

International Migration of Women from Darjeeling District: The Question of Empowerment

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ABSTRACT The phenomenon of migration flows is not a new process in Darjeeling district. It has evolved time and again with diversified patterns in terms of class, caste and gender specifics. Historical evidences addressed in hill studies show that the pattern of migration from Darjeeling district was mainly dominant by the male migrants who were migrating to the metropolitan cities to work in private sectors. But the recent trends in migration from this region are of women migrating independently to work in informal sectors mostly as a domestic worker to countries like Gulf countries, Middle East countries and South East Asian countries. They have become active economic agents as well as inspiration for aspirant migrants in the home country. Thus, on the basis of this context, exploratory research has been conducted in Darjeeling district in an attempt to study the patterns and impact of women's international migration and examine socio-cultural implications that caters towards the empowerment of women in Darjeeling district.

INTRODUCTION

Migration is a universal phenomenon concerning people's movement from one place to another for multiple reasons and having manifold connotations. International Organisation for Migration defines migration as, "the movement of a person, whatever its length, composition and causes, and it includes migration of refugees, displaced persons, economic migrants and persons moving for other purposes, including family reunification" (Bhardwaj and Sawant 2015). Donald (1979) defines migration as a "rationally planned action, which is the result of conscious decisions taken after a consideration or calculation of the advantages and disadvantages of moving and staying". In the simplest form, international migration can be defined as the movement of people across borders and staying in the host country on a temporal or permanent basis.

Conceptualising the historical trend of migration, the phrase "migrants" was used only as a code for male migrants while women migrants have always been linked with marriage and other associational reasons. While, with the oil boom in Gulf countries, the emergence of newly industrialising economies, expansion of the service economy, high demand of skilled and unskilled labour in the developed regions has intensified a much broader pattern of international

migration incorporating women migrants as well. Apparently, females represent half of the international migrants in developed regions whereby "the phrase feminisation of migration" is gaining prominence in the field of research studies.

Of the above issues of significance, international migration from Darjeeling District is a topic worth studying. International migration from this region is readily enforced and reshaped by the radical changes in the demographic pattern during the last one hundred and fifty years. The structural changes of the region are concomitant with the historic migration between and from neighbouring countries with the resultant effect of colonial regime during the early and mid-nineteenth century¹. The widespread influx of Nepalese of Nepal has not only affected the socio-economic profile of the region but also constantly blurred their (Indian Nepalese) national identities and thwarted their protracted demand of autonomy (Gorkhaland Movement), which has been a controversial issue till date. By the time of the second Census of India in 1881, the Nepalese formed the absolute majority not only in the three hill sub-divisions but also in the whole district of Darjeeling" (Dasgupta 1999).

Moreover, if one looks at the socio-economic profile of Darjeeling district, half of the population is agriculturist and majority of them are engaged in tea plantation works. Since its in-

ception, the tea industry has played a pivotal role in the survival and livelihoods of people of the region. It has not only provided employment for the male counterparts but also employed a good number of female workers accounting to sixty percent in the tea gardens. Darjeeling tea makes up three percent of India's total production employing 52,000 people on a permanent basis (Bhutia 2014). Tourism, on the other hand is an important economic activity that acts as the principle source of income in Darjeeling. The district receives 3.5 lakhs domestic tourists and 50,000 foreign tourists per year that generates near thirty percent of the total tourism business of the region worth INR 350 crore per annum (Ibid 2014).

But in the mean time, Darjeeling has witnessed dynamic agrarian changed, the shrinking capacity of resources, closure of tea industries and a declining effect on tourism industry with the frequent violence and strikes as a result of the Gorkhaland Movement that languished the socio-economic development of the region. The tea industry in Darjeeling in the post independence period became crises ridden with low productivity, financial bankruptcy and labour problem leading to disgruntlement among the people². The expansion of globalisation and technological development has been able to bring dynamic changes in the socio-economic development of the region but the existing infrastructure and opportunities have not been able to counter with the increasing rate of population and limited employment opportunities. As per the records, the unemployment rate among women in Darjeeling is high in comparison with the male counterparts (Pakhrin 2013), which acted as the crucial factor behind their migration. According to the Census of 2011, the percentage of non-workers among men was 48.83 percent while among female it was 77.56 percent. So, the figure itself illustrates the fact that women have been exclusively affected by opportunities and lack of employment in the region. In this case, not only the increasing rate of population, degradation of tea industry and agrarian changes is solely attributed to the migration of people from the hills. Instead, there are also other intervening variables like education, occupational diversification, absence of private sectors, growing aspirations of people, incessant politi-

cal upheavals, coping with high cost of living conditions and other institutional measures, etc. (Subba 2010) that had a major effect on invigorating international migration of women from this region.

Looking at the pattern of migration from this region, it is clear that, it has changed in due course of time. Earlier migration of people from Darjeeling was confined to joining the Indian army and for government and private jobs in nearby cities, which was mostly dominant by the male members. The rise in the level of education and the aspirations and fall in the employment opportunities also led to large scale migration of the youth to other places especially the metro cities and industrial areas (Sundas 2011). In Darjeeling, even subsistence farmers have been drawn to cities for manual works. A study done by Rawat (2016) on the "Causes and Effects of Rural-Urban Migration in Darjeeling" stated that not only within India but it has been observed that people from Darjeeling are also migrating outside India for low skilled labour jobs. Sharma (2014) in his study also found out that outmigration of people in Darjeeling has been a catalyst of change, which led to an increase in economic conditions of the people.

Migration and Women Empowerment

Migration in itself is an act of opposition to powerlessness that is, it is an act of empowerment, taking control over one's life (Rosulnik et al. 2016). Situated at the centre of the empowerment discourse, migration has significant implications on the moulding of women's selflessness and internal sense of power (Kweun Yu 2007). Empowerment of women can be expressed in terms of decision-making power from the perspectives of health, mobility and household purchases as well as access to work and education (Sinha et al. 2012). Empowerment is difficult to define, as it is a multidimensional approach and is context specific. According to Kabeer (1999) empowerment is that it is inescapably bound up with the condition of disempowerment and refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such ability. It can be viewed as the means of creating a social environment in which one can make decisions, make choices either in-

dividually or collectively for social transformation. Empowerment is often seen as a process with elements such as conscientisation, agency, ownership of and control over resources, ability to make choices, and to participate in decisions that affect one's life" (Charmes and Wieringa 2003). It strengthens the innate ability by way of acquiring knowledge power and experience (Hashemi et al. 1996). Migration needs to be analysed as a social process in which not only it can have an impact on the economic changes but also largely examined in relation to socio-cultural changes that will shed light on the issues of empowerment as well. The women migrants interviewed in this study represent different social strata and economic backgrounds, and therefore the impact of migration differs greatly. Thus, the empowerment of women migrants from these regions will be measured on the basis of the post migration changes that they had experienced in their lives.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study is:

- ◆ To study the patterns of women's international migration from Darjeeling District.
- ◆ To explore the experiences of women's migration and examine whether it has facilitated empowerment of women.
- ◆ To evaluate the post migration changes on women migrants and provide an exhaustive empirical analysis of the sampled population in order to examine the socio-cultural consequences of migration on women migrants in Darjeeling district.

METHODOLOGY

The study has undertaken an exploratory research covering different rural and urban areas of Darjeeling such as Allobari, Ghoom Jorebunglow, Singtam Tea Estates and Darjeeling town in lieu of the diversified location of women migrants from these areas. Primary data has been collected from 125 women migrants using both purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling technique has been used because of the fact that it yields satisfactory results for the purpose desired. Snowball sampling has been used as it allows reaching popu-

lations that are difficult to sample and collect the data from very small subgroups of population. Furthermore, it will help to use the referrals of initial respondents to identify another respondent who would be useful for the study. Using such networks, it will further guide to locate the respondents required for the study. Qualitative methods included in-depth interviews, focussed group discussions, phone conversations and narratives with the migrants, returnee migrants, household and community members. Informal conversations with women migrants through social media like Facebook, Skype, etc. have been conducted to collect the information, as some respondents were located in foreign lands. The study has taken into consideration only the voluntary migrants³ who are migrating or have migrated for at least less than one year to the countries like Middle East, Gulf countries and South East Asian countries in lieu of being the dominant recipient region of women migrants.

Brief Profile of the Study Area

Darjeeling is one of the districts in West Bengal, and has three hill sub-divisions namely, Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong and portion of the plains of Siliguri. Darjeeling is the principal town and the administrative headquarter of the district with a total population of 120,414. It consists of municipalities and three community development blocks. But recently, Kalimpong, the earlier subdivision has been fragmented from Darjeeling district on 14th February 2017 thereby forming a separate Kalimpong district, making it the 21st district of West Bengal. So, Darjeeling district now covers the subdivision of Kurseong, Mirik and a portion of Terai or Siliguri subdivision. Darjeeling, which is also popularly symbolised as the "Queen of Hills" is a mosaic of different ethnic groups and the abode of a large variety of inhabitants belonging to multiple communities like Nepali, Bhutias, Sherpas and Tibetan. The multi ethnic structure of the region saw a massive influx of migrants from neighbouring countries like Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet, which has brought a sea change in the demographic and social structure of the hills. The ethnic and social plurality is perhaps the most powerful demonstration of the Darjeeling Himalayan Region, which constitutes

various racial groups mainly mongoloids (Chatterjee et al. 2011). Though Nepalis are concentrated in different parts of North East India, numerically they comprise the largest community in Darjeeling hills however, heterogeneous they may otherwise be.

Destination of Women Migrants in Darjeeling District

Focussing on the pattern of migration from Darjeeling district, there is a lack of statistical data and figures recorded on women migration as has been already mentioned before. Nonetheless, the only statistical data that can be acquired was from the Foreigner's Registration Office in Darjeeling that certifies permits or the Police Clearance Certificate (PCC), which is essential during the migration of an individual, in respective countries. But this data inhibits only those migrants who have registered from the year 2013-2018, as the officials managed to provide six years of recorded data comprising a total number of 687 women migrants. So apart from this data, there have been massive inflows of women migrants recruited by the private or local agents, which have not been statistically recorded.

Official records show that the most preferred destination of women migrants from Darjeeling are Israel followed by Dubai, Singapore, USA, Canada, Singapore and Qatar. According to the respondents, they have clarified that, requirement of permit issues depends on the destination of migrants, the type of job, and the established companies' migrants would be recruited. Otherwise, mostly it is required for some job sectors in Gulf and Middle East countries whereas in comparison, it seems to be quite flexible in South Asian countries. Hence, there is a record of only few numbers of migrants who have issued the permit. Due to the complexity and lack of data, the study is exclusively based on fieldwork using relevant methodological tools.

As per the sample study, most of the women migrants the researcher encountered during the fieldwork are those who have already migrated (returnee migrants) and are migrating to different foreign countries. Migrating women are the migrants who are already working in foreign countries and are willing to migrate again in the future. Returnee migrants are those who have

already migrated and have returned home after working for more than a one-year period. For the convenience of analysis, both returnee migrants and migrating migrants are clubbed together as migrants but in some case studies they will be analysed separately to elicit a concrete understanding of their migration experiences and the repercussions they had undergone so far.

Out of the 125 samples, majority of the migrants fall into the age group of 30 to 35 years. Most of the migrants are married, with some unmarried and separated⁴ ones. Majority of them belong to rural and semi urban areas. The economic vulnerability, responsibility towards the family members, high demand of cheap labour and easy access of job opportunities for women in various sectors can be a major factor for married women to migrate in search of earning a better income.

As per the study, the highest proportion of women migrants from Darjeeling have migrated to Dubai at thirty-six percent followed Singapore at twenty-eight percent, Hong Kong at fourteen percent, and others⁵ comprising an overall twenty-two percent. However, contrary to the figure depicted above, the women migrating to Israel could not be mapped out much as per the official records available. Out of the total, only eight percent of them could be traced so far. There are both personal and official reasons. Migrants are of the view that, it is not worth coming after one or two years. As they had to bear a huge sum of transportation cost to migrate to Israel, and they need to combat the expenses, which can be possible after working for at least four years. Secondly, there is a possibility of work permit extension for migrants with a maximum period of more than five years. Hence, these migrants tend to arrive from Israel only after four to five years as a result of which the availability of migrants in the field for the study seems rare.

Regardless of the facts, migrants in Israel exclusively work as care takers of children, and old aged and disabled people. Those who have migrated to Dubai are the ones engaged in semi skilled jobs such as in parlours or salons, hotel staffs, sales, receptionists, etc. In countries like Singapore and Hong Kong they are mostly engaged in low skilled sectors, that is, as domestic workers, housemaids and caretakers. Though domestic sectors are the most vulnerable sector

for women migrants where they receive fewer protections and restrictive rules on their freedom to act, the interweaving of dynamic issues, concerns and an increasing demand on the service economy has compelled these women to leave their home country. Also, majority of the workers expressed distress on the mismatch between their skill and the job they had to perform. But, they were also powerless to challenge, as it is the only alternative available for them to earn good money in the host country. Moreover, the extent of choosing a respective destination majorly depends on the accessibility of job, human capital skills, and the existence of social networks in the host country.

RESULTS

The qualitative study has been undertaken to explore the implications of international migration on women migrants and provide a narrative analysis on the issues of empowerment. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of the respondents. The theme included some direct quotations or extracts from the interview with the sampled respondents.

Exercising Control on Economic Remittances

The keys to the actual emigration decisions are their autonomy and decision-making power within the household, particularly pertaining to financial matters (Oishi 2002). As far as economic changes are concerned there was a clear visibility of improvement in their consumption pattern and savings of the migrants. The remittances sent by the women migrants have been used for various purposes. The minimum income earned by the migrants was INR 20,000 to 30,000 per month and maximum of INR 80,000 to 90,000 per month depending on the type of job and destination they are migrating to. The common use of remittance is on buying basic materialistic goods like clothes, kitchen appliances, televisions, mobile phones, laptops and other valuable assets like silver and gold. Migrants were also able to recover all of their debts, which were unsettled prior to their migration.

Despite recovering the debts and expenses of migration, migrants had made a conscious effort to invest their remittances in a productive

manner. The total percentage of remittances used by women migrants in educating their children was twenty-eight percent, on building and repairing new houses was sixteen percent, on buying land was twelve percent, on assets like gold and silver was sixteen percent, and on healthcare was six percent. Acquisition of land has been considered as one of the valuable properties by the migrants and largely determines their living standard in the society. To maintain their progressive standard of living, twelve percent of the migrants have invested their remittances in small enterprises like opening grocery shops, restaurants, parlours, etc. that helped them with their long run savings. Another investment made by migrants was reusing their savings after returning back home.

Smita Basnet (31), a returnee migrant, used her remittances by giving loans to the relatives at an interest rate of five percent per month. She stated, *“After returning from Singapore, I kept half of my money for personal uses and half of it, I have invested in loan sharing business with some of my relatives. I know the risk factor is there but this is how I can make use of my small amount of money. It is profitable to certain extent.”* She is now generally known as a money-lender in her village. So, this is one of the typical ways of investment and savings by the women migrants in their home country. Women migrants have become more conscious about the use of remittances and have invested it accordingly. Hence, their propensity to save money for such investments even after contributing to the household expenses implies that they have been a major contributor in the household income. So, this visible economic presence of women migrants in the labour market has redefined the economic gender roles, which are assumed to be of men’s domain.

The control and use of remittances also decides how gender differences prevail in the home country. This is evident when women have to share their earning on consumption patterns more than the male members in the house. Also, the dependency of the household members on migrant’s remittances defines the extent of economic autonomy of women migrants. Moreover, in this case, occupation of family has determined the obligation of sending remittances back home. Although, women migrant’s income were quite

higher in comparison with their male counterparts, not all migrants had to remit their whole income to the family on a regular basis. For most of the migrants, their family was employed either in a government sector, private sector or in self-employed jobs (drivers, carpenter, in petty businesses) in the home country. Only a certain amount of migrant's earning was used for household expenses. So, the reliability on the remittances of the family members and husbands seems to be low, which in this case means that remittances are complementary, rather than featuring as a central source of income in the home country.

Ramita Tamang (32) a returnee migrant speaks of her husband (a government job holder), *"I used to send money home sometimes specially during the festival seasons and requisite times. There was no such compulsion. My husband looks after all the expenses"*. Ramita is now working as an agent in Darjeeling and wanted to migrate again to Dubai to work as a beautician.

Nischal Rana (33) a migrant speaks about her conflicting relation with her husband and the reason behind that is that she has a major control on her income. *"I decided to migrate because I was not earning much from the restaurant and also because of my constant quarrels with my husband on petty issues. My husband works as a carpenter and it is not sufficient for us, especially for my son's schooling. I send a certain amount of money to my husband on a monthly basis. I am saving my money to open up a new restaurant in my hometown later in the future."* Regardless of the outcome of the situation, she feels socially empowered, as she was able to choose her way and the life she wanted. Besides becoming an economic actor, migration can be seen as fulfilling women's self interest by trying to escape from their negative social environment. In the above cases, the occupation of the family member or male members to a certain extent has its effect on gender roles and economic autonomy of women migrants. Despite administering the pressure of financial responsibility towards their family members, they have the freedom to decide on the strategy of sending the money and to save a certain amount of money for their own purposes. On the other hand, the evident fact is that even if the decision of sending money for household resources

tends to be that of women migrants, the male members were mostly the remittance receiver in the home country and controlled the use of the remittances.

Majority of the migrants reported that they were not informed about all the details on the remittances spent by the family members. It seems that women migrants were not the decision-makers on financial matters. Most of the male members have experienced changes in gender roles after women's migration and more obliged to take on the responsibilities of women migrants thereby engaging on household chores. But at the same time they were also the one who were the main decision-makers back at home. This further explains that gender inequality in the division of labour has been reaffirmed and there is an indirect effect of men's control on financial decision-making in the home country even though migrants enjoy the financial independence while staying abroad.

Decision-making Power

Economic improvement and the higher social status that the migrant women and their families acquire through their overseas earning affect a transformation and renegotiation of power relations within the household and in the definition of the gender roles (Suksomboon 2008). As migration is often associated with access to wealth, it becomes a sought after strategy changing culture of origin communities in such a way that migration becomes a desirable social conduct as a means to vertical mobility (Anghel et al. 2015). The social enhancement of the women migrants itself starts even before they migrate, as they have developed aspirations, self-confidence and internal awakenings by challenging the established patriarchal structure. The escape from their home space gives the freedom to act and decide on their own and that shapes their new attitudes and self-consciousness.

Making the decision to migrate also connotes a form of autonomy and challenge to the established patriarchal structures. Studies indicate that women who are more independent, resourceful and have a say in the family decisions are more likely to migrate thus, the act of migration itself has been described as a challenge to patriarchy (Mahapatro 2013). Talking about the decision-

making of women migrants, some of them stated that it was their own decision to migrate. There was no interference of any family members in their decision to migrate abroad. They had informed their husband and family members not because they needed their permission or consent. But it was just about informing them. On the other hand, majority of the migrants' decision was largely influenced by the husband, family members and relatives prior to their migration. Getting permission from the husband and family members was a bit of a challenge for them.

Januka (32), a housewife and mother of two daughters, migrated with the consent of her family members. She has to take permission from her husband and convince her family members to migrate abroad. *"I was eager to migrate so that I could help my family members and build a nice big house. But initially my family members were against my decision. It took me more than a month to convince them, especially my own mother. Also, they did not have any choice, as our financial condition was not strong. So migrating was the only option we had."*

On the other hand, Mita (33), a returnee migrant had decided to discontinue her migration, as her husband was not letting her go. *"I worked for one and half years in Singapore and had to come back because my husband (who works as a clerk) was not letting me go again. So, I left the job but I am happy with the decision, as working abroad and maintaining the relationship was becoming a bit difficult for me."* Maintaining the relationship with the family members was another challenge and a concern expressed by these women migrants that have indirectly affected their decision-making.

Thus, the above statements explain that economic vulnerability of the household has greatly affected the decision-making power of the migrants and family members. While it cannot also be denied that the interference of family members on decision-making of women migrants quite explains how gender roles have been perceived in the society. Even the enhanced financial situation, which ought to have fostered a sense of independence, does not cancel out the fact that their gender is ultimately the primary concern (Chanda 2017).

Changing Social Status

The adaptation of new gender roles, reconstruction of identity and defining power relations within the household will inherently influence the social status of women migrants in general. The two broad aspects of social status that can be changed due to migration are the position of migrant women within the families and change in gender relations. Women's attitude towards their role and rights in the household also determines their status in the household (Mahapatro 2013). Being an active contributor, migrants have experienced the power to negotiate and exercise the power to choose the way of operating within the family. Maria Lepcha (36), a migrant stated, *"My husband is a government employer (driver). I came to Dubai because my brother's family was settled there. Prior to migration I was ideally staying at home. Now I work as a receptionist in Dubai and my monthly income is INR 40,000 per month. Though I had a cordial relation with my husband, but what I experience is the power to decide on initiating certain projects like repairing houses or buying stuffs at home. Before I had to get permission from my husband, as it was his money I had to spend after all, but now I do not have to think about it. It is my money and I will buy what I desire."* She feels content and empowered from within, when she is recognised as an important member to give opinions and make decisions on household matters.

Many of the women migrants have to experience hardships while working abroad, but the cultural capital acquired in migrant work gives a different picture of migration and can provide something to be capitalised on (Soco 2008). Amrita Gurung (35), returnee migrant talks about her experiences working in a sales department in Dubai and its impact on her life after returning back home. *"Working in Dubai itself was a big achievement for me. I have learned many things in life. First of all, I have understood that earning money is not an easy task. Working as a sales staff, I have learned to negotiate with the customer, how to approach them, how to make them buy the stuffs (laughs). After returning back for working four years, I have opened a small clothes shop in my hometown, which I have decided on my own. I got full support from*

my husband in running the business.” Along with economic independence, Amrita has experienced a freedom of choice to deliver what she has inculcated in her life in the form of cultural capital even after returning back home.

Not only within the family but they have been an inspiration and strong support system for the women in their locality. Some of them have also provided monetary support to the relatives and friends who were yearning to migrate just like them. In Darjeeling sixty-six percent women were able to help and bring their relatives, family members and even husbands to the destination countries. Among these women migrants, some of them end up working professionally as a private agent. Elina Subba, a returnee migrant from Darjeeling speaks about her journey as a migrant and a working agent, *“I have completed my hotel management course and was working in a hotel in Darjeeling. I had a decent salary. So, one of the guests in the hotel liked my work. So she asked me to work for her hotel in Bahrain. I went in 2007 and worked as a supervisor for 4 years. Gradually, I started recruiting women from my locality to work in the hotel. Even after returning back, the networks I have developed throughout those years helped me to work as an agent.”*⁶

Migrants have been instrumental in inspiring people and non-migrants thereby bringing collective changes in their lives and the community as well. It can be analysed from the above statement that women have been able to use and exercise their agency exercise their agency in a way that empowers everyone in the society. Although at a micro level, the perceived status and identities of the women migrants reflects a positive change.

Inculcating Changes in Taste and Choices

Migrants initially face a cultural shock in internalising the new cultural patterns during the course of their adjustment in the host country, whilst resulting in continuity and change. The change in the lifestyle among the migrants after migration has brought changes in their personality as well. Changes for women migrants started with enhancing their skills and ideas by learning to cook new food items, to use machinery household tools, learning languages, using high

tech gadgets and improved communication skills of the migrants. Above all, the change in the preferences and choices of migrants, when it comes to their “dressing style/sense” was the most rational and visible changes observed among them. It is one of the important cultural remittances that migrants carry on with them even after their migration. Women in this region are mostly comfortable in wearing Western clothes (jeans, dresses, skirts). But for married women like Richa (33) a migrant, it was altogether a new personal change. *“It felt nice and comfortable wearing jeans and skirts, as I had stopped wearing after marriage, as it does not look appropriate wearing in front of my in-laws, especially in the village. After migrating to Israel, I started wearing jeans again.”*

As Yngvesson (2017) stresses on the cultural norms that are the result of the differentiation between the two countries, there is a personal change in the migrants after migration. Acceptance prevailed with the change in their gender roles (being a breadwinner) as well as change in the personality of women migrants that to a certain extent has influenced the perception of the people in the society. They have become more open minded and acceptable in nature. Hena Tamang (30), a returnee migrant and a housewife, speaks of how her husband encouraged her to give self-importance and self care just like before when she initially came from abroad. *“My husband tells me to wear nice clothes and use make up when I go out. I like dressing up and even my husband tells me to wear nice clothes and use make up as I did it before when I initially came from Dubai.”* Here, basically her husband, views his wife’s appearance as a statement of her new identity and honour while being less critical of his wife’s inculcating modern outlooks. Along with redefining the gender roles, migration has also brought perceptible changes in the attitude of the people, as they became less prone to stereotypes, more balanced in their judgement and there is a growth of flexible gender relationships between the migrants and family members.

On the contrary, for some migrants maintaining the similar lifestyle after migration has become tough and complex. They were of the opinion that until and unless they have the money to spend on fancy clothes and accessories, only

then they can maintain the lifestyle, otherwise it is just a temporary obsession. As stated by Nirupama (36) a returnee migrant from Hong Kong, “*After migration we fall back to the old situation and environment. We cannot deny working in household chores and in agricultural fields.*” Hence, the social environment and socio-economic status of migrants to a large extent determines the impact of migration on women migrants and society in general, which can be analysed from Nirupama’s statement. Thus, these migrants have only experienced a temporal shift in gender roles. They are still expected to perform the same traditional gender roles in the family after returning, which explains that their mobility is defined and articulated by the behaviour and expectation of the family members towards the migrant.

Changing Attitudes of the People Towards the Migrants

The empowerment of women migrants can also be measured by taking into account the changed attitudes of people towards the migrants. Their perception (negative or positive) has a direct effect on the integration, reunification and adjustment of the migrants back in the home country. In the case of migrants from these regions, majority of migrants have emphasised on the visibility of positive change of attitude of the families and the society in general. Prior to their migration they had a restrictive bond of relationship with the people. Some of the migrants had also shared the experiences of feeling negligence and isolation in the society, because of having an unstable economic condition. But after their migration, people came to visit their houses to know about their whereabouts and also to acquire information on how to seek a job, on contacting the right agent and all the procedures required on working abroad. Migrants shared their experiences with a selfless attitude on gaining an internal sense of power when people interact and recognise them.

Renu Thapa (30) a migrant from Darjeeling district stated that, “*Before migration, I do not remember interacting with so many locals (people) that I have been now. People usually get curious as to where I am working, how much I*

get paid, etc. It feels awkward as well as glad that people are coming to my house even though for their own personal benefit.”

Returnee migrant Hastakala Limbu (37) shared the whole story of her experiences after returning back from Singapore. “*I had faced a lot of struggle to migrate abroad, as I did not have sufficient money for transportation costs. I asked for financial help from people I knew. But they were reluctant to lend their money even for the specific time period. I think they have not trusted me. I negotiated with the agent and he invested his money for my travel cost on the plea that my two-month salary will go in his hands. I did not have any alternatives but to agree on the deal. After working for four years, I could see the change and flexible attitudes among the people. Now if I ask for money to my relatives and friends they will not send me empty handed. Because they know I will be able to repay the debt somehow.*” The statement above has clarified the complex changing relationship and redefined perceptions of people towards women migrants. But the structure of this relationship seems to be fragile, and seems to endure until the migrants have a concrete source of income to repay the money back to the moneylenders or their social networks. But, even though the relationship has been moulded at the cost of economic capital the migrants have earned, it has largely broadened their social capital and social interaction in both the host and origin country.

DISCUSSION

The experiences shared by the migrants are too multifaceted to come to a single conclusion or categorisation. Various dimensions of background experiences of the migrants accounted for the way they react to the changes they have encountered abroad. Women’s migration in Darjeeling shows a complex picture. The increasing share of women international migrants from Darjeeling has not only enhanced their role as the remitter of the households but also affected their personality building, development of skills and practices, and the positive change in their attitudes. It has brought perceptible changes among family members and in local communities that has enhanced their pre-existing position in more

equalitarian terms. It can be observed that women because of their experiences abroad, good or bad, gained a significant level of confidence and an increased inner strength (Nijbroek 2016). After sustaining multiple challenges in foreign countries, women migrants think that they have become flexible enough to integrate and endure any circumstances. They have built an inner sense of 'power' within them. Migrants who were unable to express their opinion and were too shy to interact with people was something they were not able to do so before they went abroad. Now they seem to be more frank, open-minded and confident coming up with more critical views and opinions on things they disapprove and acknowledge in general. This is similar to a study done by Thapan et al. (2014) on Muslim women migrants in Delhi that being in a new place amongst new people helps their growth in terms of building self-confidence and in taking day-to-day decisions about their lives.

The change in gender roles has enabled women's independence in all terms serving their own interests and power. It has helped them to evolve as a strong person, breaking stereotypes and social conventions, balancing the anticipated gender roles and being the agents of change within the family and in the communities. Where a woman has economic freedom (that is, when she is working), she has more decision-making powers as compared to those women who are not working (Sinha et al. 2012). Likewise, there is a visibility of economic independence and confidence among women migrants in comparison to those women who chose to stay back at home. Thus, migration has no doubt brought a significant change in the self-image of migrants where they are no more subject to the permanent control of the family members. Migration for women migrants has not only become the medium for making them financially strong but it has its effect on enhancing their personality skills, knowledge and ideas as well, that had a diverse effect on empowering others. Simply stating, migration has enhanced women migrants with economic capital, in the form of remittances as well as cultural capital (skills, ideas, knowledge). The expansion of women's capabilities not only enhances women's own freedom and well-being, but also has many other effects on the lives of all (Ibid 2012). Women migrant's efforts of pro-

viding help in diverse ways to the aspirant migrants can be highly appreciated in this context.

Decision-making authority mostly increases when women work abroad (Ghosh 2009). In Darjeeling district prior to migration women have a little say in the decision-making when it comes to the question of asking permission from family members to migrate abroad. There was interference of family members on their decision-making. Also, if one sees the scenario after migration, women migrants had the freedom to decide on the strategy of sending remittances in the host country. But paradoxically, it was observed that men were majorly the remittance receivers who tend to control and strategise on the use of remittances in the house. Basically they stood out as the main decision-maker. As has been analysed by Rai (2005) an important indicator that ensures women's empowerment is the decision-making processes that take place in different areas. Here it contradicts the notion of empowerment where women migrants were not observed as the decision-maker in the house. They were simply the remittance sender. Also, it has been observed that women had acquired economic autonomy and freedom to act on their own until they acted as the breadwinner of the house. On their return to home, they had to indulge themselves in the same traditional gender roles while male members took care of the public domain. This observation is in line with the study done by Nijbroek (2016) about Filipina migrant workers, which explains that upon returning from abroad it is hard for Filipino women migrants to find a new job and sustain the same role. As a result, in Darjeeling district, women migrants' role as caretakers has not changed significantly after their migration trajectory. Thus, with the above analysis, the fact cannot be ignored that there is still a prevalence of patriarchal dominance in terms of major household decision-making and control over financial matters by the male members.

So contextualising the narratives and experiences of women migrants, social mobility of women can be witnessed from various dimensions such as improving gender relations, building social networks, developing a sense of self worth and ability to make desired changes in their lives. But empowerment in a complete sense like taking part in decision-making and power

sharing still reflects patriarchal influence. As has been stated by Platanova and Geny (2017), mobility thus can be an act of sacrifice for the well-being of the household, not necessarily an act of empowerment, which juxtaposes with the status of women migrants in the study. Moreover, there is a need to dismantle gender stereotypes, patriarchal control, societal barriers and other obstacles that stand in the way of facilitating empowerment of women migrants in Darjeeling district. As explained by Hugo, migration can both be a cause and consequence of female empowerment (Gaye and Jha 2011), which is also found in the case of women migrants from Darjeeling District.

CONCLUSION

Women migrants in this study are observed with various motivations to migrate and have shared different experiences on the impact of migration. It has boosted their autonomy on the one hand and on the other they had to undergo physical as well as emotional challenges during and after the migration process. These experiences varied with the situation of women migrants in both the host and home countries. From familial isolation to abuses in the host country, women have stood out strongly as an economic actor, which has redefined their traditional gender roles and inequality in the society. Most of the migrants were disadvantaged by the low educational levels, lack of information and support, language barriers, etc. for the better integration and adaptation in the host country. They have also encountered cultural shock during the initial phases of migration. But, despite such challenges women migrants have been able to cope up with terrible situations and stood out with more self-determination and self-confidence. Through migration they were able to challenge the patriarchal notions and developed the power to participate in the decision-making process within the household. They have become active independent agents in the process of migration.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Looking into the findings of the paper it is recommended that the government should formulate and ratify the migration policies for wom-

en migrant workers so as to safeguard their rights and improve the situation of women overseas. In case of domestic workers, strict regulation between the employer and employee should be implemented to avoid any exploitative situation of women migrants in the workplace. Strategies need to be developed to protect and empower women in these situations. Looking from a micro level perspective, women migrants should be accepted in the home society without labelling and stereotyping them so as to integrate without any discrimination. They should be given freedom to act on their own and should not be imposed with any restrictions to accumulate their savings into purposes that they wish without complete control from the male members in their families. In addition, a programme to raise awareness could be carried out through formal and informal educational programmes so as to provide information on the cost and benefits of all forms of migration for women.

NOTES

- ¹ Growth of Population in Darjeeling Hill Area, Migration from Nepal and Women's Response to Changed Situations and to the New Opportunities. Chapter II. From <https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/162014/5/05_chapter%202.pdf> (Retrieved on 22 March 2020).
- ² Post Colonialism and the Response of the Hill Women to the Question of Ethnic Identity and Economic Rights in the Hills of Darjeeling (1947-1985). Chapter 5. From <https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/137429/10/10_chapter_05.pdf> (Retrieved on 22 March 2020).
- ³ Voluntary migrants in this study involve those migrants who are migrating and have migrated with their own free will and the initiative for economic opportunities are not basically comprising the forced migrants who move out with the fear of persecution or have been moved by deception or coercion.
- ⁴ Separated women are those who are not officially divorced with the husband. They are residing separately on their own will and do not share any relationship with the migrants and the children (if any).
- ⁵ Other countries include Israel, Lebanon, Bahrain and Kuwait.
- ⁶ Also during the study the researcher came across some migrants who were recruited by her and still working in Bahrain.

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