldorf, 1998; Levitt, 1998; Massey, 1999; De Haas, 2003).⁸

Therefore, the migration flows and counter-flows of goods, remittances, ideas and information tend to be geographically structured with spatially clustered flows. This morphology explains well the migration pattern of several informal localized industrial clusters, though is not totally explained by income, employment (unemployment) and opportunity differentials between destination and the origin – rather it explains why particular areas or groups tend to specialize in mobility to particular destinations. Vertovec (1999) refers that migration system link people, families and communities over space. Migration then becomes almost systematic out of these specific sites, following a particular pattern or “system” (Massey, 1990).⁹ Such “system” migration sometimes becomes sufficient to alter socio-cultural-economic-institutional conditions at both the sending and receiving ends by largely influencing output, employment and growth of the regional industrial economy (Levitt, 1998).

The causes and consequences of migration then should not be considered separately – rather they are parts of the same system, i.e. the entire development space of the region within which migration process operates. In this way, spatial labour migration systems incorporate a two way reciprocal and dynamic link between migration and development. The focus is on information flows and feedback mechanism through which information about the migrants’ reception and progress at destination are transmitted back to the origin and lead to organized rural-urban migration flows. Portes and Borocz (1987), McKee and Tisdell (1988), Fawcett (1989), Martin (1992), Gurak and Cases (1992) and Kritiz et al (1992) extended this approach to international migration by incorporation of the process of “leapfrogging”¹⁰. Such an international level migration gives the worker of the informal labour market of villages and small towns to become a global worker to earn much higher income than the local and national market.

To refer the inverted U-curve or J-curve approach, a temporary increase in migration (i.e. a migration hump¹¹) is an indispensable part of the development process. In this, in the early stages of development, an increase in the wealth has led to a rise in migration of the region. With the establishment of migration “networks”, an increasing proportion of population is able to migrate, selectivity of migration tends to decrease, and

the process of economic development tends to lead to an increasing diffusion of migration access communities. Therefore, economic development of the region and decreasing income differentials with destination areas tend to follow a J-curve or inverted U-curve effect on migration – steeply increasing in the initial phase of development of the region and then gradually decreasing. However, several researchers have shown, by using “labour frontiers”, that migration tends to decrease only at later stages of the development process of any region and the region is transmitted from net labour exporters to net labour importers (Bohning, 1994; Rotte et al, 1997; Olesen, 2002).¹²

Conclusion

The nature of spatial labour mobility processes of several informal sector industries detect that economic development of the region and decreasing income differentials with destination areas tend to follow a J-curve or inverted U-curve effect – steeply increasing in the initial phase of development of the region and then gradually decreasing. Several researchers have shown, by using “labour frontiers”, that migration tends to decrease only at later stages of the development process of any region and the region is transmitted from net labour exporters to net labour importers. However, the mobility processes become sufficient to change the entire development process of the region by influencing its output, growth and employment.

APPENDIX

Earlier published references

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By social capital here we mean social organizations (such as trust, norms, reciprocity, co-ordination, interactions,

belongingness and networks) between workers and producers that facilitate better co-ordinated actions.

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However, several researchers argue that the push-pull model in the neo-Malthusian frame lacks empirical testing. Further, it ignores the heterogeneity and internal stratification of societies.

Here, “networks” are defined as sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants at the origin and at destination through bonds of kinship, friendship and shared community.

Ref: Saha, Sukanta (2011), The ‘Unprotected’ Sector of Gold and Jewellery in West Bengal, Summaries of the Conference Papers, The Indian Society of Labour Economics, 53rd Annual Conference, 17-19 December 2011, Organized by MohanlalSukhadia University, Udaipur, Rajasthan, India.

The Network Theory has been criticized on the ground that empirical researchers consisting case-studies with samples on dependent (network) variables are potentially biased to instances where such networks play infusionist role.

Here, a migration system is referred as a set of places linked by flows and counter-flows of people, goods, services and information that facilitate further exchange (including migration) between places.

The Leap-frogging phenomenon conveys: (i) There is an initial phase, in which all regions are roughly equal in size; (ii) The process of agglomeration starts; (iii) The further reduction of transport costs causes a long gradual decline; (iv) The transport costs are virtually absent and manufacturing activity in all the regions becomes approximately of the same size (Mabogunje, 1970; Arizpe, 1981; Borocz, 1987; Fawcett, 1989; Massey, 1990; Massey, 1991; Martin, 1993; Martin and Taylor, 1996; Olesen, 2002; van Dalen et al, 2005).

Here, “migrant syndrome” is considered in which migration is referred as a process of draining labour and human capital resources (Almeida, 1973; Lipton, 1980; Reichert, 1981; Penninx, 1982; Lewis, 1986; Massey et al, 1993; Reniers, 1999; Taylor 1999). A “migration hump” refers that in the early stages of development, an increase in the wealth leads to a rise in migration.

The Zelinsky model, the Skeldon model and the Martin-Taylor model may be integrated into a spatio-temporal transitional migration perspective with complex linear inter-linkages between the occurrence of various forms of migration and general socio-economic technological demographic transformation process incorporated in “development” process.

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