

Spatial Patterns of Tribal Migration in West Bengal

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Abstract: Tribal migration is a significant phenomenon driven by various socio-economic factors, including poverty, lack of opportunities, and environmental vulnerabilities. The study analyzes the trends, patterns, and factors influencing migration, highlighting the complexities of tribal migration in the region. Using census data and other secondary sources, the study reveals that rural-to-rural migration is the most dominant stream, with marriage being the primary reason for female migration. The study's findings have implications for policymakers and development programs aimed at promoting sustainable development and improving the well-being of tribal communities.

Keywords: Tribe, Livelihood, West Bengal, Migration streams. Pattern of migration, districts, Census, Population

1. Introduction

The worldwide migration of tribal communities, particularly from economically backward to advanced regions, amounts to countless human migrations. These migrations are mainly motivated by the tribes' quest for a better livelihood. Low economic conditions, insecure agricultural production, absence of fundamental facilities and entitlements, and rapid population growth are primary factors that prompt tribal migration. Backwardness in livelihood pushes tribes to migrate and impels others to change their lifestyles. The tribe is a part of human society, maintaining its own customs, traditions, religion, and worship. It is important to note that the tribal community of West Bengal is not a homogeneous group; rather, it includes several tribal groups associated with the culture of Bengal.

West Bengal is home to 40 different tribal groups that are known for their distinct customs and traditions. These groups are widely scattered throughout the district of Jalpaiguri, Bankura, Purulia, Paschim Medinipur, Bardhaman as well as other parts of West Bengal. When discussing the migration of tribal groups within Bengal, this study primarily focuses on the internal migration pattern.

2. Historical Context of Tribal Migration

In the context of Sundarbans settlement, the tribal people brought their traditional experience from nearby forest areas and introduced it to the Sundarbans mangrove forest. The transfer of technology and accumulated knowledge of over 10,000 years is considered a crucial factor in the establishment of human settlement in this hitherto unsettled dense mangrove area. Major tribes like, Santhal, Oraon, Munda were migrated from Chotonagpur, Bihar, to Sundarban as labour during colonial period (Annu Jalais, 2010). On the other hand, in the middle of 19th century, from Chotonagpur and Bihar, large number of Santhal, Oraon, Munda, and Kharia Tribes were moved to North Bengal as Tea garden labourers (Bhowmik, 1981).

3. Demographics of Tribal Communities

The 2011 census shows that West Bengal's total tribal population is 5,296,963, making up around 5.8% of the state's overall population

. This tribal population also constituted around 5.08% of the total tribal population of India.

The percentage of scheduled tribe rural population is higher than the urban population. Tribal people engage in primary activities such as cultivation, mining, hunting, and fishing etc.. These activities form the economic base of rural areas (CHAND, 2016).

4. Factors Influencing Migration

Migrants—especially from rural areas—depend more on relatives for finding work. The decision to migrate is a household consideration, based on potential risks and amenities either at the origin or the destination (Singh et al., 2014). Economic opportunities remain the primary—although not exclusive—driver of migration. When the economy cannot absorb the growing labor supply, migration provides a way to adapt, reallocating labor to regions with better conditions or greater demand (Kumar et al., 2014). Migration redistributes human resources from regions with zero or low social marginal product to environments with growing marginal returns, fueled by the accumulation of capital and the progress of technology (Singh et al., 2013).

4.1. Economic Factors

Migration is a long-standing practice among tribal groups in West Bengal, influenced by various socio-economic and political factors. The primary cause for these movements is a desire for improved livelihoods; migrants typically seek better wages and living conditions but generally plan to return home once their goals are achieved (Singh et al., 2014).

Economic considerations also dictate the seasonal nature of some migration and the selection of destinations. Skilled migrants—such as masons and carpenters—tend to remain at locations where they have secured relatively improved terms of employment, whereas unskilled or marginally skilled—carrying out such occupations as stone-breaking, rickshaw-pulling, catering or contract labour—typically alternate between two or three destinations according to the season (Kumar et al., 2014).

4.2. Social Factors

Migration of population has occurred many times since the dawn of human history. Several theories have been propounded to explain the occurrence of migration. A number of social, cultural, economic, spatial, climatic, and demographic factors for migration. Among them, the economic factors seem to be the main driver factors for migration. The most effective theory for explaining migration is push and pull theory, which posits that migration typically occurs when the positive pull forces at the destination are outweighed by push factors at the origin. Regardless of the underlying theory, migration is considered socially beneficial because it reallocates human resources from areas where their social marginal products are zero to places where their marginal products are positive and rapidly growing. The new economics of migration explains that the decision to migrate is taken by larger groups of related people, households, or families rather than. Research on migration is of utmost importance because of its significant impact on both the place of origin and independent persons, as a way to mitigate risk and augment revenue via cross-sectoral mobility destination (Singh et al., 2013).

4.3. Environmental Factors

Environmental vulnerabilities and exposures are key determinants of migration. Cyclones, floods, riverbank erosion, and salinity ingress exert highly differential impacts on migration and non-migration decisions by local populations, especially in coastal areas. Seasonal hazards such as flooding during monsoon and landslides also cause temporary inward movements with poorer households looking for work in urban areas but leaving behind dependents in the place of origin.

5. Patterns of Migration

Patterns of tribal migration in West Bengal exhibit diverse characteristics across different groups, including reasons, durations, and migrant profiles.

Gathering data on these distinct patterns poses considerable challenges. In some cases, official records of tribal migrants—and even of all migrants—are unavailable because many rural migrants leave their villages without any formal documentation. Inter-state and long-distance migration, in particular, tends to go undocumented. Unregistered and informally arranged migration is a common feature of tribal life. Even when statistics exist, they rarely cover all relevant aspects.

Information on migration streams is typically available only in the broader context of the general population; data specifically on the segment of migrants belonging to Scheduled Tribe families remains elusive. In some areas, tribal movement is so infrequent that capturing meaningful information is virtually impossible. This study mainly focuses on the internal migration pattern. To understand the internal migration patterns of West Bengal, census data from 2001 and 2011 have been used and analyzed.

When individuals migrate to seek employment elsewhere, their reasons are likely to include poverty, a lack of opportunities, underemployment, and other factors related to their place of origin. Poverty and a lack of opportunities, however, rank well below such factors as community background, personal experience, and merely following friends or relatives who have gone ahead.

5.1. Internal Migration

Migration is the process of changing one's residence and is typically categorized as either internal or international migration. Internal migration refers to the movement from one location to another within the same country, such as rural-to-urban or urban-to-urban migration. Migration towards the capital city has increased rapidly in many developing countries, exhibiting a hierarchical pattern characterized by migrants who are mostly young, more educated, and employed compared to the national average (Mastak Al Amin et al., 2017). Migration is an effective channel for internal resource reallocation that catches the attention of economists and policymakers alike. Demographic characteristics, including age group, sex, marital status, education, occupation, and family size, have a significant influence on migration patterns. Larger households, for example, tend to migrate more frequently to maintain family responsibility and efficiency.

Table 1: Total number of ST migrants and Total ST population

Year	2001	2011
Total ST Population	4,406,794	5,296,963

Source: Census data 2001 & 2011 Table 1 shows the total ST population

Table 2: the top 10 districts in West Bengal by the number of Scheduled Tribe migrants, (2011)

District Name	Total Migrants		
Paschim Medinipur	3525138	Murshidabad	350194
Barddhaman	2147174	Purba Medinipur	132576
Puruliya	2008898	Haora	78354
Jalpaiguri	1953958	Koch Bihar	62210
Bankura	1797720	Kolkata	25500
North Twenty Four Parganas	1208924	Murshidabad	350194
Maldah	1187510		
Hugli	1166462		
Darjiling	1146698		
Dakshin Dinajpur	1067594		
Birbhum	823650		
Nadia	628324		
South Twenty Four Parganas	385998		

Table 2 shows that

Paschim Medinipur stands out with the highest migration, followed by Barddhaman and Puruliya. Whereas among the districts, Kolkata has the smallest number of migrants.

Table 3 Reasons for migration.

Reason	Males (Volume)	Males (%)	Females (Volume)	Females (%)
Work/employment	32401	9.3	11322	1
Business	2146	0.62	1410	0.12
Education	4902	1.41	3103	0.27
Marriage	34965	10.04	877067	77.43
Moved after birth	34440	9.89	27588	2.44
Moved with household	48607	13.95	45046	3.98
Others	190912	54.8	167219	14.76

Source: Census(2011)

Table 3 shows the reasons for migration for both males and females. For males, the most common reasons are "Others" (54.8%), "Moved with household" (13.95%), and "Marriage" (10.04%). For females, "Marriage" is overwhelmingly the main reason (77.43%), followed by "Others" (14.76%) and "Moved with household" (3.98%).

Work and employment/employment and education are significantly more important for males than for females. This highlights a substantial gender difference in migration reasons, with marriage being the primary reason for females and a more diverse set of reasons for males.

Table 4: Duration of Residence (in Years)

Duration of Residence	Males (Volume)	Males (%)	Females (Volume)	Females (%)
Duration of residence < 1 yr	12,032	3.45	25,325	2.24
Duration of residence 1-4 yr	33,371	9.58	147,538	13.03
Duration of residence 5-9 yr	31,753	9.11	153,922	13.59
Duration of residence 10+ yr	116,457	33.44	675,214	59.61

Source: census (2011)

This shows that the majority of both male and female Scheduled Tribe migrants in West Bengal have resided in their current location for 10 years or more, with the proportion being exceptionally high for females.

It's clear that the majority of both male and female migrants have resided in their current location for 10 years or more, with the proportion being exceptionally high for females. This suggests that long-term migration is more common, and the gender gap widens for longer durations

Table 5: Migration streams

Migration Stream	Total migrants	Males	Females	Percent of Total Migrants	Percent Males	Percent Females
Rural to Rural	1052633	149729	902904	84.31242196	65.38441384	88.56402153
Rural to Urban	76583	27696	48887	6.134045019	12.09442877	4.795226647
Urban to Rural	73458	30852	42606	5.883742854	13.47260675	4.1791361
Urban to Urban	45817	20721	25096	3.669790171	9.048550642	2.461615725

Source: census (2011)

This pattern highlights that most Scheduled Tribe migration in West Bengal is rural-to-rural, with relatively little movement between urban areas or from urban to rural.

"Rural to Rural" migration is by far the most dominant stream, accounting for over 84% of all migrants, and an even higher share among females (almost 89%).

The "Rural to Urban" and "Urban to Rural" streams are significantly smaller, each accounting for approximately 6% of the total, with the "Urban to Urban" stream being the least common.

Table 6: Intra-district and Inter-district Migration

District	Intra-district Migrants	Inter-district Migrants
Paschim Medinipur	865472	60488
Jalpaiguri	487380	29908
Puruliya	462368	58518
Barddhaman	437058	131366
Bankura	376340	88610
Maldah	293970	21590
Darjiling	275956	26324
Dakshin Dinajpur	260802	26406
Hugli	234198	74708
North Twenty Four Parganas	222636	93928
Birbhum	198992	19568
Nadia	119598	41914
Uttar Dinajpur	111610	33572
Murshidabad	79298	13982
South Twenty Four Parganas	77576	27528
Purba Medinipur	13378	20276
Haora	10038	10790
Koch Bihar	9374	6752
Kolkata	0	6380

Source: census (2011)

Table 6 shows for each district, the number of people who migrated within the same district (intra-district) and those who migrated from other districts within the state (inter-district). Paschim Medinipur has the highest intra-district migration, followed by Jalpaiguri and Puruliya. Barddhaman and Bankura also have significant migration numbers.

6. Findings :

This study is made to understand the pattern and nature of internal tribal migration. Several essential aspects have been identified in this study. The highest ST population is in Paschim Medinipur, followed by Jalpaigudi, the second-highest, and Purulia is the third most ST-populated district. While Paschim Medinipur has the highest number of ST migrants, Barddhaman ranked second, and Purulia is the third highest in ST migrants. This study also reveals the reasons behind internal migration. Both males and females have diverse reasons for migration. The main reason for females' migration is marriage, and several reasons for males, migration include move with household, move after birth, marriage, and employment. The nature of migration is long-term both for males and females. While most of the streams of migration have occurred from rural to rural both for male and female, and urban to urban migration is the type of migration.

7. Conclusion

The spatial pattern of tribal migration is an important area of study as it helps to understand the reason and nature of migration. Examination of the territorial space of any society reveals the extent of its roots. The soil beneath the feet of the tribal population is their fortress for shelter and livelihood. The tribal people of India have continued to inhabit the lands of their forefathers since pre-historical times. However, over the last few decades, they have left their native villages and migrated to adjoining and far-off places for various reasons. Migration from the physically and economically vulnerable areas of India is not a new phenomenon. The tribes of India have migrated to several places within the country and to foreign countries during British rule for economic betterment as cheap labour.

Over the last three decades, the tribal people of India have left many of their identitarian features and have created a new identity through their continuous process of socio-economic mainstreaming. Leaving the malnourished concept of inherent simplicity and natural closeness to the mother earth and establishing parity among all classes in Indian society, they have shaped a new image. Poverty, unemployment and many other socio-economic and demographic factors have led to the large-scale migration of tribals to far-reaching areas at present. The exact figures of migration can be ascertained only if a migration salient variable is included in the decennial census. Nevertheless, the patterns of tribal migration in West Bengal reveal that different groups are moving to different places for different purposes, and their spatial patterns are quite distinct.

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