

AGE AND SEX DIFFERENTIALS IN MIGRATION IN INDIA

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Résumé — Cette étude fait appel aux données pour examiner d'une façon comparative les échantillons d'écarts d'âge et de sexe dans la migration rurale et urbaine de deux états indiens, à savoir, le Kérala et le Bengale occidental. Dans cette étude on soutient que la migration en Inde est sélective en un grand choix de groupes d'âge allant de 15 à 49 ans. La sélectivité d'âge en migration a tendance de différer par sexe d'une façon marquée. En général, les migrants féminins sont plus jeunes que les migrants masculins, et les migrants féminins dans le Bengale occidental sont encore plus jeunes que celles de Kérala. Étant donné que le mariage joue un rôle inévitable dans la migration des femmes, celles-ci ont tendance d'être plus émigrantes que les hommes. Cette étude a cherché à suggérer que les conditions socioculturelles différentes expliquent dans une large mesure les variations en écarts migratoires entre états.

Abstract — This paper draws on census data to examine comparatively the patterns of age and sex differentials in rural to urban migration in two Indian states, namely Kerala and West Bengal. It is contended in the paper that migration in India is selective of a very wide range of age groups from 15 to 49 years. Age selectivity in migration tends to differ markedly by sex. In general, female migrants are younger than male migrants, and female migrants in West Bengal are still younger than those in Kerala. Since marriage plays an inevitable role in migration of women, they tend to be more migratory than men. This paper has sought to suggest that differing sociocultural conditions largely account for variations in migration differentials between states.

Key Words — age selectivity, place-of-birth, village exogamy, South India

Introduction

In a review of the literature on migration differentials, Thomas observed that "there is an excess of adolescents and young adults among migrants, particularly migrants from rural areas to towns compared with the non-migratory or the general population" (1938:11). This is one of the most definitely established generalizations of all migration differentials (Shaw, 1975). Except in a study of migrants to Greater Bombay (Zachariah, 1968:80-105), no effort has been made so far to examine the above generalization with regard to the age distributions of migrants in India (Singh, 1980, 1986). Since people migrate from their rural homes to urban areas not only in search of a better opportunity and career, but also to eke out a living in the face of recurrent economic hardships in the rural sector which affect people of all ages nearly the same way, it is believed that migrants are drawn from a wide range of age groups in India. This is one of the important subjects to be examined in this paper.

Selectivity in migration is not only an age- but also a sex-specific process. It is often contended that the sex ratio¹ of urban areas is higher than that of rural areas because rural to urban migration is highly selective of males in India (Gould, 1974:258-293; Nelson, 1976:120-124; Singh, 1986). This is similar to the patterns noticed in most African countries, but dissimilar from Latin American countries (Byerlee, 1972; Herrick, 1971). The sex ratios of many cities have been gradually moving away from a very high to a relatively more balanced sex ratio (Joshi, 1976:1303). However, there is a fair amount of variation in sex selectivity in rural-urban migration at the level of states. This paper seeks to explain the reason why there are regional variations in sex differentials in migration selectivity.

In addition to discussing the range of selectivity in age and sex characteristics of rural to urban migrants, this paper will also highlight another related subject: that is, the patterns of age selectivity in migration tend to differ by sex where females are more likely to be younger than males. Since a study of this kind at the national level will become quite exhaustive, this discussion is confined to two Indian states, one from the eastern and another from the southern region, and an effort is made to present it in a comparative fashion.

Data and Their Sources

This study is based on data from Indian census reports. Detailed tabulations on migration were prepared for the first time at the 1961 census, and

the practice has continued ever since. Districts, class I towns (also known as cities) and urban agglomerations are the smallest units for which migration data have been provided in census reports.² At the district level, migrants have been classified for rural and urban areas at the place of enumeration without specifying their place of origin in terms of rural and urban areas. Migrants from both rural and urban areas have been grouped together at the place of destination. One need not emphasize that the age and sex distributions of the migrant population differ from one stream to another because of the fact that the motives of or factors leading to migration tend to differ by streams of migration. Therefore, the district level data cannot be used for this analysis. Migrants' place of origin (rural or urban) has been specified only in the case of migration to cities or urban agglomerations, and hence this paper is based on the city and urban agglomerations level data only. The population of migrants from rural areas to cities has been pooled to represent the state level situation.

The discussion is confined to the migrants of less than one year's duration at the place of enumeration. It goes without saying that migrants of different durations at the places of enumeration exhibit different characteristics with regard to age selectivity. The longer the duration of stay of migrants at the place of destination, the more likely it is that their age distributions will differ from those at the time of initial migration. Hence it is necessary to restrict the discussion to migrants with less than one year's duration of residence at the place of destination (urban areas). Moreover, generalizations made relating to age selectivity apply to age of migrants at the time of their actual migration (such migrants may also be called current migrants).

This paper deals mainly with migrants from rural areas to class I towns and urban agglomerations of Kerala and West Bengal. We have chosen these two states to represent two different types of social, economic and demographic situations. Elsewhere it has been found that they differ quite distinctly from each other in numerous respects such as social and cultural practices, level of urbanization and industrialization, per capita income, level of literacy, settlement patterns, birth and death rates, status of women, age at marriage and marriage practices (Singh, 1986:42-71). An effort has been made to establish how far these variations account for differences or similarities in selectivity in rural to urban migration by age and sex. However, we do not intend to describe the contrasting features of these states here because that would make this presentation somewhat more cumbersome. Wherever necessary we have brought the important characteristics of these states into focus in the course of the discussion.

The analysis of age selectivity is based in a technique given in a U.N. manual (1971:45-48). The method of computation is quite simple and straightforward;

TABLE 1. INDEX OF AGE SELECTIVITY AND AGE AT
MIGRATION FOR RURAL TO URBAN MIGRANTS IN KERALA AND
WEST BENGAL, 1970-71

(Migrants of Less Than One Year's Duration)				
Census Ages*	Kerala		West Bengal	
	M	F	M	F
< 15	-53.5	-37.2	-43.6	-25.6
15-19	30.2	50.0	43.5	111.6
20-24	130.8	126.9	124.6	45.9
25-49	34.8	-1.5	47.2	2.2
50+	-18.2	-18.0	-12.8	-15.6
Mean Age	20.4	18.8	20.2	17.3

* These age-groups have been done by the census.

Sources: Census of India, 1971, Migration Tables, Kerala, Part II-D, pp. 646-74; and Census of India, 1971, Migration Tables, West Bengal, Part II-D (ii), pp. 280-332.

it can be easily understood from the U.N. manual and a publication by Singh (1986:105-106, 225) on the subject.

Most studies relating to age selectivity of migrants have suggested that "migrants are generally concentrated in an age range from 15 to 20 to about 30 or 35 years" (U.N., 1973:181). Similarly the present study suggests that migrants have their highest concentration at ages 20-24, but a good proportion of male migrants is also drawn from the 25-49 age group (Table 1). Here, one might argue that the 25-49 age group is so wide that migrants appear to have been positively selected from ages between 35 and 49 years. This is apparently a valid argument, but a comparison of the age distribution of the rural population with that of the urban one in Kerala and West Bengal has shown that there is a greater concentration of population in the urban area than in the rural one at ages 15-54. Compared to Kerala, the difference in the age distribution between rural and urban population is still greater yet in West Bengal (Singh, 1986:113-114).

In both of these states, female migrants are drawn from younger age groups than are male migrants. The mean age of male migrants in both Kerala and West Bengal is 20 years, while the mean ages of female migrants are about

19 and 17 years, respectively (Table 1).³ Female migrants tend to be younger than male migrants because females migrate as a result of marriage and are usually younger than their husbands. Female migrants of West Bengal are even younger than those of Kerala. This variation in the mean age of females at migration is an outcome of regional differences in age at marriage. The mean ages at marriage of females in rural areas are nearly 17 years in West Bengal and 21 years in Kerala (Singh, 1986:62). In the ultimate analysis, a higher age at marriage in Kerala is the consequence of a very high level of literacy in the state.⁴

As there are systems of village exogamy and patrilocal residence for women after their marriage and female migrants show their highest concentration in the marriageable age groups of 15-19 in West Bengal and 20-24 in Kerala, it is contended that marriage plays an important part in their migration.⁵

There is no study relating to India or other developing countries based on the U.N. index of age selectivity employed in this study. Therefore, it is very hard to say whether selectivity in migration spanning such a wide range of age groups (15-49) is similar to that of other countries or is typical of India. However, with regard to the migration of young adults, this study, like others, suggests that migrants are quite disproportionately selected from the 15-24 age groups in both of the states.

Since the migration tables from the 1981 census of these states have not been released so far, it is somewhat difficult to conclude firmly that the above findings, based on the 1971 census, would apply to the 1981 census. Nonetheless, there seems to be no apparent reason why there would be considerable discrepancies between the findings of these two censuses.

Based on five per cent samples, a tabulation on age-specific distributions of migrants at the 1981 census for the whole country has been published recently. Although the age groups at this census have been made slightly differently, it is quite clear that there are broad similarities between the findings of the 1971 and 1981 censuses. Male migrants are recorded to have been positively selected from a very wide range of age groups, while females have been selected from a relatively narrower range of age groups. Similarly, both male and female migrants have recorded their highest concentration in the 20-24 age group. The mean ages at migration of males and females in India are nearly 22 and 18 years, respectively (see Table 2).

Migrants, especially males, are drawn from a wide range of age groups in India because the rural labourers, who vary greatly in terms of age, move to cities when they do not have jobs on farms during the lean season or when villages confront economic hardships arising out of frequent natural

TABLE 2. CUMULATIVE AGE DISTRIBUTION AND INDEX OF AGE SELECTIVITY OF RURAL-URBAN MIGRANTS IN INDIA, 1981

(Migrants of Less Than One Year's Duration at the Place of Enumeration)				
Census Ages	Cumulative Age Distribution		Index of Selectivity	
	M	F	M	F
< 15	5.4	22.0	-86.8	-45.1
15-19	20.0	38.1	52.0	77.5
20-24	44.5	59.0	214.6	148.0
25-29	64.2	73.0	178.0	87.0
30+	100.0	100.0	3.2	-22.6
Mean Age	21.6	17.7	--	--

Source: Census of India, 1981, Report & Tables Based on 5 Percent Sample Data, Part II-Special, Series 1, India, pp. 360-65.

catastrophes like floods, droughts and famines. Sometimes rural labourers are also drawn to cities following the commencement of new construction projects.

Sex Differentials in Migration

One of the most well known "laws" of Ravenstein (1885:196) holds that "woman is a greater migrant than man." Females are truly found to be more migratory than males in both the states examined. According to the 1961 census, 117 males in West Bengal and 185 males in Kerala were recorded as migrants per 1,000 males. Female migrants, on the other hand, constituted 279 in Kerala and 326 in West Bengal per 1,000 females. The rate of female migration is even higher at the all-India level. Similarly, the 1971 census has shown a similar trend of higher mobility among women than men (Singh, 1986:98).

Since marriage is a universal institution governed by the system of village exogamy and the patrilocal practice of residence for women after marriage, every woman is bound to move away from her village of birth. Women, therefore, tend to be more migratory than men in India. For the first time, the 1981 census has provided tabulations on reasons for migration which have clearly

TABLE 3. REASONS FOR RURAL-URBAN MIGRATIONS IN KERALA AND WEST BENGAL AS GIVEN AT THE 1981 CENSUS

States	Sex	Employment	Education	Family Moved	Marriage	Others	Total
Kerala	M	70.9	2.1	14.7	0.4	11.9	100.0
	F	8.6	1.8	32.4	47.4	9.8	100.0
West Bengal	M	58.2	2.9	18.9	1.1	18.9	100.0
	F	5.0	1.7	28.6	58.5	6.2	100.0

Source: Same as for Table 2.

borne out the views that sociocultural reasons for female migration are far more important than economic ones. Of total female migrants, over 47 per cent in Kerala and 58 per cent in West Bengal are due to marriage. In addition, the 1981 census reported that a fairly good number of females migrated either as housewives or dependents of the migrating male members of their families (32 per cent in Kerala and about 29 per cent in West Bengal) (Table 3).

Rural to urban migration in India is highly selective of males, but this is not true of the whole country. Kerala differs quite distinctly from West Bengal, as well as from the national situation. In Kerala, in all the four migration streams — rural-rural, urban-rural, rural-urban and urban-urban — migrants were predominantly male.

In West Bengal, on the other hand, sex ratios of migrants for different streams are not so uniform. The sex ratio of rural to rural migration is very low, that is, about 30 to 40 males per 100 females. This is much lower than that in rural to rural migration in Kerala. Females heavily preponderate in the rural stream of migration in West Bengal because of the system of village exogamy, whilst in Kerala village exogamy is not practised so rigidly. Village endogamy is also in practice as in other parts of South India.

The fact that rural-urban migration is highly selective of males is evident in Table 4, where the sex ratios of cities are shown to be quite high. The sex ratios of cities in West Bengal were 152 in 1961, 142 in 1971 and 126 in 1981, which suggest that males have a greater tendency to migrate alone than with their family. In the northern or eastern zones of India, when men migrate to cities to work they often leave their wives on the ancestral land in the village. Migration from village to cities, therefore, is usually of recurrent rather than of permanent nature. "Permanent migration out of the village by an entire

TABLE 4. SEX RATIOS OF CLASS I TOWNS (100,000+ TOWNS INCLUDING URBAN AGGLOMERATIONS) OF KERALA AND WEST BENGAL, 1961-1981

Class I Towns	Kerala			Class I Towns	West Bengal		
	1961	1971	1981		1961	1971	1981
Cochin	108	105	102	Calcutta	154	143	128
Calicut	103	101	99	Asansol	152	132	127
Trivandrum	104	101	99	Kharagpur	123	118	113
Alleppey	102	101	98	Bardhaman	127	124	113
Quilon	-	101	99	Durgapur	-	131	119
Cannanore	-	-	100	Balurghat	-	-	111
Trichur	-	-	96	Siliguri	-	-	126
Palghat	-	-	99	Baharampur	-	-	103
				Nabadwip	-	-	103
All Towns	104	102	100	Ondal	-	-	139
Rural Areas	97	98	97	Habra	-	-	104
				Raniganj	-	-	134
				All Towns	152	142	126
				Rural Areas	106	106	106

Note: Blank columns suggest that they were not classified as Class I towns at the given censal year.

Sources: 1. Census of India, 1971, General Population Tables, Series -1, India, Part II-A(i), pp. 239-497;
2. Census of India, 1981, Provisional Population Totals (Rural-Urban Distribution), Series-1, India, Paper 2 of 1981, pp. 122-23, 198-204.

family does not occur often because, for most people, the tie in the village provides at least some sense of security, while the positions they can acquire in the city are seldom more than marginal" (Rowe, 1973:226).

The sex ratios of cities in Kerala are much lower than in West Bengal (104, 1961, 102 in 1971 and 100 in 1981). However, it should be noted that Kerala is the only state in India which has a low sex ratio. The sex ratios of rural population were 97 in 1961, 98 in 1971 and 97 in 1981. Despite the fact that the sex ratios of rural to urban migrants in Kerala were quite low, the sex ratios of the cities are high. This has been possible because the sex ratio of migrants from other states is quite high and because even at the intrastate level there were more male than female migrants in the past. On the whole, it appears that rural-urban migration is much less selective of males in Kerala compared to West Bengal. The sex ratios of cities in Kerala or in south India are relatively balanced.

In rural to urban migration in West Bengal, males outnumber females because females, especially single ones, are not usually encouraged to migrate to towns to earn their living. The liability of running a family rests with the adult male members of a family, as in other parts of north India. Even married women do not necessarily accompany their husbands at the time of migration. Since a high proportion of men do not go to towns with their female partners, the urban areas have recorded a higher proportion of single-member households than the rural areas. In urban areas of West Bengal, for example, single-member households constitute about 13 per cent compared to seven per cent in rural areas (Mitra, 1967:28). Because many of the individual migrants live with their friends or kinsmen in the urban areas, the proportion of single-member households is less than what one would normally expect.

The sex ratios of cities in West Bengal are high also because most migrants from states like Bihar, Orissa, Assam, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh — who together constitute about 90 per cent of total in-migrants to West Bengal — have a very strong tendency to move alone leaving their families behind (Singh, 1986:151-159). This is quite natural because most of them are manual labourers and other low-paid workers who cannot afford to live in cities with their families. They can increase their savings if they live alone. Interestingly, females are usually considered an economic burden in cities, for they are not encouraged to work outside their homes. They take up outside jobs usually when the male's earnings are not sufficient to meet the basic necessities of life.

Kerala is different from West Bengal in many respects, besides in cultural terms. Kerala has a higher level of female literacy, the lowest level of difference in literacy by sex among all states in the country, a matrilineal system of family, cross-cousin marriages, a higher level of female participation in the workforce, a higher expectation of life for females and a relatively more egalitarian social and economic value system, suggesting a higher social status of women in that state compared to West Bengal. In view of this, a higher mobility among females in the rural-urban stream of migration is not really unusual.⁶ Females in Kerala migrate not only as a consequence of marriage, but also as dependent daughters, housewives, sisters, mothers and breadwinners. The tendency of familial migration is much greater in Kerala or all of south India than in the northern region of the country. To quote Rowe, "this study and other data lead us to categorize South Indian migration to the city as permanent family migration, in contrast to the North Indian pattern of recurrent unaccompanied male migration" (1973:238-239).

Summary and Conclusions

Regardless of the line of enquiry, past researchers have corroborated the proposition that rural to urban migration is highly selective of young adults. The present study further supports this fact, but at the same time it also suggests that rural to urban migration is selective of a wide range of age groups, from 15 to 49 years. However, similar to the findings of other studies, persons aged 15-24 are definitely more migratory than those belonging to other age groups. Female migrants are found to be younger than male migrants in Kerala as well as in West Bengal. This has been mainly because wives are invariably younger than husbands. There is little difference between Kerala and West Bengal in terms of the patterns of selectivity in age of male migrants, although the differences in socioeconomic situation and in demographic characteristics are marked. The mean age at migration for males is the same in both the states: 20 years. However, the mean age at migration for females is lower in West Bengal than in Kerala by about two years. This has been possible chiefly because the mean age at marriage of females in West Bengal is lower than in Kerala.

The young experience a comparatively greater mobility because they respond to opportunities available outside their village home quite quickly, being on the verge of the beginning of a new phase of life. This is the period of family formation, separation of young adults from parental care and control, commencing a career or entering the workforce to assert individuality and independence, and a time of meeting fresh challenges of life in a society. Also, the young are able to adjust more easily to new situations. It is this stage of life when the young are quite often encouraged by their parents to start a working life or a life of independence in the interest of the family of origin, in general, and in their own interest, in particular. All of these factors, coupled with other factors more specifically related to individual circumstances, induce greater mobility among the young people.

Since marriage in India is a universal social institution characterized by the patrilocal system of residence for females after marriage, migration becomes an inevitable phenomenon in the life of a woman. This makes women more migratory than men. In rural to urban migration, men are more migratory than women in West Bengal, but not in Kerala. The sex ratio of cities in West Bengal is much higher than that of rural areas, primarily because males are not always accompanied by the female members of their families in migration from the village to cities. This is true about both intra- and inter-state migration.

Footnotes

1. Herein the sex ratio refers to the number of males per 100 females in contrast to the number of females per 100 males followed in Indian census reports.
2. At the level of the individual urban centre, migration tabulations have been prepared for class I towns and urban agglomerations (UA). In the Indian census, towns have been classified into six categories on the basis of population size as follows: class I – 100,000+; class II – 50,000 to 99,999; class III – 20,000 to 49,999; class IV – 10,000 to 19,999; class V – 5,000 to 9,999; and class VI – less than 5,000. The concept of “urban agglomeration” – a new name for “town group” which was used for the first time in the 1951 census – was introduced in the 1971 census to signify almost the same phenomenon. It has been defined as follows:

An urban agglomeration is made up of a main town together with the adjoining areas of urban growth and is treated as one urban spread. Each such agglomeration may be made up of more than one statutory town, adjoining one another such as a municipality and the adjoining cantonment, etc. and also other urban growths such as a Railway Colony, University Campus, etc. Such out-growths (O.G.) which did not qualify to be treated as individual towns in their own right and have pronounced urban characteristics are shown as constituents of the agglomeration. (Census of India, 1971d:155.)

3. Median is considered as the most appropriate measure of central tendency for an age distribution, but herein we have employed mean age because the main purpose of this measure is to compare the age at marriage based on Hajnal's (1953:111-136) method (which is, in fact, the mean age at marriage) with the mean age at migration.
4. According to the 1981 census, the levels of literacy are 70 per cent in Kerala (75 for males and 66 for females) and 41 per cent in West Bengal (51 for males and 30 for females).
5. Village exogamy refers to the practice of seeking a mate outside the village. In north India, village exogamy is the inviolable rule; marriage within the village is regarded as highly improper. In south India, besides village exogamy, village endogamy (marriage within the same village) too is very popular.

The patrilocal system refers to the practice of a married couple living in the husband's community or village or of a wife settling in the home of her husband. In south India, especially in Kerala, both patrilocal and its reverse – matrilocal system of residence – are in common practice.

6. Although the systems of matrilineal family and cross-cousin marriages are on the verge of gradual disappearance in Kerala, they have not been characteristic of the people in West Bengal.

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