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Married Women Migrating from Rural Uttar Pradesh and Bihar: Juggling Family Duty and Aspirations

Priya Deshingkar¹ and Jyoti Tripathi²

This article traces the experiences of accompanying wives who had migrated with their husbands from southern Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and returned to their villages during the COVID-19 pandemic. It dwells on post-marriage migration and work which is an under-researched aspect of women’s migration. Our study offers insights into the ways in which married women navigate power relations within the family as well as their places of work to fulfil their family obligations and personal aspirations. The analysis shows how they juggle multiple family roles as wives, mothers, daughters-in-law and daughters in their decisions related to (im)mobility, work and earning. Theoretically, the article speaks to the production of gendered and racialised work and how these fit into capitalist accumulation, women’s productive and reproductive labour, and the tensions between family duties and personal aspirations. The women in the study were ‘factory’ workers, home-based workers and ‘homeworkers’, all with different subjectivities. Although women’s work and mobility are shaped by patriarchal norms in both states, the women in our study were pushing the boundaries of tradition and asserting their views within the family. Work in cities has given them the means of fulfilling aspirations, especially related to their children’s education.

Keywords
Married women, gender and migration, gendered urban spaces, gender and work

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The analysis of migrating women’s lives within the family and their experiences as workers under capitalist systems of production has been the subject of several studies in India and elsewhere (Mazumdar et al., 2013; Wilkinson-Weber, 1997). While women have entered the workforce, they have not been released from unpaid work in the home such as childcare, cooking, tending animals and looking after homesteads. From a Marxist perspective, these social reproduction activities performed by women are critical to capitalist accumulation as women’s work within the home contributes to the maintenance of the existing class divisions by reproducing the labouring classes (Mezzadri, 2020; Norton & Katz, 2017). The importance of rural homes as the sites of social reproduction of labour became evident at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in India when millions of migrants returned back to their rural families (Mezzadri, 2020; Shah & Lerche, 2020). Globally, the lowest levels of production and services in factories, domestic work and other low paid jobs employ a classed, gendered and racialised migrant workforce (McDowell et al., 2007; Parreñas, 2000). In India, men and women in low-skilled factory work often belong to the lower castes. They are restricted to feminised tasks and spaces, and these divisions are reinforced by traditional gender roles and cultural stereotypes of women’s capabilities (Osella & Osella, 2006; Rai, 2020).

The extant literature on women’s migration focusses on either the impact of men’s migration on women who are left behind, migration for marriage (Chatterjee & Desai, 2020; Mazumdar et al., 2013) or female migration and labour force participation (Banerjee & Raju, 2009; Chaudhary & Verick, 2014; Das et al., 2015). Although it is recognised that many women enter the workforce after marriage, there is a dearth of research on married women’s migration and work. The few papers that exist mostly examine labour force participation of post-marriage migration from an economic perspective, for example, J. K. Parida and S. Madheswaran (2020) and Mazumdar et al. (2013) who offer insights based on a large survey conducted by the Centre for Women’s Development Studies (CWDS) across 20 states and Zachariah & Rajan (2001) who analyse women’s migration patterns from Kerala to the Gulf based on surveys carried out by the Centre for Development Studies. We do not know enough about the ways in which married women, accompanying their husbands to the city, simultaneously manage their productive and reproductive roles. Neither do we know enough about the ways in which they juggle their family and filial duties with personal aspirations.

It is precisely this complicated range of obligations, desires, plans and actions that we focus on here to better understand how married women migrants maintain their role as good wives, daughters, daughters-in-law while also earning for their personal aspirations. The article draws on informal, open-ended conversations with seven women working in a variety of feminised occupations and what happened to them in the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. We focus on women migrating for low-paid and unskilled work in a variety of ‘factory’-based work, home-based work and homework, all informal and precarious as they lack formal contracts or any workplace benefits.

Whereas factory workers earned a regular and relatively substantial wage (considering most were engaged in unpaid domestic labour in their villages), the earnings of women were much lower than what the men earn, even though the
differences in their work were not so apparent. This confirms yet again what many others have noted which is that women are routinely paid less. For example, the analysis of the nationally representative National Sample Survey and National Family Health Survey data observes the ‘inexplicable’ pay gap and attributes it to discrimination against women (Fletcher et al., 2017). Those women who were involved in home-based work in our study were employed on extremely exploitative terms, earning very small and variable amounts ranging from ₹600 to ₹1,200 a month. Other research has shown that the home-based workers’ earnings in India are much lower than other informal occupations (Chakravarty, 2021). We examine the reasons for married women accepting these forms of work and what it means to them in terms of fulfilling their family duties and personal aspirations. We build on the research of feminist geographers who have drawn attention to the way in which lower caste migrant women provide a pool of cheap exploitable labour in jobs at the lowest tiers of a range of enterprises, slotting into and reproducing gendered divisions of labour in the city (Rai, 2020).

Our objective here is to probe the relational aspects of women’s experiences in their families as they interact with their husbands, in-laws and natal families and how that shapes their migration and subjectivities. We also train the spotlight on the ways in which they manage their obligations as wives and daughters-in-law with their own personal aspirations. In nearly all the cases, the women have expressed a desire to educate their children, and it was especially striking to see how mothers with low levels of formal education aspired to give their girls a good education by accepting exploitative work.

The accounts presented below, thus, provide rich detail on married women’s navigation of gendered power relations within the family as they embark on migration and enter work. The work choices of women in our study have depended on their childbearing status and family care responsibilities. We offer insights on how the subjectivities of married women migrants are constituted through the intersection of their class, gender and caste positions during migration. All of them entered feminised work roles that have been socially constructed on the basis of stereotypical understandings of women’s capabilities and what is socially appropriate for them. This segregation occurs at the time of recruitment and continues to be reinforced by factory floor supervisors who are usually male. Those women who work from their own or others’ homes are similarly relegated to low-paid feminised work such as attaching accessories to garments, making garlands and, recently, sewing medical masks (Datta, 2021). In such cases, their interactions are with contractors who drop off raw material and collect the finished product. The contractors enact and uphold cultural constructions of gender difference for the extraction of surplus value as they are responsible for selecting women and enforcing production targets in this particularly exploitative feminised work.

While the ancillary tasks performed by women in certain industries, such as garment manufacturing, are relatively well recognised, there are many others that we do not know enough about. This lack of knowledge is not just in terms of the actual task performed, but also characteristics of women who do the work and the social relations that shape their experiences. Here, we delve into the specificities of forms of factory work and home-based work that are under-researched and
under-documented. Each one of these reconfigures gender roles and responsibilities of women vis-à-vis their families and work in specific ways. The case studies show how women must prioritise their care duty and how labour is reproduced within the family. But at the same time, they also show how these processes are entangled with their aspirations for going beyond their class boundaries. Most of the women that Jyoti Tripathi spoke to were migrating to mobilise funding for the education of their children or to access better schools in the city.

Here, it is useful to look at the way family obligations have been theorised in literature on India. While earlier normative patriarchal accounts of the family present it as a site of cooperation and harmony to protect the integrity and honour of the family, there has been a growing recognition of a more complex concept of family which has adapted to occupational mobility, individual aspirations and conflict (Uberoi, 2006 cited in Kaur, 2019; Samanta, 2019). The position of women within their families has changed with migration and education; they now have more decision-making powers and are more visible outside the home (Rodgers & Rodgers, 2011). We are seeing women who have aspirations and opinions in the family, and although they are migrating, their activities are still circumscribed by patriarchal norms, especially in the case of younger women.

The Context

The villages of migrants’ origin in our study lie in southern Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh, which is the heart of the infamous ‘Red Corridor’ of Naxal activity, comprising some of the poorest districts in the country. This region has witnessed organised rebellions against the upper castes by historically oppressed lower castes (Sahay, 2004; Sharma, 2005). Underlying these tensions was the highly exploitative zamindari system of land allocation and rent-seeking as well as extremely extractive labour and sharecropping arrangements which created relations of dependency between rich upper castes and lower castes who lived in abject poverty.

Migration has been one of the transformational factors in the region that has helped to reduce the dependency of historically poor castes and classes on landowners. However, they are adversely incorporated into urban employment where traditional caste relations imbue workplace hierarchies (Lerche & Shah, 2018). Yet these very urban areas are seen by the rural families, like the ones we discuss here, as the only real route out of inter-generational poverty.

The study locations were Kaimur district in Bihar and Sakaldiha which is a poorer part of Chandauli district in Uttar Pradesh. Both lie in the Red Corridor and are among the poorest in the country, characterised by historically unequal land distribution and a heavy dependence on agriculture with little industrialisation.

Methods

Informal open-ended conversations were held on an opportunistic basis with seven married women who had returned to villages in southern Bihar and Uttar
Pradesh from cities in the wake of the first lockdown imposed by the Indian government. These conversations had not been planned as interviews, and the women were identified by Tripathi through snowballing and her own personal network in the Varanasi area that had been established for previous research. Therefore, textbook interviewing methods were not possible where a respondent would give her own views without interruption and influence. In nearly all the cases, the women had to be spoken to in the presence of their husbands and/or male and female relatives. In a deeply conservative patriarchal society such as rural Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, conducting a deep conversation with a woman in a separate room or out of earshot of the men in the family would have created suspicion and led to consequences for the concerned women. It is recognised that this created some limitations on what could be asked and also what the women reported, especially about tensions within the family over migration and work matters. But at the same time, it provided a unique opportunity to speak to married women’s experiences of migration from this region.

Migration, Life Course and Intra-household Relations

Nearly all the women in our study are in their 20s and 30s with children of varying ages. They fall under the broad category of bahuen (singular, bahu) or daughters-in-law in the joint family system. Even though there is much interaction between people in these two districts and the outside world, there seem to be some continuing patriarchal restrictions on bahuen. Not letting your daughters-in-law go out to work is a matter of prestige and honour. It is common to hear the refrain, ‘Hamare ghar ki bahuen bahar kaam nahin karte hain’ [In families like ours, daughters-in-law do not go out to earn a living] during the conversations in the villages. They were expected to focus on domestic responsibilities of child-rearing, caring for elders and providing food for the family.

In such a social context, the migration aspirations of married women could be realised only if endorsed by the husband or if someone from her natal family supported both husband and wife to migrate. Take the case of Sujata who belongs to a Kushwaha/Koeri (Other Backward Classes [OBCs]) family in Kaimur. Her husband had been migrating to Navsari in Gujarat to work in the rice mills and plastic bag industry for several years. He wanted to take her there to support him by running the house. He persuaded the family elders to let her go as there were other women in village who could manage the family responsibilities. She went along with this idea, but she had her own ideas for earning which we discuss below.

In Renu Devi’s case too, the idea of migration originally was presented by her husband to the family even though she herself had wanted to work outside and earn. She is a 29-year-old woman belonging to the Rajbhar caste in Sakalidha. Rajbhars are mainly landless labourers in the village where women earn around ₹50 a day doing agricultural or brick kiln work. Renu’s situation in the village was visibly poor with a mud house and basic facilities. Her husband had previously migrated to Dindori Bazar in Nashik, Maharashtra, in 2001 along with others from the village. By 2020, he was earning well at ₹350 per day. He felt his wife
should be by his side to make progress: ‘Jab tak aurat char baat na kariyan, tab tak na hoyee’ [Women need to remind men about the importance of earning better for the development of their family]. She was keen to migrate because she wanted to experience life outside the village and earn. She had heard that women could earn up to ₹200 per day. Her desire was to build a house and educate her children in good schools.

Prabha’s migration from her village in Kaimur was facilitated by her sister who was settled in Palwal, Haryana. Prabha is a 35-year-old woman belonging to the Bind (OBC) caste who are dependent on low-paid wage labouring in the village. Her sister supported her idea that her migrating and working in the city was the only way to improve the situation of the family.

**Aspirations**

A common thread running through all the conversations was that married women wanted to mobilise additional income through their own work to fulfil particular goals: children’s education and marriage; purchase of gold, house construction and purchase/lease of land; and natal family’s needs, gifts for the in-laws and wider family obligations.

For Prabha, the main motivation was to secure the future of five girls under her care. Three of these were her own teenaged daughters and the other two were her widowed sister’s children whom she was looking after. In Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, daughters are regarded as a burden as parents must find them a good groom who will provide for them (Leder & Chandramukhee, 2013). The girls’ parents are expected to spend a lot of money for the wedding and dowry. Prabha aspired to educate them and marry off the girls in a befitting way and knew this was not possible unless she left the village to work: ‘Kuch kaam nahi karenge to ka khayenge; kaise badhenge’ [If we do not work, how will we eat; how will we move ahead]. Prabha describes the life of women in the village as eating and sleeping, as there is no regular work: ‘Gaanon me kuch bhi na hain, kewal kheti grihasti hain. Gaon me koi kaar karkhane nahi hain aur shahar mein companiyan hain. Barah maas kaam hain. Apni mehanat pe kaam karo aur kamao par gao me nahi hain’ [In villages, there are no factories or any other work, but in cities, there are companies. In cities, you will have employment throughout the year, but not in villages where there is only seasonal work]. She wanted to migrate to earn more than the money she earns from occasional ropani (sowing) and sohani (weeding) work at home.

Chanda Devi echoes similar thoughts. She believes that working and saving in the city is the key to success and one can develop oneself in the city while it is hard to earn money in the villages: ‘Shahar me to bachat hota. Admi ban jayenge agar e dharti chod ke chal jaye’ [One can save in the cities, one can become self-sufficient if we leave our villages]. She also says that taking loans during an emergency is easier in the city, whereas in the village, even after having done their work, it is really hard to get paid what is owed to them. Chanda Devi left behind two daughters and one son in the village and wants to build their futures. Another woman, Sitara
Devi who migrated from Sakaldiha did so because she wanted to educate her three children in good schools and marry off her daughter properly. She feels bad because she is uneducated, and her husband has only studied until Grade 8. Education is an important key to change the life: *Padh likh lenge to acche aadmi ban jayenge* [If the children get educated, they will have a good future].

What was striking from the caste profile of the women was that even erstwhile oppressed castes like dalits had extremely high aspirations for migration and the education of their children, although the outcomes of education are in no way guaranteed for them. Anita is a 30-year-old woman from Sakaldiha belonging to the Chamar caste. The Chamars were historically leather workers and regarded as untouchables in the varna caste system. However, they are among the most upwardly mobile dalit communities, especially with regards to education (Ciotti, 2006), and they have high ambitions for their continuing social transformation. Anita has been educated up to high school, having passed Grade 10. She reflects her aspirations for upward mobility and wanted to migrate to change the circumstances of her family. Her dream is to build a house, purchase gold, educate her children, marry them well and have money in hand to spend. Although traditionally Chamar women have had no restrictions placed on them in relation to working outside the home, there has been a gradual adoption of higher caste practices such as confining women to the domestic sphere, dowry and purdah (veil) to show upward mobility in society (Rawat, 2011). Anita, thus, faced some opposition to the idea of migration. She eventually mustered up the courage to ask some of the women in her neighbourhood about job opportunities in Surat, Gujarat, where her husband and other men from the village were migrating. Her migration journey began after she became a mother when she joined her husband, but only after considerable negotiation with the joint family.

Renu who also comes from an extremely poor landless family in Sakaldiha—which was surviving locally, mainly dependent on brick kiln work and agricultural labour—aspired to change their lives through migration. She has two sons, aged 10 and 7, and wants to educate them in the city. She says, *Yahan sarkari school mein kya padhayenge? Master ko toh kewal apni tankhah se matab hain* [There is no point in educating them in government schools, the teachers there are only to collect their salaries]. She says, *Hamare jaise nahi rahenge. Hum log to na padhe. Par padhe likhe rahenge to mitti ka kaam kaun karega?* [They won’t be like us. We didn’t get an education: but if they get educated who will do our type of labour?]

**Work in the City**

Once in the city, the kinds of work options that women could pursue were circumscribed by class, caste and gender, and they knew which jobs they could apply for from the accumulated experience of those who had come before them. As most of them belonged to the OBC or SC category with low levels of formal education, their options were limited to labour jobs. Exactly what job they opted for depended on their position in the labour market as well as inside in homes. Their
work options depended on how their caste and gender identities were constructed by employers, and inside their home, it depended on their family responsibilities. Those who were able to leave their older children (over the age of 10) behind in the village with either their natal families or their in-laws were able to take on full-time factory work, and others, with young accompanying children, took more flexible home-based or homework arrangements. Their concern was to ensure that they were able to balance their productive and reproductive roles without compromising the latter as this would attract social penalties within the family.

**Factory Work**

Prabha and her husband migrated in a group with other relatives, all looking for work in the prosperous Palwal industrial area. They would go to the gates of a factory and show the guard their Aadhar card as identity proof, and if there were any vacancies, they would be allowed to go inside and ask for work. Initially, both husband and wife found work in a dyeing factory. While her husband was working in the dye canister maintenance department where he had to load the dye into packing machines, she was placed in a more feminised job in the segregated packing area. Here, she would work ten hours a day, standing alongside an automated dye packing machine and separate the sealed pouches and pack them into boxes. She did this work and occasionally took on a couple of hours overtime work to supplement her income. She said, ‘Kaam ki chinta hoti hai, aur jab kaam ke liye aaye hain toh chhuti kyun le. Hum eka admi kamayenge to kuch mantain na hoga.’ [Working all the time is stressful, But we have come here only for work so we don’t want to take time off. If only one of us earns then we cannot look after our family]. She meant that women have to struggle to balance earnings with their social responsibilities. There were between 500 and 2,000 women like her in the factory at any given point, most from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

Chanda migrated to care for her sick daughter who eventually passed away. But she and her husband stayed on to support their son-in-law and earn for their children back home. During this time, she made connections with local women to find work and started to work in a soap factory in the packing department. She learned on the job from a co-worker: ‘Koi batai tabe na admi kare [Only when someone teaches us, will we be able to learn]. This is what she called a ‘local’ factory which offered a fixed wage of ₹8,000 per month with no Provident Fund (PF) or Employee State Insurance (ESI) scheme as these facilities were only available in proper bhari companies (meaning big, which indicates a large factory with benefits for the workers), she said. She used to work for eight hours a day with a lunch break. She was working in the same factory for six years since her first migration. Although the money was relatively small compared to other industrial workers in large companies, Chanda liked this work as it gave her the flexibility to return to the village to manage their small plot of land during the agricultural season. Both husband and wife were circulating between city and village work in this way.

Another factory worker was Anita, also from a Chamar (SC) background who started working in a ‘local’ factory in Surat where there was no PF or ESI and simply payment for work done: ‘Jitna aap kaam karenge utna paisa milega’ [Your
wages depends on your productivity]. She was employed as a ‘roller’ in a textile factory where her job was to unwind the last bit of thread on spools, splice these end bits together and create a new spool. This was evidently a feminised job as all the other rollers were women from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Odisha and Maharashtra. Although she was glad to be away from the physically demanding work in agriculture back in the village, she found the factory work very tiring as well as she had to lift heavy spools and do a lot of work that involved constant sitting and standing, up to 3–4 times per minute. She was paid for the amount of work she did in cash at the end of the month. Her work was, therefore, not a regular salaried position and came with no workplace benefits. She said that she often took an advance for her basic expenses after working for 15 days, indicating that she was paid a relatively low wage. She was reluctant to say exactly how much she was paid. It was probably not a coincidence that she was employed in such an exploitative way even by a large firm as rural caste hierarchies and remuneration patterns are reproduced in modern sectors (Deshingkar, 2017; Lerche & Shah, 2018). She complained about long days in the city because of her double work burden, in her home and at her workplace.

Renu and her husband were also factory workers, working on contract. They first migrated to Pune, Maharashtra, but were unable to get a well-paid job. So, they decided to go to Nashik where Renu’s brother was already working for a wine bottling unit where they were paid ₹3,000–5,000 per week to work as bottle washers. All the others working there were also migrants from different parts of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar such as Chandauli, Siwan and Ghor. At the factory, they were given work on a contract basis. This too had no PF and ESI with the job. They were provided with a room by the factory owner where four people were sharing. Anita liked the arrangement because they had electricity and proper sanitation which they did not have back in the village. Anita would come back to her room twice in the day to eat, rest and look after the children.

Home-Based Work

Sujata took her three children with her to Navsari when she migrated from Kaimur. Her daughter was 13-years-old at the time of our study and was studying in Grade 8, the second daughter was 10 and studied in Grade 5 and her 8-year-old son was in Grade 2. All of them are in expensive English-medium schools, and their fees together cost around Rs 24,000 a year. She also pays for private tuition for all three as well as uniforms, books and transport costs. Sujata decided that a home-based job would suit her. She has a high school education and is trained in tailoring. Initially, her husband said she did not need to go out to work as he was earning well from his factory job in plastic bags factory in Navsari and also was a migrant labour broker on the side. But she persuaded him to buy her a sewing machine so that she could start a sewing. She also started a training centre and offered classes in two shifts (12–2 PM and 2–4 PM). Each class had 10 to 15 students, and she was charging each one ₹500 per month. In that way, she had two sources of income and was able to afford the education of her children.

Madhu is a 23-year-old woman with three young children who migrated to Ahmedabad along with her husband. Her husband had migrated to the city at the
age of thirteen. On one of his trips back home, he married Madhu and decided to bring her to the city as she had gone through a bad pregnancy. While Madhu’s husband has learnt many skills (marble polishing, tile setting, welding) on his different stints in Delhi and other cities and has progressed on to skilled work, Madhu had very limited options. This is partly due to the fact that she has no formal education and also because she is a mother to three young children.

She found work in a plastic spoon-making factory through one of her neighbours. There she works as a packer, packing 50 spoons in each bag. For this, she is paid ₹30 for packing 100 bags of spoons. Her motivation for migration is earning to educate her two children and achieve a better standard of living. She had the two youngest children with her in Ahmedabad, so she had to balance looking after them. She earns less than those without children and makes between ₹600 to ₹1,200 a month. She is a home-based worker where the spoons and packing material are dropped off by a middleman, and she is paid when he comes to pick up the packed spoons.

Sitara Devi, a 35-year-old woman belonging to the Nonia (OBC) caste, had been migrating from the age of 20 to Ahmedabad. She first migrated to join her husband after marriage who was working as a welder in the city. The husband was earning ₹15,000 per month and had employed Sitara’s brother as a helper. The brother paid them ₹2,500 per month for his accommodation. But expenses were high in the city, and Sitara was not satisfied with the living conditions and development of her family. Inspired by her neighbours to work, she was unable to because she had small kids at that time. She had to manage her family, so it was hard for her to go out. She started taking on various kinds of home-based work: she started with making necklaces where she was paid ₹30 units for one dozen and earned ₹150–₹180 a day when work was given to her. She earned ₹600–800 per month in cash. She later took on work to attach electrical components to lights for which she was paid a mere ₹20 per 1,000 light fittings. She also worked at plastic spoon packing (50 spoons in one pack) at the rate of ₹30 per 100 packs, earning ₹1,500 –2,000 per month. Recently, she was cleaning steel spoons for which she was paid ₹1 for one dozen spoons. All of this work was done at her home with contractors dropping off the raw material and collecting the finished product from her. She used that money on her children or for emergencies. She had control over the money.

**Juggling Family Duties and Aspirations**

All the women in our study had to skilfully navigate their productive and reproductive duties and balance their family obligations and personal aspirations. For Prabha, life in the city was both a source of joy, but also constant stress related to work. Her day started at 4:30 AM, so that she could complete her domestic chores before going to work at 7:30 AM. She was sometimes called in to work on Sundays as well and which took away her only day of leisure and rest when the family would usually go out shopping. At first, her daughters accompanied her to Palwal where she arranged private coaching classes to keep up their studies, spending ₹450 each month which she paid for from her own earnings. But her mother-in-law
was taken ill, and money had to be sent home for her treatment. But she later decided to send the daughters back to the village to continue their education under the supervision of a close relative. She did not say why, but rising household expenses due to the illness of the mother-in-law may have been a reason.

Anita was simultaneously managing her work in the factory, looking after her children, supporting her brother and caring for her father back in the village. She was living with her children, husband and brother in Surat at the time of our study. After working in the textile factory for a couple of years, she decided to support her brother to come to Surat because he had finished his schooling in the village. Her 10-year-old daughter who is studying in Grade 4 also helps Anita with the housework. Her 8-year-old son studies in Grade 3. Anita was spending Rs 1,000 per child per month for their education. Anita was also her father’s main carer as her mother had died during childbirth. Her father ran a small shop of general merchandise in the village. She had left her children in the village to take care of her father when he had a heart attack the previous year. But she took them back to the city with her later to continue their education. A few years after arriving in Surat, Anita’s husband left his job in the same factory and started a fruit-selling business after learning about it from friends in the city. By early 2020, he was earning ₹400–1,000 a day. With three of them earning, they managed to buy a small plot of land in Surat before the lockdown on part payment and instalments of ₹10,000 per month, and Anita was delighted that she could buy the land in this way in Surat as it was not possible in the village. As the family had become better off, they were able to afford a relatively expensive hospital in Varanasi for her father’s treatment.

Her long-term plan was to save for her children’s marriages, but at the same time she ensured that she performed her duties towards her in-laws. She spent generously for a wedding in the extended family on her husband’s side. The couple saved enough to buy a plot of land in the village measuring 500 to 600 feet (1/2 biswa) at ₹60,000 this year. She is proud of what they have achieved: ‘Paisa kamaye toh vikas hua’. [Because we could earn money, we progressed]. She adds about migration, ‘Lalach hai, swarth hai bahar jane ka [There is a desire to leave our village to fulfill one’s needs].

Madhu’s meagre earnings were being used mainly for her children’s education as that was her personal goal and why she took on the work. Madhu’s eldest son was living with her grandmother so she sends money for his education. The 5-year-old son and the youngest 3-year-old son were with her. The family’s financial situation remained precarious, and they would sometimes have to borrow from relatives or the employer and gradually repay the loan. Although her job was not well paid, she liked living in the city as she could explore interesting markets and places to eat out. She enjoyed socialising with other people from Jaunpur and Azamgarh in the neighbourhood.

The extra that Sitara Devi is earning as a homeworker is enough to send her three children to a private school in the city. The eldest is a 14-year-old girl in Grade 9, next is a 12-year-old boy in Grade 6 and the youngest is a 9-year-old boy in Grade 3. She pays ₹1,000 per month per each child for their private school fees and private tuition. According to her, the village is not good for the children. They just do whatever they want to do, falling into bad behaviour, using bad language.
In the city they, stay at home and do not move anywhere without her permission. She occasionally sends money to her in-laws when they need it.

COVID-19 Experiences

COVID-19 interrupted the work and earnings of nearly all the women in our study. The factory that Prabha was working in shut down during the lockdown for six weeks, and they were not paid. Their landlord also asked them to vacate the room they were renting as they could not pay for the rent. But they were allowed to stay after government declared that tenants could not be forced to vacate, and they also received some money from the government. They could have stayed on with this support, but they had to return to the village because Prabha’s mother-in-law was seriously ill, and she had no choice in the matter. At the time of my conversation with Prabha, she was planning to migrate again with her husband as soon as it became possible, because both of them had to earn to improve the standard of the family: ‘Ek aadmi ka pura paisa khane, padhane aur rahne par kharcha hoga aur ek ki kamayee bachat hogi’ [One person’s salary goes towards the expenses for living, food and education while the other person’s salary is our savings].

Chanda and her husband had returned to the village during Diwali. But by the time they decided to go back to Rajasthan, the pandemic had started, and they had to stay in the village. But they too were making plans to remigrate.

Sujata had to stop her classes during the lockdown, but when others started opening their shops, she also started the classes with the consent of her husband. For Renu and her husband COVID-19 was a calamity as everything shut down. Initially, the employer paid ₹800 per week for the first month to each family. They and all the other migrant workers were confined to their rooms (‘Sab apne apne room pe rahe’). It was hard for them to manage daily life: ‘Kaam dhandha band ho gaeiyl to kaisa khoraki chali’ [Our work stopped, so how could feed ourselves]. In the end, their employer told them to return to their villages because it seemed that the pandemic-induced lockdown would last a long time. Eight of them, booked a small truck paying ₹80,000 to travel to their village at the rate of ₹10,000 per person. Once back in the village, Renu was expected to behave like a bahu again and just stayed indoors getting bored, ‘swatting flies’: ‘Eha baith ke makhiye na marat ha’. Normally, the alternative would have been to work in local brick kilns or sowing. But during the lockdown, there was no work in the village; no jobs were available. Renu’s husband could get only 10 kgs of government-subsidised grains, and Renu received two payments of ₹1,000 in her account. They were keen to go back to the city to earn: ‘Kama kerb age ke baam hoeiye’ [We want to work again to secure our future].

The lockdown was very hard for Madhu who was also in a precarious situation as a homeworker. She stopped getting work or any money from the employer. She did not get any support from the middlemen or government and survived on her savings. Unlike some other factory workers, she did not receive any money from the government. She received some food for the first 4–5 days of the lockdown, but her invisible work meant she did not receive any help after that either in the city or back in the village.
Sitara and her husband had returned to the village as everything was shut down in Ahmedabad. They booked train tickets after a long struggle by paying ₹3,500 for five people. They did not have clear plans for staying or re-migrating to the city again.

Conclusions

The accounts presented in this article show that women tread a fine line between the expectations of their families and fulfilling their own desires. Their migration, work and agential strategies must be understood within social relations of caste and patriarchy. We saw that women supported the overall family project of migration, and they also carved out a niche for their own plans and earning once in the city. In some cases, they aspired to migrate and had to persuade their husbands with the help of relatives. In all the cases, the assertiveness and decision-making power of the women within the family were evident. But they strategically chose when and how to express their desires and whom to get support from for their migration and work project. Their activities were carried out in a way that maintained the visible hierarchy of the patriarchal family while also pursuing their own plans within these structural constraints. Often their plans were aimed at securing their children’s future through marriage and education. While saving and investing in these goals, they also performed their role as good wives, daughters-in-law and daughters by spending on family weddings, health needs and care for relatives in the extended family. They were, thus, able to prove that they were not threatening the status quo, but at the same time they persevered with their own projects and persuaded their husbands to support them. Nearly all of them were developing plans to return to the city once the interruptions caused by the COVID-19 were over. These findings provide a different view on women’s lives in what is known as the patriarchal heartland of India where they are usually seen as passive and silent, without a voice.

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Notes

1. The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation of the Government of India defines home-based workers as follows:
   a) own-account workers and contributing family workers helping the own-account workers, involved in the production of goods and services, in their homes, for the
market, and b) those homeworkers who work in their homes for remuneration, resulting in a product or service, as specified by the employer(s), irrespective of who provides the equipment, materials or other inputs used, and those contributing family workers helping such homeworkers. (Datta, 2021)

Among all informal sector operators in India, 21.3 per cent of women were homeworkers as against 2.1 per cent of men. In other words, 21.3 per cent of women entrepreneurs were dependent on other enterprises and were paid by the piece (Raveendran, 2017).

2. OBC is a broad caste category including many historically artisanal castes. There is a wide variation among OBCs with some castes having progressed economically and educationally more than others.

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