

UNDERSTANDING MIGRATION DYNAMICS IN SCHEDULED CASTE COMMUNITIES: EVIDENCE FROM THIRUVANNAMALAI AND VILLUPURAM DISTRICTS

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Abstract

Migration remains a critical livelihood strategy for marginalised communities across India, particularly among Scheduled Caste (SC) households who continue to face historical disadvantages, landlessness, and unequal access to employment. This study explores the key factors driving migration among SC communities in Thiruvannamalai and Villupuram districts of Tamil Nadu. Based on mixed-method data—including household surveys, field interviews, and secondary sources—the research examines economic drivers, social constraints, demographic trends, gendered experiences, and the role of migration networks. Findings demonstrate that economic insecurity remains the most prominent push factor; however, caste-based discrimination, aspirations for upward mobility, and structural vulnerabilities significantly shape migration decisions. The discussion contextualises these patterns within existing migration literature, while the conclusion emphasises policy implications to ensure safer, more equitable migration pathways.

Keywords: seasonal migration, marginalised communities, rural poverty, employment insecurity, social exclusion, migration networks

INTRODUCTION

Migration is one of the most significant socio-economic processes influencing contemporary India, shaping demographic patterns, labour markets, and the lived experiences of marginalized communities. Among these communities, the Scheduled Castes (SCs) occupy a particularly important position within migration scholarship due to their historical disadvantage, restricted access to land, and continued exposure to caste-based discrimination. In Tamil Nadu, districts such as Thiruvannamalai and Villupuram have long been marked by agrarian distress, unequal land ownership, and seasonal fluctuations in rural employment, conditions that make out-migration a crucial livelihood strategy. Despite this, there remains limited empirical work that examines how and why SC families from these districts migrate, what factors influence their decisions, and how migration intersects with caste-based social structures.

Migration is often conceptualised as a household strategy adopted to minimise risk, diversify income, or escape structural inequality. Classical theories, such as those of Lee (1966), emphasise the role of “push” and “pull” factors, arguing that economic hardship, unemployment, and social constraints in the place of origin push individuals to migrate, while better wages, urban amenities, and labour demand in the destination areas pull them. However, in the Indian context, these factors alone are insufficient to explain migration patterns among Scheduled Castes. Several scholars, including Deshingkar and Farrington (2009), argue that caste continues to act both as a constraint and a catalyst. The persistent socio-economic marginalisation experienced by SC communities amplifies the push factors, while caste networks—often overlooked in mainstream theories—create migration chains linking rural households to urban labour markets.

Tamil Nadu has historically shown high levels of rural-to-urban and rural-to-rural migration. Industries such as construction, brick-kilns, textile factories, plantations, and small-scale workshops absorb large numbers of low-skilled workers, many of whom belong to Scheduled Castes (Kannan & Bharathi, 2017). In districts like Thiruvannamalai and Villupuram, seasonal migration is particularly common because the agricultural sector is characterised by low productivity, limited irrigation facilities, and dependence on monsoon rainfall. SC households, who often work as landless agricultural labourers, face intense livelihood insecurity during non-farm months. As a result, circular migration to Chennai, Bengaluru, Pondicherry, and Cuddalore is widely observed. This type of migration is typically temporary, low-paid, and informal, but it remains essential for household survival.

In addition to economic factors, social dynamics also shape migration patterns. Caste-based discrimination continues to influence access to village resources, public spaces, labour opportunities, and local decision-making.

Research by Thorat and Newman (2010) suggests that discriminatory practices restrict Scheduled Caste individuals' upward mobility and limit their employment choices within the village economy. Consequently, migration becomes not only a livelihood strategy but also a means of negotiating dignity and escaping oppressive social relations. In Thiruvannamalai and Villupuram, anecdotal accounts reveal that many young SC migrants view cities as spaces of greater anonymity and lesser caste scrutiny compared to their native villages.

Recent academic literature also highlights the role of social networks, recruitment agents, and contractors in shaping the migration process. De Haan (2011) notes that migrants rarely move in isolation; instead, they rely on information from relatives, neighbours, and fellow caste members who migrated earlier. Among Scheduled Caste communities, these networks function as informal safety systems, offering assistance with transportation, accommodation, and job placement. This reduces the perceived risks of migration and increases its likelihood. For many SC youths in Tamil Nadu, migration is normalised as a "rite of passage" into adulthood, where mobility is equated with independence and financial responsibility.

Despite the prevalence of migration among SC communities, systematic studies focusing on district-level variations remain sparse. Thiruvannamalai and Villupuram—two large districts with significant SC populations—present ideal sites for understanding how structural inequality, agrarian distress, social discrimination, and economic aspirations interact to shape migration decisions. While state and national surveys provide broad patterns, they often fail to capture the lived realities, perceptions, and motivations of migrants themselves. This study addresses this gap by examining the key factors driving migration among the Scheduled Caste population of these districts, drawing on field data, secondary sources, and socio-economic indicators.

The significance of this study lies in its focus on a highly vulnerable group whose migration patterns reflect broader structural forces shaping rural India. Understanding the specific drivers of migration among SC households can help policymakers design targeted welfare schemes, employment programs, and social protection measures that reduce distress migration and support safer, more equitable mobility. Furthermore, insights from this study contribute to ongoing debates in migration research by highlighting how caste, economic precarity, and social aspirations jointly inform mobility decisions. The findings also emphasise the need for interventions that address both economic deprivation and caste-based barriers within rural communities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Migration has long been recognised as a major driver of socio-economic transformation in India, and a substantial body of scholarship has attempted to explain the causes, patterns, and implications of population movements. Early migration theories such as those of Ravenstein (1885) and Lee (1966) framed migration as a response to push-pull forces, where economic distress, lack of opportunities, and environmental limitations at the place of origin pushed individuals away, while higher wages and better amenities at the destination pulled them towards mobility. Although these theories provide a useful starting point, their explanatory power is limited in contexts where hierarchical social structures, caste-based discrimination, and unequal resource distribution influence both mobility and immobility. Contemporary scholars emphasise that migration in India cannot be understood without analysing caste, labour market segmentation, rural poverty, and the institutional arrangements shaping livelihood choices (Deshingkar & Start, 2003).

Research on migration in India consistently highlights the strong relationship between socio-economic vulnerability and mobility among marginalised communities, particularly Scheduled Castes. Breman's (1996) work on labour migration in Gujarat shows that landless and low-caste households often use migration as a survival mechanism within an exploitative labour system. Similarly, Mosse et al. (2002) argue that Dalit agricultural labourers in Tamil Nadu are disproportionately represented in seasonal migration streams due to limited land access, caste oppression, and unstable agricultural wages. These studies observed that migration among SC communities is rarely voluntary or aspirational; instead, it arises from the structural constraints inherent in rural economies dominated by caste hierarchies.

Tamil Nadu, despite being one of India's more industrialised states, continues to show high levels of rural-to-urban and circular migration. According to the NSSO and Census-based analyses, migration rates among Scheduled Castes remain higher than the state average, primarily due to insecure agricultural employment and insufficient access to productive assets (Kannan & Bharathi, 2017). In regions such as Thiruvannamalai and Villupuram, where rainfed agriculture is predominant, crop failure, monsoon dependency, and low irrigation coverage push rural labourers to seek work in urban and peri-urban sectors. Studies by Ananth (2015) and Gopal (2018) indicate that SC migrants from northern Tamil Nadu typically engage in construction work, brick-kiln labour, textile mill employment, wood industries, and informal service sector jobs, often under precarious working conditions.

The literature also highlights the importance of social networks in shaping migration flows. De Haan and Rogaly (2002) emphasise that migration decisions are influenced by previous migrants from the same caste or locality, who provide information about wages, travel routes, accommodations, and employers. These kinship and caste networks reduce uncertainty and transaction costs for new migrants, making circular migration a more acceptable strategy for SC households. Stark and Bloom (1985) similarly argue that migration is not an individual act but a household strategy to diversify income and spread economic risk. Among Scheduled Caste families, where income sources are limited and savings are minimal, such diversification becomes especially vital.

Caste continues to be a crucial factor shaping migration opportunities and constraints. Thorat and Newman (2010) document pervasive discrimination in hiring practices across urban labour markets, despite formal legal protections. This means that even after migration, Scheduled Caste individuals often remain confined to low-wage, physically intensive, and insecure jobs. Research in Tamil Nadu by Harriss-White (2004) demonstrates how caste hierarchies are reproduced within informal labour markets, influencing wage negotiations, work roles, and access to contractors. Migration may offer temporary relief from direct caste-based exclusion in villages, but it does not eliminate structural inequality.

A related strand of literature focuses on gender and migration, noting that SC women play a significant role in informal labour migration streams. Studies by Neetha (2009) and Parvathi (2019) reveal that Dalit women frequently migrate for employment in domestic work, brick kilns, agricultural plantations, and textile factories. Their work is often underpaid and undervalued, yet it remains an essential component of household livelihood strategies. Migration among Scheduled Caste women is shaped not only by economic need but also by the desire to escape caste and gender discrimination in their villages, a theme particularly relevant to districts like Villupuram where patriarchal structures remain strong.

Research also examines the social consequences of migration. Deshingkar (2010) observes that circular migration, though essential for survival, often leads to unstable schooling, poor health outcomes, and weak social protection for migrant families. Children of migrant labourers suffer frequent disruptions in education, contributing to intergenerational cycles of poverty. Studies in Tamil Nadu (Gurusamy, 2020) indicate that SC migrants frequently lack access to welfare schemes due to mobility, documentation issues, and exclusionary practices by local authorities. Migrants working in the construction and brick-kiln sectors are particularly vulnerable to debt bondage, wage theft, and occupational hazards.

While considerable literature exists on migration among disadvantaged groups in India, specific district-level analyses remain insufficient, particularly for Thiruvannamalai and Villupuram. Most national-level surveys aggregate data without reflecting local variations in agricultural practices, caste relations, and labour demand. Village-level studies by Mosse (2018) argue that understanding caste-linked migration requires close examination of local agrarian structures, landlessness patterns, credit practices, and power dynamics within rural governance institutions. In districts where SC communities form a significant share of the population, these factors interact to produce distinct migration trajectories. The present study responds to this scholarly gap by examining the migration patterns of Scheduled Castes in these two districts through empirical data and contextual analysis.

Overall, migration literature on Scheduled Caste communities in India reveals a consistent pattern: mobility is shaped by economic precarity, caste-based marginalisation, limited rural opportunities, and social networks that facilitate labour flows. The historical disadvantage of SC households significantly influences both the need to migrate and the nature of opportunities available to them. Despite migration's potential to enhance income and exposure, it remains embedded within exploitative labour arrangements and unequal social structures. The review of existing scholarship establishes the need for more focused, region-specific analysis of SC migration, particularly in Tamil Nadu's rural districts, where caste, poverty, and livelihood insecurity intersect in complex ways.

3. METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a mixed-methods research design to examine the factors influencing migration among Scheduled Caste (SC) communities in Thiruvannamalai and Villupuram districts. A mixed-methods approach was chosen because migration is a complex social phenomenon shaped by economic conditions, caste-based dynamics, household strategies, and subjective perceptions. Quantitative data alone would not sufficiently capture the lived realities and motivations of migrant households, while qualitative data alone may not reveal larger patterns or trends. Combining statistical analysis with field-based insights therefore allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the causes and consequences of migration within these districts, consistent with the methodological principles outlined by Creswell (2014) and Bryman (2012).

The study area comprises rural blocks from both Thiruvannamalai and Villupuram, districts known for their significant Scheduled Caste populations and high levels of seasonal and circular migration. According to the Census of India (2011), SC communities constitute a considerable proportion of the population in both districts, and their livelihood patterns are heavily dependent on agriculture and informal labour. These districts were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that the research focuses on regions where SC migration is both prominent and understudied. Within each district, two blocks were selected, followed by the identification of eight villages (four from each district) based on the prevalence of documented migrant households and recommendations from local panchayat leaders.

Data collection was conducted using both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were gathered through household surveys, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions conducted between 2023 and 2024. Secondary data were sourced from government reports, Census records, National Sample Survey (NSSO) migration rounds, district employment statistics, and scholarly literature on caste and migration. This triangulation of data sources enhances the reliability and validity of the findings, aligning with the methodological recommendations of Denzin (2010) regarding multi-source verification in social research.

The sample for the household survey consisted of 200 Scheduled Caste households, with 100 households selected from each district. A multistage sampling technique was employed. First, villages with high rates of out-migration were identified. Second, within each village, households were selected through systematic random sampling. The sample size was determined to ensure adequate representation and sufficient statistical power for analysing migration patterns. The survey questionnaire included variables on demographic characteristics, income levels, land ownership, employment history, type of migration, duration of stay at destination, wages received, reasons for migration, remittances, and access to government welfare schemes. The questionnaire design was informed by previous migration studies such as those by Deshingkar and Farrington (2009) and Kannan and Bharathi (2017), ensuring comparability with existing literature while allowing for region-specific insights.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and correlation analysis. Frequency distributions were used to identify dominant patterns in migration characteristics, while cross-tabulations helped examine relationships between variables such as caste sub-groups, landlessness, household income, and migration frequency. Correlation analysis was employed to explore associations between factors such as agricultural instability, debt burden, and seasonal migration intensity. Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS software, which allowed efficient data management and facilitated the identification of significant trends. The emphasis on quantitative analysis aligns with the methodological frameworks used in migration statistics (Singh, 2018; De Haan, 2011).

To complement the statistical findings, qualitative data were collected through twenty in-depth interviews with migrants and ten interviews with key informants, including labour contractors, village leaders, and local NGO workers. These interviews explored personal experiences, caste-based challenges, working conditions at destinations, decision-making processes within families, and perceptions of urban employment. Focus group discussions were conducted separately with male and female participants to capture gender-specific migration dynamics. The qualitative component followed the thematic analysis approach recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006), involving the coding of narratives, identification of recurring themes, and interpretation of socio-cultural meanings.

Ethical considerations were integral to the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was assured by anonymising names and sensitive information. Participation in surveys and interviews was voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage. Given the vulnerability of Scheduled Caste communities and their frequent exposure to socio-economic risks, the study adhered to the ethical principles of respect, non-maleficence, and cultural sensitivity, following the guidelines of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR, 2018).

Reliability and validity were ensured through several strategies. Pilot testing of the survey instrument was conducted in one non-sample village to refine the wording of questions and identify potential misunderstandings. After revision, the final questionnaire was administered by trained field investigators fluent in Tamil. To minimise interviewer bias, consistent guidelines were provided, and interviews were conducted in neutral locations within the village. Triangulation between survey results, interview narratives, and secondary data strengthened the credibility of the findings. The integration of qualitative insights with statistical trends allowed for deeper interpretation, reflecting the methodological value of mixed-methods designs in migration research (Hesse-Biber, 2010).

Limitations of the study include the challenges of capturing accurate migration histories due to the seasonal and circular nature of mobility. Migrants who were away during field visits could not always be directly interviewed, requiring reliance on family members for certain information. Additionally, the informal and undocumented nature of employment at destinations meant that wage data and working conditions were sometimes based on participant recollection rather than official records. While these limitations are common in migration research, they were addressed through careful triangulation and cross-verification wherever possible.

Overall, the methodology adopted in this study enables a detailed and contextually grounded analysis of migration among Scheduled Caste communities in Thiruvannamalai and Villupuram. By integrating statistical analysis with qualitative narratives, the research captures both the structural factors driving migration and the lived experiences of migrant households. The methodological framework aligns with established migration research practices while addressing district-specific realities that shape SC mobility patterns.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

The analysis of primary data collected from 200 Scheduled Caste households across Thiruvannamalai and Villupuram reveals a multi-layered pattern of migration driven by economic necessity, landlessness, caste-based exclusion, and aspiration for better livelihoods. The findings reflect both the statistical trends emerging from the household survey and the deeper socio-cultural insights gathered from interviews and focus group discussions. Together, they illustrate how migration operates as a critical survival strategy for SC families, shaped by structural vulnerabilities and reinforced by established migration networks.

The demographic profile of migrant households provides a foundation for understanding the mobility patterns of Scheduled Caste communities in the study region. The average household size across both districts was 4.8 members, with a marginally higher size in Villupuram compared to Thiruvannamalai. Among the total 200 households surveyed, 156 households (78 percent) reported at least one member currently engaged in migration, while 118 households (59 percent) reported two or more members who migrate seasonally or semi-permanently.

The age distribution of migrants showed that 63 percent were between 18 and 35 years, indicating that migration is predominantly undertaken by young working-age individuals. Male migration remained slightly higher at 57 percent, although female migration was also significant at 43 percent, particularly in Villupuram, where women frequently engage in textile factory work, brick-kiln labour, and domestic services.

The analysis of land ownership patterns highlights the economic precarity faced by SC communities. Out of the 200 surveyed households, 142 households (71 percent) were landless, while 46 households (23 percent) owned less than one acre of marginal land. Only 12 households (6 percent) owned between one and two acres, usually dry, low-yield land. The strong association between landlessness and migration was evident, as 89 percent of landless households had at least one migrant member. Statistical analysis indicated a positive correlation ($r = 0.62$) between landlessness and seasonal migration, suggesting that households without land are significantly more likely to migrate to meet basic subsistence needs. This finding is consistent with earlier studies arguing that landlessness remains the strongest predictor of rural labour mobility among Scheduled Castes.

Income patterns further demonstrate the economic vulnerability of these households. The average monthly income of non-migrant SC households was ₹6,200, whereas migrant households reported an average monthly income of ₹10,800 when remittances were included. Approximately 68 percent of migrant households noted that migration accounted for more than half of their total annual income, signalling the critical dependence on mobility-based earnings. A detailed breakdown showed that construction work, brick kilns, and industrial units offered daily wages ranging from ₹350 to ₹600, depending on the season and location. However, despite the higher income potential, migrants frequently faced wage delays, deductions, and irregular employment, particularly in construction and contract labour.

The motivations for migration were explored using both survey data and interview narratives. When asked to identify their primary reason for migrating, 62 percent of respondents cited “lack of employment opportunities in the village,” while 49 percent reported “irregular agricultural wages.” Another 37 percent highlighted “debts and financial stress” as a major factor, often linked to medical expenses, social obligations, or high-interest borrowing from local moneylenders. Notably, 29 percent mentioned “escaping caste discrimination” as an important motivator, although this reason was more frequently articulated during qualitative interviews than in survey responses.

The study observed significant district-level variations in the nature of migration. In Thiruvannamalai, migration was predominantly seasonal, with 64 percent of migrant workers travelling for three to six months each year to Chennai, Bengaluru, Hosur, and Cuddalore for construction and industrial labour. In Villupuram, migration was more semi-permanent, with many households relocating for longer durations due to employment in textile mills, cashew-processing units, and urban domestic work. Female migration was particularly higher in Villupuram, where 48 percent of migrant workers were women compared to 37 percent in Thiruvannamalai. Interviews revealed that young women often migrate in groups facilitated by local recruiters, who promise stable factory employment but sometimes expose them to exploitative working conditions.

The analysis of migration patterns also showed the prevalence of circular migration. Approximately 54 percent of migrants returned to their villages at least twice a year, typically for harvesting periods, festivals, or family obligations. Another 32 percent engaged in short-term migration lasting less than three months, often linked to construction projects or agricultural work in neighbouring districts. Circular migration is sustained by well-established caste-based networks, as noted in interviews where migrants described depending on relatives or neighbours already working in destination cities for accommodation and job contacts. These networks significantly reduce the perceived risks associated with migration and provide informal support systems for new migrants.

Working conditions at destinations were characterised by informality and vulnerability. Among the 274 migrant individuals identified across surveyed households, 67 percent reported working without any written contract, while 72 percent indicated that they received no social protection benefits such as ESI, PF, or health insurance. Wage theft and underpayment were reported by 18 percent of migrants, particularly those working under small contractors in the construction sector. Female migrants in textile mills described long working hours, restricted mobility within hostels, and limited opportunities for skill advancement. Brick-kiln migrants, primarily from Thiruvannamalai, were particularly vulnerable to debt bondage arrangements, where advance payments tied them to employers for entire seasons at low wages.

Despite the challenges, migration was widely seen as necessary for household survival. Remittances played a vital role in improving consumption patterns and meeting essential expenditures. A majority of migrant households—72 percent—reported using remittances for daily expenses such as food and groceries, while 41 percent used them to repay debts. Only 18 percent were able to save a portion of their earnings, and just 6 percent invested in children’s education or house repairs. Interviews revealed a clear pattern: while migration increased short-term income, it did not necessarily lead to long-term economic mobility due to high living costs at destinations, irregular wages, and continued dependency on informal credit systems.

Caste-based discrimination emerged as an important but less openly discussed factor. Although only a minority of respondents cited caste as a direct reason for migration in survey responses, qualitative interviews painted a different picture. Many participants described experiences of exclusion from village-level employment opportunities, such as being denied work on dominant caste-owned farms or being paid lower wages during peak agricultural seasons. Migration was often perceived as a temporary escape from these oppressive structures.

However, caste-based occupational segregation persisted even in cities. Several respondents reported being assigned menial jobs, denied promotional opportunities, or verbally abused at worksites. Despite these barriers, many migrants expressed that caste discrimination felt “less visible” or “less suffocating” in urban environments compared to their native villages.

The findings further reveal that the seasonal nature of migration has substantial implications for children and family life. Among migrant households with school-aged children, 39 percent reported at least one child experiencing interruptions in schooling due to mobility patterns. Female migrants particularly struggled with balancing childcare responsibilities and work demands, as revealed in focus group discussions. Health challenges were also common among migrants. Nearly 46 percent reported experiencing illness or workplace injuries, yet only a small proportion sought medical care due to cost constraints or lack of access at work locations.

Overall, the analysis indicates that migration among Scheduled Caste communities in Thiruvannamalai and Villupuram is shaped by a combination of structural vulnerabilities, livelihood insecurity, caste-based marginalisation, and limited rural opportunities. Migration provides essential income support but does not significantly improve long-term socio-economic mobility. Instead, it embeds SC households within precarious labour arrangements, reproducing cycles of vulnerability and dependence. The statistical findings and narratives together illustrate that migration is simultaneously a strategy of survival, resistance, and constrained choice, reflecting broader inequalities present in rural Tamil Nadu.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of the study indicate that migration among Scheduled Caste (SC) communities in Thiruvannamalai and Villupuram districts is shaped by a complex interaction of economic pressures, caste-based vulnerabilities, and emerging aspirations. The predominance of economic motives observed in the survey aligns with wider national patterns, where rural households increasingly rely on migration as a livelihood diversification strategy in the face of agricultural stagnation and irregular wage employment (Deshingkar & Farrington, 2009). In both districts, limited access to stable work and low daily wages acted as primary triggers for migration, confirming earlier scholars’ observations that SC households remain structurally dependent on informal labour markets that provide neither security nor progression (Thorat & Newman, 2010).

The study’s findings also highlight that social factors, particularly caste discrimination and unequal land ownership, continue to influence mobility decisions. While economic necessity was the most frequently articulated motive, discussions with respondents revealed that caste-based marginalisation formed the background context in which these economic struggles unfolded. This supports the argument that migration for SC communities is rarely a purely economic choice; rather, it emerges from interlocking social hierarchies that restrict their access to local opportunities (Mosse, 2018). Some respondents indicated that migration offered a temporary escape from discriminatory practices in the village, an observation consistent with literature showing that urban or semi-urban labour spaces often provide relative anonymity and reduced social monitoring for marginalised groups (Shah et al., 2018).

Another major insight arising from the results concerns the changing demographic pattern of migration. The increasing participation of young adults, and in some cases entire families, points to the transformation of migration from a short-term coping strategy to a planned livelihood pathway. This echoes national trends where circular migration has become a long-term household strategy, particularly for SC and OBC groups whose local occupation structures remain constrained (Tumbe, 2018). Participants’ narratives reveal that young migrants view mobility as a means to break intergenerational occupational stagnation, suggesting a shift from distress-driven migration to aspiration-driven movement.

The study also found gendered differences in migration experiences. While male migrants predominantly engage in construction and industrial labour, women frequently participate in domestic, textile, or informal service work, often under less regulated and lower-paid conditions. This reflects broader findings on gendered segmentation in informal labour markets (Kothari, 2013). However, women reported that migration enhanced their decision-making power and financial contribution, an outcome also identified in research examining the empowerment potential of women’s mobility under certain conditions (Rao, 2017). These findings indicate that while structural vulnerabilities persist, migration can create spaces for renegotiating gender norms within SC families.

A critical implication emerging from the results concerns the precarious nature of migrant work. Respondents frequently cited issues such as irregular wages, unsafe work environments, absence of social protection, and exploitation by contractors. These challenges align with earlier studies documenting the systemic informality and risk inherent in migrant labour circuits (Srivastava, 2020). The lack of portability of welfare schemes, despite ongoing policy efforts, continues to hinder migrant households’ access to essential services, reinforcing the cycle of vulnerability.

The findings also demonstrate the importance of social networks in shaping migration decisions. Many migrants reported moving to destinations where relatives or friends had previously migrated, facilitating access to employment and accommodation. This confirms established migration theories that emphasise cumulative causation, where migration becomes self-sustaining over time through network effects (Massey et al., 1993). In the context of SC communities facing information asymmetry and restricted mobility, such networks become particularly crucial.

Comparatively, the results from Thiruvannamalai and Villupuram show subtle district-level variations. While economic distress is common across both districts, Villupuram respondents reported slightly better access to transport and labour contractors, suggesting more established migration channels. Meanwhile, respondents from Thiruvannamalai appeared more dependent on seasonal migration linked to agricultural cycles. These variations indicate the influence of district-specific development patterns, local labour markets, and historical settlement structures.

Overall, the study reinforces that migration among SC households is neither a uniform nor a unidimensional phenomenon. It is shaped by intersecting structural constraints, livelihood needs, social aspirations, and shifting demographic trends. The discussion underscores that policies aimed at reducing distress migration must address underlying systemic inequalities—particularly landlessness, caste-based exclusion, and lack of rural employment diversification. At the same time, interventions that support safe, secure, and dignified migration—such as skill development, portability of welfare schemes, and regulation of labour contractors—can enhance the opportunities that migration provides.

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indicate the influence of district-specific development patterns, local labour markets, and historical settlement structures.

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6. CONCLUSION

The present study examined the factors influencing migration among Scheduled Caste communities in the Thiruvannamalai and Villupuram districts of Tamil Nadu. The analysis demonstrates that migration in these regions is the outcome of interwoven economic, social, and demographic forces. While economic necessity—particularly the pursuit of higher wages, stable employment, and escape from agrarian stagnation—emerges as the primary driver, it is clear that these motivations cannot be separated from the structural caste-based inequalities that shape access to local livelihoods. The findings reaffirm the broader scholarship that positions migration among marginalised communities not simply as a choice but as a strategy shaped by unequal social structures and limited developmental opportunities.

The study shows that for many SC households, migration provides both relief and opportunity. It reduces dependence on unpredictable agricultural income and broadens access to new forms of employment. At the same time, it offers temporary social anonymity, enabling migrants to navigate spaces where caste hierarchies are less rigidly enforced. For younger migrants in particular, mobility has become associated with personal aspiration, improved living standards, and a means to break intergenerational occupational limitations.

However, the study also highlights the vulnerabilities embedded in migrant labour circuits. Migrants frequently encounter exploitative work conditions, lack of formal protections, and restricted access to welfare benefits due to the portability gaps in social security schemes. Women migrants face additional risks, including lower wages, unstable employment, and heightened exposure to informal-sector exploitation. These challenges reaffirm that while migration can be transformative, it remains deeply conditioned by systemic disadvantages.

The comparative insights between the two districts show that while both share similar structural drivers, the degree of migration facilitation varies based on local labour networks, transportation links, and district-level development patterns. Such differences offer important implications for regional policy interventions.

Overall, the study concludes that migration among Scheduled Caste households is a multifaceted phenomenon that functions both as a survival strategy and an avenue for socio-economic mobility. Policies addressing this issue must therefore move beyond short-term relief and aim to transform the underlying conditions—particularly landlessness, caste discrimination, and limited rural employment diversification—that produce the need for migration. Strengthening skill development, enforcing labour protections, improving access to social welfare, and regulating contractor-mediated labour flows are essential steps toward ensuring that migration becomes a pathway to dignity rather than vulnerability.

In essence, migration in these districts is not merely a response to local deprivation but a reflection of broader structural inequities. A holistic approach that integrates economic development, social justice, and migrant welfare is necessary to support Scheduled Caste communities in navigating migration safely and with greater agency.

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