

City in Their Imagination: Narratives of ‘Left-behind’ Bhumihar Women

Vandana Rai

Abstract

This paper addresses how ‘left-behind’ women imagine the distant city spaces and how their imagination, experiences, and aspirations of migration are shaped by their caste, class, and age. Through the narratives of upper-caste rural Bhumihar women, this paper aims to spotlight some vignettes of gender and migration. Migration is common among various caste groups in Bihar, although its history, intensity, nature and pattern differ for each group. While migration as a livelihood strategy is a dominant theme in academic studies, its emotional and aspirational aspects, especially in the context of gender, have not received much scholarly attention. This paper, therefore, foregrounds the category of ‘left-behind women’, and privileges the experiences, aspirations, and meaning-making by left-behind women of their social worlds and the world their men inhabit. These women, of course, are not a homogeneous category, but their class and family locations engender specific power dynamics mediating not only their existence but also differing aspirations related to the ‘distant’ migrant city perceived and imagined in diverse ways.

Keywords: Migration, left-behind, women, Bhumihar, Bihar, caste, morality

Introduction

This paper engages with two questions: (i) how do ‘left-behind’ women – wives who stay behind at home when their husbands migrate for work to urban areas – imagine the distant city space; and (ii) how are their imagination, experiences, and migration aspirations shaped by their caste, class, and age? It explores these questions through the accounts of Bhumihar women whose lives are embedded in rural Bihar, privileging the subjectivities and meaning-making of a dominant part of these women’s lives and social reality—migration. These narratives provide some coordinates to unpack an infrequently touched domain of migration.

Bihar has a long history of outmigration going back to the early nineteenth century when people from this state migrated as indentured labourers to the British colonies of Mauritius,

Vandana Rai (vandanastyle27@gmail.com) is Research Scholar at the University of Hyderabad.

Guyana, Trinidad, and Fiji (Dutta and Mishra 2011, 458). Within India, the direction of migration has been changing, largely dependent on economic opportunities. Pinak Sarkar's work (2019) reveals that outmigration from Bihar is mainly for economic reasons such as work, employment and business, and is twice the all-India figure for both male and female migration. According to the 2011 census of India, more than half of the working men are absent from the state as they work in urban and rural centres in India and abroad (Datta and Mishra 2011). With the economy changing from agriculture-based to more industry- and service-based sectors, the migration flow is mostly towards cities and towns offering employment.

Migration in Bihar is common for almost all caste groups, although the history, intensity, nature, and pattern differ. Arjan de Haan (2002), based on his study on the long history of outmigration from Saran district, Bihar, contends that 'migratory work should be seen as a central part of livelihoods of many sections of the population'. De Haan's work is significant in stressing the 'segmentation' of migration. Many micro-level studies underline that marginalised groups dominate short-term seasonal migration, whereas the 'upper caste' dominates semi-permanent and permanent migration (Vartak and Tumbe 2019, Tumbe 2018, Haberfeld et al. 1999, Vijay 2005, Fuller and Narasimha 2014).

In migration literature, the term 'left-behind women' generally refers to rural female stayers in the context of male outmigration. The implications of migration are at both ends: those who 'migrate' and those who are 'left behind'. For a long time, most of the inquiries into migration studies were on male migration, its nature, pattern, and the roles of migrants at the place of destination (Neetha 2004, Curran et al. 2006, Ghatak 2019). In earlier scholarship, there was little focus on the women living in village-based families without their men. Some exciting works have emerged in recent decades on women who are not directly part of migration yet whose lives have been directly impacted by it. Hugo (2000) asserts that migrants' families deal not merely with the absence of member/s but also with newly acquired material or immaterial things/objects transmitted back by migrants. Leela Gulati's (1993) extensive work on male Gulf migration and left-behind women in Kerala substantiates this claim. Through ten case studies, Gulati examines various health, psychological, financial, and family issues of left-behind women. The narratives of these women demonstrate that migration plays a vital role as a catalyst for social change. Recent work in migration studies has opened up many hitherto untouched aspects of left-behind women's lives that are fundamentally related to migration.

However, much of the scholarship on left-behind women uses the 'impact analysis framework'. These studies analyse the 'impact of male migration' on various aspects of women's lives, such as empowerment or disempowerment of women, mobility of women, increase or decrease of workload, decision-making power within the household, and mental and physical health (Desai and Banerji 2008, Paris *et al.* 2005, Hondagneu-Sotelo 2000, Jetley 1987, Gulati 1987, Menon 1995). Mascarenhas-Keyes (1990), in a study of a Catholic village of

peasant origin in Goa, found that women were withdrawn from agricultural work after an increase in household income from male migration, which reduced the women's workload to some extent. Male migration does not always positively affect the lives of left-behind women; often, the impact is negative. Jetley's study (1987) of poor peasant and landless families in rural Uttar Pradesh reveals that income through remittances could not mitigate poverty. In addition to familial and domestic responsibilities, women had to take on extra responsibility to support their families financially. Moreover, it is not as though all left-behind women have autonomy in household affairs; this is subject to whether the woman lives alone (or with her children) or is a junior member in a joint or extended family that has older women (Desai and Banerji 2008).

The category of left-behind women is not homogeneous; they are embedded in varying social structures and power relations within the household and outside it, which shapes their experiences and meaning-making of their worlds. The impact analysis framework has significantly brought out left-behind women's empowerment, participation in workload, mental and physical health, and mobility in the absence of their men. However, it has not focused much on left-behind women's emotional, aspirational, and meaning-making aspects.

This paper foregrounds these aspects, which the 'impact analysis framework' is insufficient to map into. Slightly deviating from this framework, the attempt here is to bring to analysis the dynamism of left-behind women's varied everyday experiences. Additionally, the general trend has been to study the left-behind women from marginalised caste groups since lower-caste men have dominated the seasonal migration phenomenon. However, the experiences of these women differ from those of the women belonging to the upper castes mainly because privileges and rules governing their social and economic lives in the village differ according to their caste and class location. One medium in which the subjectivities and experiences of left-behind women of Bihar's peasant society receive space is folk songs. The Bhojpur region of Bihar is India's largest linguistic region where migration has created an oral culture of folk songs exclusively written and sung by women on various occasions (Singh 2019). Singh (2018) has studied how the Bhojpuri folk songs of Bihar capture the disjuncture between the lived and imagined geographies and tell us stories of women's subjectivity, agency, and helplessness.

This paper focuses on left-behind Bhumihar women of rural Bihar. It highlights their experiences, aspirations and meaning-making of their own social worlds and the world their men inhabit. Bhumihars, one of the dominant castes of Bihar, associate themselves with the land.¹ The fieldwork that informs this paper was conducted in the village Naygaon (name changed), located 17 km east of the Jehanabad district. In this multi-caste village, Bhumihar (locally called Babhan), Ravidasi (Scheduled Caste), and Kahar (Other Backward Caste) are numerically larger groups. Brahmin, Teli, Bhuiya, Dhobi and Nai are also present in small numbers. There are approximately 640 households in the village, of which 210 are Bhumihar

households. In my year-long fieldwork, I interacted with Bhumihar women in different settings, within and outside the households, in groups and sometimes individually. Bhumihar women form an assorted group but are uniformly subject to gender codes of their caste. The women neither strictly adhere to these codes nor do they reject them. Instead, they use different modalities to deal with the caste codes in their everyday life.

Bhumihars' migration from this village has surged in the last two or three decades. They have detached themselves from land and farming and migrated to different urban centres in search of paid jobs or to start a business. Based on migration, the Bhumihar households can be categorised into two groups: first, Bhumihar households that have outmigrated with families, locking up their houses in the village; second, households where only the men have migrated, leaving the women behind. Only a few Bhumihar households do not have a single migrant. The economic condition of the Bhumihar households who have outmigrated with family is better than households with only male migrants.² Among Bhumihars, migration with family is more dominant than outmigration of only men: more than half of the Bhumihar households have undertaken family outmigration. There is more family outmigration among Bhumihars than other numerically large groups, such as Kahars and Chamars. Since my doctoral work focuses on a single caste, I do not have the exact breakup of data on the family outmigration of the Kahars and Chamars. Although Bhumihar women's migration with their men has increased in recent decades, many Bhumihar women in the village remain behind for economic or family reasons.

Left-behind Bhumihar Women

It is common to see men of this village outmigrate after schooling. However, in recent decades, Bhumihar men have migrated in bulk to urban centres both within and outside the state in search of work. Many men have migrated for the first time in their late thirties or early forties. So, there is late-age male migration along with the dominant phenomenon of young male outmigration.

Bhumihar left-behind women are diverse in age—young, middle-aged, and a very few older women). Their reasons for staying back also vary. Generally, the term 'left-behind women' implies that women suffer from a lack of choice in whether to migrate with the men or stay back as they do not have any role in decision-making, which is their men's domain (Das 2018). This assumption, which treats women as passive actors, has not gone unchallenged. Archambault (2010) cites the example of women, especially older women, left behind in rural Tanzania who stay back to maintain ownership of family-owned land and strengthen important social networks. Miranda Das (2018, 29), in her study in Bihar, finds that 'left-behind women had no desire to migrate, even if they are given a chance'. It is important to argue that left-behind women are not passive actors, but it would be inaccurate to generalise that these women always stay back willingly. In the case of the Bhumihar left-behind women in my field village, their perception varied according to their age group.

Young Bhumihar women I spoke with strongly desired to migrate with their husbands and earn. In most cases, the husband's earnings did not support the wife's migration. Hence, they lived in the village in the company of elderly women of their family. In a few cases, young women chose the middle path between migrating with their men and staying back in the village—they moved to the nearest town for their children's education. For instance, Renu's husband, Mukul, works in Sikkim at a private firm and comes home once a year. Initially, Renu stayed in the village with her son and widowed mother-in-law. When her son turned five, she migrated to the nearest town, only 6 km from the village. Renu wanted her son to be away from this village's *mahaul* (social environment) and get educated in an English medium school. She did not want to go to Sikkim, nor did she wish to stay back in the village. Therefore, Renu came up with the proposal to migrate to the nearest town. Initially, her husband and mother-in-law disagreed and refused to allow it, but eventually, she convinced them. Some young left-behind women like Renu – although very few – whose husbands earn a good amount choose this middle path between their husband's destination and origin place.

The middle-aged left-behind women did not express such desires; on the contrary, they found the village more comfortable and even livelier. These women have reached the age where they can easily move outside their household (although within the marked boundary of their settlement) and interact with women of their age group, which is not available to young women. Also, the upgradation of women's status from wife/mother to mother-in-law/grandmother changes the power dynamics within the household, and they gain more autonomy than they had at a young age. There are considerable differences in opinion across ages relating to staying back, which challenge the notion that women left behind are passive actors or always prefer to migrate.

Migration literature has established a close association between left-behind women's workload inside and outside the house and their men's absence (Datta and Mishra 2011; Paris et al. 2005). Remittances received at the village do not always fulfil the monetary requirement to sustain the family. Hence, the women left behind must work to fill the income gap (Jetley 1987). It has been noted that in the absence of their men, left-behind women have various responsibilities such as supervising their farm, working as labourers on farms and taking care of cattle, in addition to their familial and domestic responsibilities. This is true in the case of 'lower-caste' left-behind women, who constitute the larger part of left-behind women and are additionally disadvantaged (Das 2018). The Bhumihar left-behind women present a different picture.

Most Bhumihar households with only men migration are not economically well-off. In most cases, the men do not generate sufficient income to send enough remittances. But even when the remittances are insufficient, Bhumihar left-behind women do not involve themselves in farm-related or other labour-intensive activities for income. This does not mean that

Bhumihar women are absent from paid jobs. In recent decades, the number of working Bhumihar women has increased. Many Anganwadi, Shikshamitra, and ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist)³ posts, which require basic educational qualifications, are filled with Bhumihar women. Also, Bhumihars use their political power through the Panchayat to ensure these appointments. Usually, when the women are in such jobs, their husbands are present in the village, acting as proxies for their wives at block and district meetings. No one among the left-behind Bhumihar women in the study village had a paid job. Most elderly and middle-aged Bhumihar women were either illiterate or partially literate. The young Bhumihar women are educated but are usually discouraged from working outside the village.

Bhumihar women have recently become active outside the village spaces but still do not go to their fields to work on or supervise the farm. It is still taboo for Bhumihar women to step onto a field. Earlier, Bhumihar women were responsible for processing agricultural produce, such as boiling the paddy, making flattened rice, and cleaning and storing the grains, which were done within their domestic space and considered domestic work. With machines coming, Bhumihar women need not do this work anymore. Although those chores were strenuous and labour-intensive, the women liked the fact that they were passing their day working in the company of other women of the same or neighbouring families. These days, they complain about the absence of means to engage themselves in their free time between morning and evening chores. There is a clear segregation of work between *gharelu kaam* (domestic work) for women and *duwar⁴ ka kaam* (outside domestic work) for men or ‘lower-caste’ women. It signifies two things. First, Bhumihar women’s mobility is subject to caste and space norms in a different way from that of women of marginalised castes. Despite the financial burden, these women cannot work and support their families even if they wish. Second, Bhumihar women do not have additional workloads on top of their household and domestic responsibilities, unlike the women of marginalised castes.

Bhumihars’ caste normative system largely restricts their mobility within the village. Those who deviate from it are regarded as ‘lesser’ Bhumihars. For instance, Reena, a forty-two-year-old left-behind Bhumihar woman, is an exceptional case who engages with *duwar ka kaam* in her husband’s absence. This includes cleaning her *duwar*, feeding cattle, milking the cows, and making dung cakes. Reena’s family had moved away from the joint family over domestic issues. Her husband earned well working in a private firm in Patna until he had an accident and injured one leg. After this, he became a security guard in a school in Patna, with a reduced salary, which was insufficient to support a family of six members. To fill the income gap, Reena keeps three cows and sells the milk for extra income, with her husband handling the work of buying and storing the cattle fodder. However, she is severely criticised by other Bhumihar women for being involved in what is considered ‘lower-caste’ work.

Reena justifies her work as an extension of her domestic work. She explained that caring for cattle differs from working in the field. Reiterating the moral position of her caste, she argued, 'Bhumihar women should not work in the field even if they are dying of starvation.' Most of the Bhumihars who have migrated have either given their land for sharecropping or left it fallow. While as noted above, women of marginalised castes, irrespective of age, are active in village spaces such as other caste settlements, *duwar*, village shops and agricultural farms. Caste position and morality norms shape women's social experience in the village spaces.

After this broad picture of left-behind Bhumihar women, I will provide a detailed description of two left-behind Bhumihar women⁵, showing how they imagine the city space, often different from the village space, the aspirations they hold, and how the migration of their men conditions their life in the village.

Women's Narratives

City as a Space of Emancipation

Priya, approaching thirty, got married at the early age of eighteen. In her first eight years of marriage, she lived less at her *sasural* (husband's natal home) and more at her *maike* (girl's natal home). Her stay at her *sasural* increased after her six-year-old son was admitted to a private English medium school in the village. With the marriage of her brother, the family dynamics also changed at her natal home. So, she reduced the frequency of her visits and days of stay at her natal home. She acknowledged the compulsion to develop a sense of belonging at her husband's house and with his family. But from the very beginning, Priya has had problems adjusting to her *sasural*, the most prominent one being loneliness.

Priya lives in the village with her mother-in-law, Kamala, and her younger son. Priya's husband, Rajesh, and father-in-law, Madan, have both migrated for work. Rajesh migrated before his marriage and has lived in Patna for over ten years. After many failed attempts at business, he opened a small grocery shop against the wishes of both Priya and Kamala. Madan works at a dam in the nearby village and comes home more frequently, once or twice a month for a day or two. In the absence of both men, their land is given for sharecropping. Both Priya and Kamala consider Rajesh's migration to Patna impractical because he is not in a monthly paid job, and his earnings from the shop are low, barely enough to support his expenses in the city. Instead, they have suggested he open a shop in the village. Rajesh refuses to return to the village. It would be a blow to his self-esteem as it would signify his failure in the city. Priya has no say in her husband's migration nor in her staying back in the village.

Staying at Naygaon, Priya is primarily confined to the inner space of the house. In the absence of the men, Kamala is responsible for fetching the ration and vegetables from the shop in the settlement. Kamala likes to spend her time in the company of women her age. She attends a Bhumihar women's (all middle-aged and above) gathering near her settlement and visits two or three houses of her close caste kin daily. In Kamala's absence, Priya is all alone in the house. Even after eight years of marriage, Priya is not allowed to go to the rooftop in daylight or near her house's main gate. In her free time, she watches Bhojpuri movies battling frequent power cuts. Priya said despairingly, 'Imagine, the whole day, I am alone. I have no one to share my feelings with, whether good or bad.'

Like Priya, most young left-behind women live with their mother-in-law. In the absence of their men, the young women have only the company of the elderly women of the village. The power relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law and the generation gap between them dissuades many young women from freely expressing their feelings and thoughts with the older women. Very few unmarried daughters or women visit the young married women; even if they visit, the mother-in-law would be around. Young married women do not visit the house of their close blood or caste kin until they reach a certain age or for an occasion like marriage. Young married women do not get to interact with women of their age group, as they are all subject to similar norms. However, young women of the village sometimes exchange phone numbers through their children or others and speak over the phone without the mother-in-law's knowledge. Once, I delivered Priya's number to her neighbour, Kanti, who also lives with her mother-in-law in her husband's absence. There are many such strategies these young women use in their everyday lives to negotiate and adjust to the norms.

Priya's narrative reveals that loneliness constitutes a large part of her everyday life. Before labelling it solely as an 'impact' of her husband's absence, one must consider the knitted system of norms and values induced by her caste position, which conditions her seclusion and loneliness. Many feminist writings on caste and gender have established that gender is significant in the perpetuation of caste hierarchy through control of sexuality and exploitation of the sexual-economic labour of women (Yalman 1963; Chakravarti 1993; Rao 2003). Also, caste structure, in the form of rules and regulations, invades women's lives differently (Dube 1997). It has also been noticed that when a caste aspires for a higher position in the caste ladder, what first comes into play is the attempt to control their women.

Bhumihar women, as with many other caste women, are subject to constant supervision, which does not end with their marriage. Restricting women by keeping them within the inner space of the house suggests that these spaces are projected as intensely moral realms (Niranjana 2001). Everyday expressions, such as a mother-in-law's instructions or admonitions to her daughter-in-law — do not peek through the window, do not appear in front of every man and woman, do not go to the roof before the sunset, do not come to the main door, don't

you know how to talk or laugh softly — carry implicit references to shame, honour, chastity, and female sexuality.

A mental map of the house interior is created where the private space is clearly demarcated from the public spaces. The innermost part of the house, including the cooking hearth, worship place, bedrooms and attached courtyard, is where young married women are restricted, which constantly invisibilises them from other parts of the house. They get access to the more public parts of the house only after attaining a certain age. As a newlywed, Priya was restricted within the inner space of the house. Moreover, with the changing composition of the family structure, from joint to nuclear households, women like Priya feel lonelier. These young women have access to newer technologies such as TV and mobile phones, but Priya's experience shows the limitation of these technologies, with the longing for company persisting despite this access.

Priya is happy when her husband visits home, but it is momentary. He comes home after a gap of four to five months and stays only for a few days despite living only around 60 km from the village. Priya recalled some of the happy moments she spent with Rajesh when he came home, such as watching Bhojpuri movies together, listening to music, laughing and playing with their son. However, Kamala taunts Rajesh for spending so much time inside the home, particularly inside the room in Priya's company. Priya can move around with her husband, visiting religious sites, markets, and even the hospital. During his brief visits, she does not bring up her issues and tries to cherish his company. She remarked, 'Once he leaves, my life becomes monotonous again.'

Priya's narrative indicates that as a daughter, a woman (up to a certain age) has relative freedom for movement in the household and the *duwar*; the streets and fields are more accessible. However, as a daughter-in-law, the boundaries of access and freedom of movement are fixed. Even as they cope with the commonplace but powerful transformation of marriage, in terms of changes in physical place and moral registers, the husband's migration leaves these women desolate.

Priya believes a permanent solution to her loneliness is to migrate to the city with her husband. In her view, the city means relaxation from all the rules she is subjected to as a married Bhumihar woman: 'In the city, we have freedom and personal space, which is absent in the village.' She perceives the village and the city as two distinct socio-spatial entities. Before marriage, she lived in the village but perceived her natal conjugal villages differently. She said, 'The village as such is not an issue. The problem is *bandhan* (restrictions). Here [at her *sasural*], I feel *ghutan* (suffocated); it is like a jail.'

In her imagination, the city is a space of intimacy (with her husband) and freedom, while the village is suffocating and restrictive. The image of the distant place her husband has migrated

to gives Priya hope for freedom from all restrictions. Unfortunately, with so many household complications and insufficient earnings, that escape is not possible at the moment.

City as a Destroyer of Dreams

Kajal, a thirty-two-year-old housewife and mother of two (aged five and two), whose husband is an outmigrant, lives with her parents-in-law, grandmother-in-law and two children. After a few months of the marriage, Kajal, too, had migrated with her husband and lived in the city of Bhagalpur for nearly a year. She returned to the village with her husband when he resigned from his job and decided to start his own business. After three years of business failures and financial difficulties in the village, her husband migrated to Patna and joined a salesman's job in an electronic shop. Kajal stayed back in the village with her kids. She maintains a cordial relationship with her mother-in-law. Her parents-in-law are caring for her kids and they support her financially. Being the mother of two sons and seven years of marriage behind, Kajal has gained negotiating power within the household and in her conjugal relationship.

Of all my respondents, Kajal was the only one who had written down a part of her life events and emotions in a personal diary. She generously shared the diary with me as a reference to understand her life after her marriage.⁶ Kajal's personal diary notes the experiences of her husband's outmigration and her own experience in the city in the initial years of her marriage and captures her imagination of the city space. Regular entries for a short period, from January 2015 to November 2016, note many events of her life, emotional ups and downs, desires, self-reflections, and meaning-making of her world. The very first entry in the diary is on the day her marriage was fixed, and the last entry is during her first pregnancy. Her entries in the diary reflect some of the important phases of her life, such as her transformation from unmarried to married life, her initial experience at the *sasural*, her short-term migration to the city and her conjugal relationship. Busy with her kids and household responsibilities, Kajal has been unable to resume her diary writing, although she wishes to.

Kajal began her diary writing from her school days to express her feelings and thoughts, which she could not communicate to anyone else for fear of being judged. Of all the diaries she wrote, only this one remained with her. The rest were lost when Kajal moved from her natal house. She preferred to write in *Hinglish*; only a few pages are in Hindi. She uses English words in many places, such as lover, husband, feeling, happy and sad, and also writes short sentences in English, such as: 'Today I am very happy'; 'Please god help me.' Several events and emotions noted in the diary were discussed during my conversations with Kajal. In the initial few months after marriage, she lived with her in-laws in the village. Her husband, who was working in a town in Bihar, left for work eight days after the marriage. Her entry on that day in the diary notes her feelings. She expressed her despair: 'Today, my husband returned to work. No one bothered to ask how I felt. It is so painful' (9 May 2015).

As with other left-behind women, she went through a double separation: one from her natal home and another from her husband. Kajal had a pre-marriage telephonic conversation with her husband for about two months but it had not given her a clear sense about her husband's nature. Based on her telephonic conversation, she wrote about her doubts and observations about her husband's nature, wondering 'whether he is progressive or conservative'. She waited for her marriage and in-person conversations to get a concrete idea about his nature. But before Kajal got to know him, her husband returned to the town for work. She notes,

In these eight days, I could not know him properly; how would I? The whole day, he stayed outside the house. I also wanted him to spend time with me during the day, but he did not. I want to stay with him and share what I think and want from life, and he can share his feelings. I do not know when I will go and live with him (8 May 2015).

Kajal's diary bursts with emotions of desolation, anxiety, agony, hesitation and fear, mainly reflecting the changes in her life after the marriage. Her jottings indicate she had many plans for her new, married life, which she wanted to share with her husband. On another occasion, she described her dream of an ideal and happy domesticity with mutual transparency and sharing. But she felt that was impossible in the village, within the joint family set-up. In her imagination, as noted in the diary, she perceived the city as a place for this possibility. Like Priya's account, Kajal's narrative explicates the differences between village and city.

The culture of intimacy and privacy is by and large absent from villages. Intimacy between husband and wife is supposedly only for reproduction. Although this practice has changed over the years, even today, men are criticised if they spend time in the day with their wives. As we have seen, Kamala would taunt her son for spending time in the company of his wife. Kajal was aware of the norms governing a married couple's intimacy in the village. That is why she desired to start her domesticity in the town, to overcome the hurdles to intimacy and other restrictions imposed on upper caste young women. She thought the married life she desired was possible only in the urban area without the joint family's restrictions and surveillance.

With all these dreams and desires, she finally went to live with her husband. Here, at least, she had freedom of movement inside the house. She had relaxation of *parda*, dress, food and even the ritualised routine of everyday life which she had to do at the village. Technically, her mobility outside the house was more plausible. However, being new in the town and embodying (caste and gender) normativity, she relied on her husband's company and his permission to go out. Fifteen days after she arrived in the city, she made the first entry in the diary, which consists mainly of her reflections on her life in the city with her husband. The dominant emotion is disappointment, as most things from the imaginary world of her domesticity were missing:

I assumed that when I went to stay with him, he would give me more time, and I would not feel alone. He stays out from 9 in the morning to 9 at night. Even when he is at home, he watches movies on his phone. I keep waiting for him to listen to me (16 September 2015).

Kajal came to the city with a bundle of expectations. She thought she would get the time and attention of her husband for a fulfilling partnership, and her much-cherished dream of her husband helping her to prepare for a job would be realised. In contrast to the village, where women had limited scope, many responsibilities and caste-related restrictions, the city seemed to her to be full of opportunities. Kajal often initiated conversations about this and other things with her husband but invariably received a cold response. Her diary notes,

Once, I initiated a talk about getting a job, sharing that I wanted to study further to prepare myself for it, but he did not show any interest. I cook, clean, wash and care about his comfort daily, but he ignored me when I wanted to talk. Even if I cry, he does not bother to ask. Leave that; he never asks to eat together or sit near me, nor asks how I spend the whole day alone. These are small things. Does it require much effort? No (16 September 2015).

Kajal reflects on her imagination, perceptions and experiences of the urban space. She had migrated with her husband to the town, hoping to build an ideal conjugal relationship far from the village and its regulations. Kajal thought she would transcend the conjugal (power) relation. However, contrary to her imagination, she experienced unequal reciprocity from her husband. The major disappointment for Kajal was her husband's disinterest in mundane activities of everyday life that engage her. On another occasion, she notes,

Sometimes, I wonder how my life here differs from that in the village. I left everyone there and came to stay with him, thinking we would have a more intimate time. It is the same jail, confined to four walls. Would he ever understand my desire, or would my dreams always remain unfulfilled? (4 October 2015)

Generally, intimate emotional behaviour is socially regulated to preserve the gendered division and is mediated by power, division of labour, family composition, caste, community, sexuality, and place (Geetha 2007, Jackson 2012). Kajal had perceived the city as emancipatory, supposedly without orthodox rules and constant supervision. In many places in her diary, she had written, 'I want my husband to be my lover.' I asked Kajal how she differentiates between husband and lover. She explained that a husband is always tied to familial duties and tries to bend and shape his wife according to family rules. However, a lover's concern is mainly with his partner's happiness without much thought of family rules and other people. Unfortunately, her desires remained unfulfilled.

Kajal's husband did not play the role she wished for; on the contrary, he tried to shape her into a good *bahu* (daughter-in-law) who always prioritised the family before her own desires. Her experience of coupledom was asymmetrical in emotional response despite the shift in location. She kept questioning her experiences in both spaces, often concluding there was no difference between the two in terms of conjugality. Her experience of conjugal relationship is personal yet can be generalised for many young married women in the village. Losing hope in her conjugal relationship, Kajal prioritised her kids and their upbringing; they are now the fulcrum of her domesticity. Disappointed with the city and because of the insufficient income of her husband, Kajal chose to stay back in the village and negotiate the gendered norms of her caste in her everyday life.

Conclusion

In engaging with the two main themes of the essay – a) how do left-behind women imagine the distant city space; and b) how do their caste, class, and age shape their imagination, experiences, and aspirations of migration – I have attempted to move beyond the 'impact analysis framework'. I have pursued a slightly different line by highlighting the women's subjectivities and meaning-making to understand a significant slice of their lives—migration. Laying the context of the study, I have presented a broader picture of the lives of left-behind Bhumihar women concerning migration. The lives of left-behind Bhumihar women are not radically different from those of Bhumihar women whose husbands stay in the village. However, this paper has underscored that the husband's absence adds to their misery and often gives them hope and aspirations for the world that the husband occupies.

Two different narratives of Bhumihar women are then discussed to argue that the regime of caste values, economic condition, and age shape the experiences of these women. Priya is keen to experience city life to gain more freedom and 'personal space', but her spouse's insufficient earnings lead to despair. Kajal, like Priya, initially imagines the city as an emancipatory space. However, her dream of building an ideal conjugal relationship with her husband in the city remains unfulfilled.

Hence, the essay indicates how different left-behind Bhumihar women, whose lives are embedded in the social structure and power relations within the household and outside it, imagine the city space differently and how caste, class, and age add their own layers to their meaning-making of the husband's migration. These instances are not peculiar to the Bhumihar women in this village and can be used to understand the life of 'upper-caste' women in contemporary rural Bihar in particular and rural India in general.

Notes

1. Traditionally, land is considered a significant source of livelihood and the most desirable form of possession. Bhumihars define themselves literally: Bhumi (land) + ahar (food)= livelihood from land. Although the Bhumihar caste associates itself with land, its caste morality prohibits the adherents from doing the actual labour in the field. During the ‘Brahmin status movement’, Swami Sahajanand Saraswati, one of the prominent Bhumihars and famous as a peasant leader in Bihar, clearly distinguished Bhumihars from other land-owning castes. He argued that Kshatriya (an ‘upper’ caste) could work in the objection or un-objection period (*aapattee aur un-aapattee kaal*), but Bhumihar should not work in the field in the un-objection period. It is considered a sin equal to killing a thousand animals (see ‘Brahmarshi Vansh Vistar’ 1916 in Sharma 2010). In a certain sense, this belief and morality still govern most of the Bhumihars. Bhumihar women are not allowed to venture into the agricultural fields even during the objection period. During fieldwork, I observed that even poor Bhumihar women do not work in the field. They clearly stated that even if they died of starvation, they still would not go to the field for work.
2. This statement is based on the descriptions provided by their neighbours and my observation of the structure and size of the locked-up houses.
3. The Anganwadi program is part of the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) of the Indian government, which focuses on providing food supplements to young children, adolescent girls, and lactating women. ASHA is an all-India female- cadre of community health workers constituted by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare under the National Rural Health Mission in 2006. They are responsible for promoting universal immunisation, referral, and escort services for reproduction and child health (RCH) and other healthcare programs. Shiksha Mitra, the para-teachers, are recruited in government schools as part of a low-cost education strategy adopted by Bihar state in the 2000s. The power of recruiting Shiksha Mitra lies with the village Panchayat. These para or Panchayat teachers are given lower lump-sum payments for the same workload without governmental benefits.
4. Duwar is the empty open space in front of one’s house. One example of *duwar ka kaam* is the works related to cattle such as feeding and milking them and cleaning *duwar*.
5. The fieldwork was conducted between May 2019 and May 2021.
6. Translations of the excerpts, where necessary, are by me.

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