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MIGRATION POLITICS AND ITS IMPACT ON THE PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING OF POOR PEOPLE IN NORTH BENGAL

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ABSTRACT

Migration is an important socio-economic phenomenon in North Bengal. People migrate from rural areas to towns, from one district to another, and to other states in search of employment, education, better wages and improved living conditions. However, migration is not simply an economic decision; it is also influenced by political policies, regional inequalities, landlessness, unemployment, ethnic identity, displacement and the unequal distribution of resources. For poor and marginalised communities, migration often becomes a matter of survival rather than personal choice.

This paper examines how migration politics affects the psychological well-being of poor people in North Bengal. It focuses on the emotional and mental consequences of forced and distress-driven migration, including anxiety, fear, insecurity, loneliness, family separation, uncertainty, loss of identity and social exclusion. It also considers the experiences of tea garden workers, agricultural labourers, Adivasi communities, Rajbanshi communities, women and other economically vulnerable groups. The paper argues that migration-related psychological distress should be understood not only as an individual problem but also as a consequence of structural poverty, political decisions and unequal development.

Keywords: Migration politics, psychological well-being, poverty, North Bengal, social insecurity, displacement, identity crisis, marginalised communities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Migration has become a significant feature of social and economic life in North Bengal. The region, comprising Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, Cooch Behar, Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur, has diverse geographical, cultural and economic characteristics. Despite its natural resources and cultural diversity, many communities experience poverty, unemployment, inadequate infrastructure, land insecurity and limited livelihood opportunities.

For poor people, migration is frequently a response to economic hardship. Agricultural labourers may leave their villages during periods of unemployment, while workers from tea gardens may migrate because of low wages, irregular employment or the closure and instability of plantations. Young people may move to cities and other states in search of education and work.

Migration is also connected with politics. Government policies, regional development programmes, land regulations, ethnic identity movements, citizenship debates, border administration and labour arrangements can influence people's decisions to migrate or remain in their native places. These political and economic conditions may create uncertainty and insecurity among vulnerable populations.

The psychological consequences of migration are often overlooked. People who migrate may experience separation from family, discrimination, exploitation, fear of losing employment and uncertainty about their future. Those who remain behind may also experience loneliness, anxiety and additional family responsibilities. Therefore, migration politics must be studied not only in terms of population movement and economic change but also in terms of its effects on human emotions, mental health and social relationships.

2. MEANING OF MIGRATION POLITICS

Migration politics refers to the relationship between migration and political power, policies, institutions and social conflicts. It includes the ways in which political decisions influence who migrates, why people migrate, where they move and what rights and opportunities they receive.

In North Bengal, migration politics may be understood through several dimensions:

i. Economic politics: Unequal employment opportunities, low wages, poverty and inadequate rural development.

ii. Land and displacement politics: Land insecurity, displacement and conflicts over access to natural resources.

iii. Identity politics: Ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity, including the concerns of different regional communities.

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iv. Border politics: The influence of border administration, citizenship-related concerns and cross-border historical connections.

v. Labour politics: Recruitment systems, informal employment, exploitation and the absence of adequate social security.

vi. Development politics: Unequal distribution of infrastructure, education, healthcare and livelihood opportunities.

These dimensions can influence migration decisions and shape the experiences of people who move or remain behind.

3. BACKGROUND OF MIGRATION IN NORTH BENGAL

North Bengal has experienced different forms of migration over time. Historical movements of workers, agricultural migration, displacement, urban migration and seasonal labour migration have contributed to its changing social structure.

The tea plantation economy of the Darjeeling hills, Terai and Dooars has a long history of labour mobility. Adivasi and other plantation-worker communities have developed distinct social and cultural identities in the region. In addition, agricultural workers and economically disadvantaged households often depend on temporary employment outside their villages.

The region's proximity to Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and other parts of eastern India also makes migration an important historical and contemporary issue. However, different forms of migration must be distinguished carefully. Historical settlement, voluntary migration, seasonal labour movement, displacement and migration under economic pressure are not the same phenomenon.

For poor households, migration is often linked to the absence of secure local employment, low agricultural income, educational limitations and a lack of social protection.

4. MAJOR CAUSES OF MIGRATION AMONG POOR PEOPLE

4.1 Poverty and unemployment

Poverty is one of the principal reasons for migration. When local employment cannot provide sufficient income, people are compelled to search for work elsewhere. This creates uncertainty about food, housing, education and family security.

4.2 Agricultural insecurity

Small and marginal farmers, agricultural labourers and landless households may experience seasonal unemployment, low agricultural returns and vulnerability to floods or other environmental problems. Migration becomes a strategy for household survival.

4.3 Tea garden crisis

In some tea-growing areas, workers face problems associated with low wages, irregular work,

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poor housing and instability in employment. Difficult conditions in tea garden communities can encourage temporary or long-term migration.

4.4 Unequal regional development

Differences in infrastructure, educational opportunities, healthcare facilities and industrial development can encourage people to move from rural and remote areas to towns, cities and other states.

4.5 Political and social insecurity

Land disputes, ethnic tensions, political instability and uncertainty about rights and opportunities may influence migration decisions. Such factors can also intensify people's fear about their future.

4.6 Education and employment aspirations

Many young people migrate to obtain higher education, professional training and better employment. Although this may be voluntary, financial limitations and a lack of local opportunities can make migration stressful.

5. PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF MIGRATION POLITICS ON POOR PEOPLE

Migration has both economic and psychological consequences. The psychological effects are especially significant when migration is forced by poverty, insecurity or political circumstances.

5.1 Anxiety and uncertainty

Poor migrants frequently face uncertainty regarding employment, income, accommodation and personal safety. They may worry about whether they will find work, receive wages on time or be able to support their families.

5.2 Fear and insecurity

Political uncertainty, discrimination, exploitation and lack of legal or social protection may create a feeling of insecurity. People may become fearful about their identity, rights, livelihood and future.

5.3 Depression and emotional distress

Separation from family, repeated unemployment, financial difficulties and social isolation may contribute to sadness, hopelessness and emotional distress. These experiences should not automatically be treated as clinical depression without proper assessment.

5.4 Family separation and loneliness

Migration often separates husbands and wives, parents and children, and other family members. Migrants may experience loneliness, while family members remaining in villages may feel abandoned or emotionally burdened.

5.5 Identity crisis and social exclusion

Migrants may struggle to maintain their language, culture and community identity in unfamiliar

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places. Discrimination based on region, language, ethnicity, class or occupation can weaken their sense of belonging.

5.6 Loss of self-esteem

People who migrate for low-paid or insecure work may experience humiliation, exploitation and a sense of social inferiority. This can negatively affect confidence and personal dignity.

5.7 Stress among women and children

Women may face additional responsibilities when family members migrate. They may have to manage household work, childcare, agricultural activities and financial difficulties. Children may experience emotional insecurity, educational disruption and separation from parents.

5.8 Psychological effects on elderly people

When younger family members migrate, elderly people may remain alone in villages. They may experience loneliness, insecurity and difficulty accessing healthcare or everyday assistance.

6. Migration Politics And Vulnerable Communities In North Bengal

The impact of migration is not uniform. Different communities experience it according to their economic position, social identity, gender and access to resources.

- Tea garden workers: Employment insecurity and low household income may encourage migration and produce family stress.
- Adivasi communities: Historical marginalisation, livelihood insecurity and limited access to resources may influence migration experiences.
- Rajbanshi communities: Rural economic inequality and limited employment opportunities may shape decisions about temporary and long-term migration.
- Agricultural labourers: Seasonal unemployment and uncertain agricultural income may produce repeated migration.
- Women: Migration can increase economic independence in some circumstances, but it may also expose women to exploitation, insecurity and additional unpaid responsibilities.
- Young people: Migration for education and employment may create opportunities but can also produce loneliness, pressure and uncertainty.
- Elderly people and children: They may experience emotional consequences when working-age family members migrate.

7. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The study can be explained through the following sociological and psychological perspectives.

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7.1 Push-Pull Theory of Migration

This theory explains migration through factors that push people away from their place of origin and factors that attract them to another destination. Poverty, unemployment, land insecurity and political uncertainty may act as push factors, while better employment, education and living conditions may act as pull factors.

7.2 Marxist Perspective

The Marxist perspective connects migration with class inequality, unequal ownership of resources and the exploitation of labour. Poor people may be compelled to migrate because their local economic conditions do not provide adequate opportunities for survival.

7.3 Relative Deprivation Theory

This perspective explains how people experience dissatisfaction when they perceive that their living conditions and opportunities are inferior to those of others. Comparisons with economically developed regions may create frustration, insecurity and a sense of exclusion.

7.4 Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory helps explain how people understand themselves through community, language, ethnicity and cultural belonging. Migration may challenge these identities when individuals face discrimination or feel excluded in a new social environment.

7.5 Psychological Stress and Coping Perspective

This approach examines how individuals respond emotionally to uncertainty, financial pressure, separation and social discrimination. Social support, family relationships, community networks and access to public services can influence people's ability to cope.

8. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MIGRATION POLITICS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Migration politics affects psychological well-being through the unequal distribution of economic opportunities, social protection and political power. When people feel that their livelihood depends on decisions over which they have little control, they may experience helplessness and uncertainty.

For example, a worker who migrates because a tea garden has become economically unstable may not experience migration as an opportunity for personal growth. Instead, the worker may perceive it as a forced decision. Such migration can involve separation from family, insecure accommodation, unfamiliar working conditions and the fear of exploitation.

Research on North Bengal supports the importance of these concerns. Thapa and Mishra (2022), in their study of seasonal out-migration, connect migration in northern West Bengal with agrarian distress and the search for livelihood security. Kakati (2024) documents out-migration from Kurti

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Tea Garden in Jalpaiguri, linking it to limited employment, inadequate amenities and household debt.

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The psychological consequences are therefore connected with the conditions under which migration takes place. Migration accompanied by secure employment, decent housing and social support may improve well-being. Migration driven by poverty, exploitation and insecurity may increase psychological distress.

9. ROLE OF POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS AND GOVERNMENT POLICIES

Political institutions have an important role in determining whether migration becomes a source of opportunity or a source of distress.

The government can reduce distress-driven migration through:

i. Generating stable employment opportunities in rural areas.

ii. Ensuring timely payment of wages and implementation of labour rights.

iii. Improving the condition of tea gardens and providing rehabilitation where necessary.

iv. Strengthening rural employment programmes and livelihood schemes.

v. Providing affordable healthcare and mental-health services.

vi. Ensuring access to education and vocational training.

vii. Protecting migrant workers from exploitation, trafficking and deceptive recruitment.

viii. Providing social security benefits that remain accessible when workers move between locations.

ix. Strengthening women's economic security and access to support services.

x. Promoting transparent and inclusive regional development.

The political response should recognise that migration is not necessarily a problem in itself. The central issue is whether people can make informed choices and migrate safely, or whether they are forced to move because they have no viable alternative.

10. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A number of studies provide a foundation for understanding migration and livelihood insecurity in North Bengal.

- Thapa and Mishra (2022): Their article, Agrarian Distress and Seasonal Out-migration: Insights

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from a Field Survey in North Bengal, examines the relationship between declining agricultural viability, livelihood distress and seasonal migration. It is particularly relevant to understanding migration as a survival strategy among marginalised rural households.

Sage Journals

- Kakati (2024): In Out-migration from Tea Gardens and Its Cause and Effect: A Case of West Bengal, India, the author examines migration from Kurti Tea Garden in Jalpaiguri. The study identifies limited employment, household debt and inadequate amenities as important factors behind out-migration.

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- Golay and Hannan (2024): Their study, Labour Market and Livelihood Practices in the Closed Tea Gardens of Darjeeling Hills, West Bengal, discusses alternative livelihood practices and out-migration among workers in closed tea gardens. It also identifies gender-related consequences and disruption of marital life.

Sage Journals

- Rinju Rasaily: In Living through the Tea Crisis: Women Workers' Predicament in North Bengal Tea Plantations, the author discusses the relationship between the tea crisis, women's labour, deprivation and migration. The study highlights the social costs of livelihood displacement.

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- Purnima Roy: Her research on Adivasi movements in the Dooars and Terai discusses economic marginalisation, tea garden dependence, unemployment and migration to other states. It provides important regional context for understanding the relationship between political marginalisation and livelihood insecurity.

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Although these studies examine migration, labour and livelihood conditions, there remains scope for further research specifically investigating the psychological experiences of poor migrant households in North Bengal.

11. RESEARCH GAP

Existing research has examined seasonal migration, agrarian distress, tea garden crises, labour conditions, displacement and political marginalisation in North Bengal. However, the psychological consequences of migration politics require more focused investigation.

The proposed study will address the following gaps:

- The relationship between political and economic insecurity and psychological distress.
- The emotional experiences of people compelled to migrate because of poverty.

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- The psychological impact of family separation on women, children and elderly people.
- The relationship between migration, identity, discrimination and social exclusion.
- Differences between voluntary, seasonal and distress-driven migration.
- The role of family, community and government support in reducing migration-related stress.

12. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The major objectives of the proposed research are:

1. To examine the causes and patterns of migration among poor people in North Bengal.
2. To analyse the influence of political and economic factors on migration decisions.
3. To study the psychological impact of migration on poor and marginalised communities.
4. To investigate anxiety, fear, loneliness, insecurity and emotional distress among migrants.
5. To examine the impact of migration on family relationships and social life.
6. To understand the experiences of women, children, elderly people and tea garden workers.
7. To assess the relationship between migration, identity crisis and social exclusion.
8. To examine the role of government policies and social institutions in addressing migration-related problems.
9. To suggest measures for improving the psychological and socio-economic well-being of vulnerable populations.

13. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the major causes of migration among poor people in North Bengal?
2. How do political decisions and regional inequalities influence migration?
3. Does poverty-driven migration increase anxiety and psychological insecurity?
4. How does migration affect family relationships and social support?
5. What psychological challenges are experienced by women and children in migrant households?
6. How do discrimination and identity-related concerns affect migrants?

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7. What role do government policies and community organisations play in reducing migration-related distress?

14. RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

The following hypotheses may be tested through empirical investigation:

- H_1: There is a significant relationship between economic insecurity and psychological distress among poor migrant households in North Bengal.
- H_2: Distress-driven migration is associated with higher levels of anxiety and social insecurity than migration undertaken primarily for education or planned career advancement.
- H_3: Family separation is significantly associated with loneliness and emotional distress among migrants and their family members.
- H_4: Social support is negatively associated with migration-related psychological distress.
- H_5: Employment insecurity and perceived discrimination are significantly associated with lower psychological well-being among migrants.

15. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design: Descriptive and analytical research design.

Nature of the study: Mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods.

Study area: North Bengal, West Bengal. The research may cover selected rural, tea garden, semi-urban and urban locations across the seven districts.

Proposed population: Poor households, seasonal migrants, migrant workers, families of migrants, tea garden workers and other economically vulnerable groups.

Proposed sample size: 300 respondents, subject to feasibility and field conditions.

Sampling techniques: Multistage sampling and purposive sampling. Snowball sampling may be useful for reaching migrant workers who are difficult to identify through household lists.

Sources of data:

- Primary data: Structured questionnaires, interviews, focus-group discussions and case studies.
- Secondary data: Books, research articles, government reports, census publications and relevant institutional records.

Tools for data collection:

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1. Socio-economic background schedule.
2. Migration history questionnaire.
3. Questions on political and economic insecurity.
4. Psychological well-being questionnaire.
5. Interview schedule for family members and migrant workers.

Suggested psychological indicators: Anxiety, loneliness, perceived insecurity, stress, family separation, social support, self-esteem and sense of belonging. A validated instrument, such as the WHO-5 Well-Being Index or an appropriate validated distress scale, may be selected according to the study population and research design.

Statistical techniques: Percentage, frequency distribution, mean, standard deviation, correlation, chi-square test and suitable regression analysis.

Ethical considerations: Informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation and sensitive handling of distress-related questions are essential. The research should not diagnose mental-health conditions unless conducted by appropriately qualified professionals.

16. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study is significant because it connects migration with the psychological experiences of economically vulnerable people. Migration is generally discussed in terms of employment, remittances, population movement and economic development. However, its emotional and social costs are equally important.

The study may contribute to:

- Understanding the relationship between poverty and psychological insecurity.
- Identifying the emotional consequences of distress-driven migration.
- Highlighting the experiences of marginalised communities in North Bengal.
- Developing gender-sensitive and family-centred migration policies.
- Improving social protection and mental-health support for migrant workers.
- Providing useful information for researchers, policymakers, social workers and development organisations.

17. EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The proposed research is expected to identify how economic hardship, employment insecurity,

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political marginalisation and family separation influence the psychological well-being of poor people in North Bengal.

It may also reveal differences in psychological experiences between seasonal migrants, long-term migrants and people who remain in their villages. The study could demonstrate the importance of social support, secure employment, accessible healthcare and inclusive development in reducing migration-related distress.

These are expected areas of investigation, not established findings. Actual conclusions must be based on collected and analysed field data.

18. SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Create sustainable employment opportunities in rural and tea garden areas.
2. Improve wages, housing, healthcare and educational facilities for plantation workers.
3. Establish accessible counselling and mental-health support services.
4. Provide migrant workers with information about safe employment and legal rights.
5. Strengthen social security for workers moving between states.
6. Develop support programmes for children and elderly people in migrant households.
7. Promote women's participation in local employment and decision-making.
8. Prevent deceptive recruitment practices, labour exploitation and trafficking.
9. Encourage local community organisations to provide emotional and practical support.
10. Ensure that regional development policies are inclusive and responsive to the needs of poor communities.

19. CONCLUSION

Migration politics has a profound relationship with the socio-economic and psychological conditions of poor people in North Bengal. For many marginalised households, migration is not simply a matter of personal ambition; it is often a response to poverty, unemployment, agricultural insecurity, tea garden instability and unequal development.

The psychological consequences of such migration may include anxiety, fear, loneliness, family separation, identity insecurity and emotional distress. Women, children, elderly people and workers employed in insecure occupations may experience particular difficulties.

The study therefore argues that migration should be understood as both a socio-economic and a

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psychological phenomenon. Political institutions must move beyond treating migration merely as a movement of labour and recognise the human experiences behind it. Sustainable employment, social protection, inclusive development, safe migration opportunities and accessible mental-health services are necessary to protect the dignity and well-being of poor people.

Ultimately, the success of regional development should not be measured only by economic growth or employment statistics, but also by whether people can live with security, dignity, social belonging and psychological well-being.

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