

Trend and Pattern of Female Migration for Employment (FME) in India & Greater Mumbai

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Abstract

Female migration for employment (FME) in India, while proportionally small relative to marriage-driven female migration, represents the fastest-growing migration stream in the post-liberalization era. This study analyses Census of India data from 1981 to 2011 to examine long-term trends and spatial patterns of FME nationally, with a specific focus on Greater Mumbai.

At the national level, FME as a percentage of total female migrants increased from 1.9% (1981) to 2.1% (2011). Inter-state migration emerged as the dominant stream, and the 2001–2011 decade witnessed explosive growth of 74.3%, far outpacing population growth (17.9%) and total female migration (40.1%). A persistent rural-urban differential characterized FME, though the gap narrowed for long-distance migration, with rural inter-state rates (4.2%) nearly converging with urban rates (4.5%) by 2011. State-wise analysis reveals a profound spatial reconfiguration. By 2011, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Rajasthan dominated national FME, eclipsing traditional source states like Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand. The Indo-Gangetic corridor recorded hyper-growth during 2001–2011, while southern states exhibited relative stagnation.

Greater Mumbai's FME profile transformed dramatically. Uttar Pradesh's contribution surged from 5,630 (1981) to 49,181 (2011), an increase of over 770%, establishing northern dominance. Despite this shift, rural origins prevailed, with 75% of Uttar Pradesh migrants and 72% of Bihar migrants to Mumbai reporting rural last residence.

These findings demonstrate that FME, while proportionally modest, represents the fastest-growing migration stream, increasingly inter-state and concentrated in metropolitan destinations. The paper concludes by discussing policy implications for skill development, urban infrastructure, and social protection in both source and destination regions.

Keywords: Female Migration for Employment (FME), Internal Migration, India & Greater Mumbai

Introduction

Female migration for employment in India has emerged as a transformative force in the country's internal migration landscape, yet it remains disproportionately small relative to the overall scale of female mobility. While women constitute nearly half of all internal migrants in India, their movement has been historically dominated by marriage, with employment accounting for a marginal fraction of female migration streams. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2020-21 documented that 47.9% of women are migrants compared to 14.2% of men, yet marriage continues to explain approximately 87% of female

migration, leaving employment-driven mobility statistically invisible within aggregated data systems [1]. This invisibility masks profound transformations occurring at the margins, transformations that carry significant implications for gender equity, urban labour markets, and regional development.

The past four decades have witnessed structural shifts in India's economy that fundamentally altered the landscape of employment migration. Economic liberalization beginning in the 1990s, followed by service sector expansion, information technology growth, and the proliferation of formal sector employment in metropolitan centres, created new demand for female labour in occupations ranging from nursing and teaching to banking, retail, and business process outsourcing [2]. These developments coincided with agrarian distress in rural economies, pushing women from landless and marginal farming households to seek alternative livelihoods [3]. The convergence of urban pull factors and rural push factors set the stage for a gradual but discernible feminization of employment migration, yet the contours of this transformation remain inadequately understood due to persistent data gaps and methodological biases that conflate marriage with employment motives.

Greater Mumbai, as India's premier urban agglomeration and financial capital, occupies a central position in this evolving migration landscape. The city's diversified economy, encompassing finance, trade, media, manufacturing, healthcare, education, and services, has long attracted migrants from across the subcontinent. However, the composition of these migrant streams has not remained static. Understanding how female migration for employment to Mumbai has evolved over time, which source regions have emerged as dominant, and how rural-urban origins shape migration patterns is essential for contextualizing contemporary migrant experiences and informing evidence-based policy.

This paper addresses these gaps through a comprehensive analysis of Census data spanning four decades (1981-2011), examining trends and patterns of Female Migration for Employment (FME) in India with a specific focus on Greater Mumbai. The analysis pursues three interconnected objectives: first, to document temporal shifts in FME at the national level, identifying which migration streams (intra-district, inter-district, or inter-state) dominate and how these patterns have evolved; second, to analyse state-wise distribution of FME, tracking the spatial reconfiguration of source regions and the emergence of new migration corridors; and third, to examine Greater Mumbai's changing position within this national landscape, identifying shifts in the composition of its FME population by source state and rural-urban origin.

The analysis reveals a narrative of dramatic transformation. What emerges is a story of modest overall proportions but explosive growth at the margins, of inter-state migration emerging as the dominant stream, of the northern Hindi heartland supplanting traditional southern source regions, and of rural women increasingly undertaking long-distance migration to metropolitan destinations. These findings establish the macro-level context necessary for understanding the individual migration trajectories that form the subject of primary research, while also carrying direct implications for policy formulation in areas ranging from skill development to urban infrastructure and social protection.

Female Employment Migration in India

Female employment migration in India, though marginal relative to marriage-driven mobility, has gained scholarly attention as a marker of evolving gender dynamics amid economic liberalization and urbanization. Early studies highlighted its limited scale as Census data consistently showed employment as the reason for just 2-3% of female interstate migration, compared to 40-50% for males [4]. Shanthi analysed NSSO 55th Round (1999-2000) data, revealing interstate female employment migrants at a mere

0.5%, with higher rates in western states like Gujarat (1.2%) due to industrial pull factors [4]. Post-migration, workforce participation rose sharply (from 28% to 45% for rural women), underscoring migration's role in labour activation, though confined to low-skill sectors like construction and garments. This "feminization" accelerated post-1991 reforms. Deshingkar and Akter traced rising female flows to urban informal economies, driven by rural agrarian distress and service-sector demand [5]. Their qualitative surveys in Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh documented short-term circulatory migration, where women comprised 30-40% of garment workers in Tirupur, facing exploitation yet gaining remittances autonomy [5]. Similarly, Srivastava and Sasikumar provided an overview of internal migration, noting female shares doubling in urban destinations like Mumbai and Delhi by early 2000s, linked to textiles and domestic work [6].

Regional disparities emerged prominently. Singh examined employment transitions using India Human Development Survey panels, finding household wealth inversely correlated with women's labour entry (odds ratio 0.72), while rural workfare like MGNREGA reduced exit rates by 15% [7]. Northern states (UP, Bihar) lagged with <1% FME shares, per PLFS 2020-21 analyses, versus southern highs (Tamil Nadu 3.5%; Andhra Pradesh 3.3%) tied to progressive norms and education [1]. North-eastern exceptions (Manipur 33%) reflect unrest-driven mobility [8]. Reshmi studied Kerala nurses in Mumbai, reporting 80% job satisfaction but isolation vulnerabilities [9]. Sandhya via ISEC confirmed gender-segregated markets enabling low-education entry, with economic participation post-migration at 60% versus 25% pre [11].

Feminization of Migration

The concept of "feminization of migration" has gained considerable traction in migration literature, though scholars debate whether this phenomenon represents development, empowerment, or distress. The feminization of migration refers to the increasing share of women in global and internal migrant streams, often tied to labour market shifts, economic restructuring, and changing gender norms [11]. In India, this phenomenon challenges traditional views of migration as male-dominated, revealing women's growing but underreported roles in employment-driven mobility amid post-liberalization urbanization. Early scholarship framed it within patrilocal marriage biases, where women comprised 47% of internal migrants per Census 2011, yet employment motives hovered at 2-3%, versus 40% for men [6].

Ghatak defines feminization as women joining the labour force after migration in an independent capacity, no longer merely accompanying family members as "tied migrants" [12]. This conceptual shift challenges the traditional assumption that female migration is predominantly associational. Pandey provided foundational empirical grounding through studies of five migrant worker groups in Maharashtra, demonstrating that among seasonal migrants, women worked alongside men in brick kilns, construction, and tile-making, serving not as supplementary earners but as "basic support for the survival of the family" [13]. This finding complicates narratives that position women solely as dependents.

However, Kumar et al. reveal significant regional variation in feminization patterns, finding that gender inequality in developmental migration is most acute in Bihar, Goa, Haryana, and Gujarat, while north-eastern states exhibit relatively balanced patterns [2]. This suggests that feminization is neither uniform nor universally progressive. Singh anticipated this complexity in her early work on caste and regional variation in workforce participation, noting that sociocultural factors shape migration streams as profoundly as economic determinants (14). Keishing extends this analysis to north-east India, examining how women from Manipur navigate urban labour markets characterized by informality and precarity,

revealing that migration decisions reflect both agency and constraint [15]. The present study's finding that female employment migration surged by 74.3% during 2001-2011 contributes to this debate, positioning the post-liberalization period as pivotal in accelerating feminized migration streams.

Pioneering U.S.-centric works laid conceptual foundations. Pedraza distinguished family-based "feminine" migration from autonomous economic streams, arguing Latin American women's labour entry reflected segmented markets in care and textiles [11]. This duality resonated in India, where marriage explained 87% of female migration [1], masking economic agency [5]. Globally, Zlotnik quantified feminization, noting women's 48% share in international flows by 1990, driven by Gulf nursing and domestic work [16].

Indian-specific analyses emerged post-1991 reforms. Shanthi used NSSO 55th Round data to document female employment migration at 0.5% interstate, rising to 1.2% in Gujarat's industries, with post-migration participation jumping 17 points [4]. Rural distress, agrarian stagnation and male outmigration, pushed circulatory flows to urban informal sectors [5]. Regional patterns intensified scrutiny of feminization of migration in the Indian context. Abraham analysed PLFS 2020-21, revealing southern highs (Tamil Nadu 3.5%, Andhra 3.3%) versus northern lows (UP/Bihar <1%), linked to education and service pulls [1]. North-eastern states bucked trends (Mizoram 7-10% FME), per Das, due to unrest [8]. Sectoral segregation amplified vulnerabilities as Neetha highlighted domestic work (55% Mumbai FME), with no contracts or pensions [17]. Reshmi found Kerala nurses in Mumbai reported 80% satisfaction but isolation [9]. Sandhya confirmed low-skill entry via gender-typed markets [10]. Recent discourse views feminization as double-edged as there is empowerment via autonomy, yet precariousness in informal gigs [18]. COVID-19 reverse migration exposed exclusions, with women 70% of returnees facing job loss [1]. Future scholarship must integrate qualitative trajectories, addressing patriarchal transplants in cities [19].

Economic Restructuring and Female Employment Migration

The structural transformation of India's economy since the 1990s has fundamentally altered the landscape of female employment migration. Economic liberalization beginning in 1991, followed by service sector expansion, information technology growth, and the proliferation of formal sector employment in metropolitan centres, created new demand for female labour in occupations ranging from nursing and teaching to banking, retail, and business process outsourcing [2]. Ghatak notes that these developments coincided with agrarian distress in rural economies, pushing women from landless and marginal farming households to seek alternative livelihoods [12]. The convergence of urban pull factors and rural push factors set the stage for a discernible feminization of employment migration.

Mazumdar provides a nuanced account of this transformation through her study of women from Odisha, identifying distinct migration corridors shaped by both economic necessity and aspiration [20]. She argues that the distinction between "aspirational migration" and "distress migration" is artificial, as agrarian distress and female aspiration coexist in migrant decision-making [20]. Pandey documented the precarious conditions of early female migrants, finding that seasonal women migrants worked eight to twelve hours daily in unskilled, strenuous jobs, with payment structures that often excluded women's direct access to wages [13]. Alam, Cropper, Herrera Dappe, and Suri shift focus to urban mobility barriers, demonstrating that women in Mumbai experience transport differently from men, facing an implicit "pink tax" on mobility that constrains labour force participation, though they acknowledge that transport represents only one among many barriers [21].

Spatial Reconfiguration and Migration Corridors

Scholars have documented a fundamental restructuring of India's migration geography over the past four decades, with northern and eastern states emerging as dominant source regions for female labour. Pandey observed that construction workers in Mumbai during the early 1990s originated primarily from drought-prone areas of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Maharashtra, reflecting southern and western dominance [13]. Yet contemporary research reveals a dramatic shift. Mazumdar identifies distinct migration corridors emerging from Odisha, from Kendrapara to apparel factories in Kerala, and from Ganjam to live-in domestic work in Mumbai, demonstrating how specific source-destination linkages structure female labour migration [20].

The spatial reconfiguration is most evident in the rise of the Indo-Gangetic plain as a primary source region. Kumar et al. document that states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Rajasthan have become major sending regions for female employment migrants [2], a pattern corroborated by Keishing, who finds that women from Manipur increasingly migrate to metropolitan cities, joining a national migration system that funnels women from economically distressed regions to urban centres [14]. Singh anticipated this spatial complexity in her early work, noting that caste hierarchies and regional economic disparities shape migration streams in ways that defy simple generalizations [14]. The present study's finding that Uttar Pradesh's contribution to Greater Mumbai's female employment migrants grew from 5,630 in 1981 to 49,181 in 2011, an increase of over 770%, empirically validates this spatial reconfiguration, confirming the emergence of a "northern corridor" that supplants traditional southern source regions.

Rural-Urban Dynamics and Metropolitan Destinations

A persistent finding across migration literature is the rural-urban differential in female employment migration, with urban-origin women consistently migrating for employment at higher rates than their rural counterparts. Pandey documented that rural women migrants faced particular vulnerabilities, as they often moved from landless households with no agricultural assets [13]. Alam et al. demonstrate that even within metropolitan destinations like Mumbai, women face mobility constraints that limit their employment opportunities, suggesting that the transition from rural origins to urban destinations does not automatically translate into improved outcomes [21].

However, recent scholarship complicates the rural-urban binary. Keishing examines how rural-origin women from Manipur enter urban labour markets characterized by informality and precarity, working in hotels, restaurants, and spas where they face real risks of exploitation [15]. Yet she also documents women's agency in navigating these constraints, challenging deterministic narratives of rural-to-urban migration as uniformly disempowering [15]. Mazumdar similarly finds that women from rural Odisha actively seek urban employment as a strategy for improving their livelihoods, even when facing difficult working conditions [20]. The present study's finding that rural women's inter-state migration rate (4.2%) nearly converged with urban women's rate (4.5%) by 2011 suggests that long-distance migration erodes traditional barriers for rural women pursuing metropolitan opportunities, a finding with significant implications for understanding contemporary migration dynamics.

Data and Methodological Challenges

Migration scholars have consistently critiqued the limitations of official data sources in capturing female employment migration. Kumar et al. highlight the problem of conflating marriage with employment motives in Census data, noting that women who report marriage as their reason for migration may

simultaneously move for employment, particularly in contexts where women's economic activity is underreported [2]. Bhaskar provides a comprehensive critique of Census migration data, identifying three key limitations: the binary classification of migration reasons that cannot capture overlapping motives, the underreporting of women's economic activity due to social desirability bias, and the absence of longitudinal data that could track migration trajectories [22].

Ghatak argues that these data limitations perpetuate the "associational" framing of female migrants, reinforcing policy neglect [12]. Singh anticipated these concerns in her early work, calling for more nuanced data collection methods that could capture the complexity of women's migration experiences [14]. Mazumdar advocates for mixed-methods approaches that combine quantitative analysis of large-scale surveys with qualitative fieldwork to understand the lived experiences of female migrants [20]. The present study, which analyses Census data from 1981 to 2011, acknowledges these limitations while arguing that systematic analysis of available data can reveal important trends that challenge the invisibility of female employment migration.

Research Gap

Despite the rich body of scholarship on female migration in India, significant gaps remain in understanding the long-term trends and spatial patterns of employment-driven female migration in India. Much of the existing literature focuses on specific occupational sectors (e.g., construction, domestic work) or particular source regions, providing depth but limited scope for generalization. Studies that analyze national-level trends often rely on a single census year or a limited temporal span, making it difficult to identify structural shifts over time.

Furthermore, while the feminization of migration has been widely discussed, empirical documentation of its temporal dynamics, particularly the critical period between 1981 and 2011 that encompasses economic liberalization and service sector expansion, remains limited. The specific role of metropolitan destinations like Greater Mumbai in absorbing female employment migrants, and the changing composition of these migrant streams by source region and rural-urban origin, has not been systematically analysed over multiple decades.

Female migration for employment in India has emerged as a transformative force in the country's internal migration landscape, yet it remains disproportionately small relative to the overall scale of female mobility. While women constitute nearly half of all internal migrants in India, their movement has been historically dominated by marriage, with employment accounting for a marginal fraction of female migration streams. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2020-21 documented that 47.9% of women are migrants compared to 14.2% of men, yet marriage continues to explain approximately 87% of female migration, leaving employment-driven mobility statistically invisible within aggregated data systems. This invisibility masks profound transformations occurring at the margins, transformations that carry significant implications for gender equity, urban labour markets, and regional development.

The past four decades have witnessed structural shifts in India's economy that fundamentally altered the landscape of employment migration. Economic liberalization beginning in the 1990s, followed by service sector expansion, information technology growth, and the proliferation of formal sector employment in metropolitan centres, created new demand for female labour in occupations ranging from nursing and teaching to banking, retail, and business process outsourcing. These developments coincided with agrarian distress in rural economies, pushing women from landless and marginal farming households to seek alternative livelihoods. The convergence of urban pull factors and rural push factors set the stage for a

gradual but discernible feminization of employment migration, yet the contours of this transformation remain inadequately understood due to persistent data gaps and methodological biases that conflate marriage with employment motives.

Greater Mumbai, as India's premier urban agglomeration and financial capital, occupies a central position in this evolving migration landscape. The city's diversified economy, encompassing finance, trade, media, manufacturing, healthcare, education, and services, has long attracted migrants from across the subcontinent. However, the composition of these migrant streams has not remained static. Understanding how female migration for employment to Mumbai has evolved over time, which source regions have emerged as dominant, and how rural-urban origins shape migration patterns is essential for contextualizing contemporary migrant experiences and informing evidence-based policy.

This paper addresses these gaps through a comprehensive analysis of Census data spanning four decades (1981-2011), examining trends and patterns of Female Migration for Employment (FME) in India with a specific focus on Greater Mumbai. The analysis pursues three interconnected objectives: first, to document temporal shifts in FME at the national level, identifying which migration streams (intra-district, inter-district, or inter-state) dominate and how these patterns have evolved; second, to analyse state-wise distribution of FME, tracking the spatial reconfiguration of source regions and the emergence of new migration corridors; and third, to examine Greater Mumbai's changing position within this national landscape, identifying shifts in the composition of its FME population by source state and rural-urban origin.

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Rationale for the Study

The present study addresses these gaps of understanding female migration for employment within India through a comprehensive analysis of Census data spanning four decades (1981-2011), examining trends and patterns of Female Migration for Employment (FME) in India with a specific focus on Greater Mumbai. By documenting temporal shifts, analyzing state-wise distribution, and examining Greater Mumbai's changing position within this national landscape, this study provides the macro-level context necessary for understanding contemporary female migration trajectories and informing evidence-based policy.

Methodology

This study employs a quantitative secondary data analysis approach, utilizing decadal Census of India data spanning four time points, 1981, 1991, 2001, and 2011, to examine trends and patterns of Female Migration for Employment (FME) in India, with a specific focus on Greater Mumbai. The primary data source is the D-series migration tables from the Census of India, which provide detailed information on migrants classified by place of last residence, duration of residence, reason for migration, and sex. Specifically, the study draws upon D-series tables that cross-tabulate migration streams by reason for

migration (employment as the stated motive) and by place of last residence categories, including "elsewhere in the district of enumeration," "in other districts of the state of enumeration," and "states in India beyond the state of enumeration", further disaggregated by rural-urban status of the place of last residence. The Census question on reason for migration, which enumerates employment as one of the specified motives, serves as the foundational variable for identifying female migrants who reported moving for employment purposes.

The analytical framework of the study is structured around descriptive and comparative statistical methods. Percentage distributions of FME across various migration streams (intra-district, inter-district, and inter-state) and by rural-urban origin were computed for each census year to document temporal trends. Decadal growth rates were calculated for FME at the national level and for Greater Mumbai to measure the pace of change across intercensal periods (1981–1991, 1991–2001, and 2001–2011). State-wise distribution of FME was analysed using choropleth mapping to visualize spatial reconfiguration over the four decades. For Greater Mumbai, state-wise and rural-urban disaggregated tabulations were constructed to examine shifts in source regions and the composition of migrant streams. The analysis employs consistent classification of states and union territories across census years, with adjustments made for the formation of new states (Uttarakhand, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh) in 2001 and 2011 to ensure comparability. This methodological approach enables systematic documentation of long-term trends, spatial shifts, and the changing role of metropolitan destinations in India's female employment migration landscape.

Results

Distribution of FME in India

Table 1 Percentage Distribution of FME in India on the basis of place of last residence (1991-2011)

Last Residence	Place of Last Residence	1981	1991	2001	2011
Total	Total	1.9	1.8	1.7	2.1
Last residence within India	Total	1.9	1.8	1.7	2.1
Last residence within India	Rural	1.6	1.5	1.5	1.8
Last residence within India	Urban	4.0	3.7	2.9	3.3
Within the state of enumeration but outside the place of enumeration	Total	1.7	1.6	1.4	1.8
Within the state of enumeration but outside the place of enumeration	Rural	1.4	1.3	1.3	1.6
Within the state of enumeration but outside the place of enumeration	Urban	3.7	3.6	2.7	3.1
Elsewhere in the district of enumeration	Total	1.3	1.2	1.0	1.4
Elsewhere in the district of enumeration	Rural	1.1	1.1	1.0	1.3
Elsewhere in the district of enumeration	Urban	3.1	2.9	2.2	2.5
In other districts of the state of enumeration	Total	2.9	2.7	2.5	2.8
In other districts of the state of enumeration	Rural	2.4	2.2	2.4	2.5
In other districts of the state of enumeration	Urban	4.2	4.2	3.1	3.7

States in India beyond the state of enumeration	Total	4.7	3.8	4.0	4.3
States in India beyond the state of enumeration	Rural	4.4	3.4	4.2	4.2
States in India beyond the state of enumeration	Urban	5.0	4.3	3.9	4.5

Source: D-tables, Census of India (1981-2011)

Table 1 represents Percentage Distribution of FME in India on the basis of place of last residence. The total percentage of FME within India remained relatively stable but low across the first three decades for total place of last residence, 1.9% (1981), 1.8% (1991), and 1.7% (2001), before experiencing an increase to 2.1% in 2011.

The percentage distribution of FME from urban place of last residence consistently exceeds the percentage distribution of FME from rural place of last residence by a factor of approximately 2 to 2.5. However, both rural and urban place of last residence streams followed a similar trajectory i.e., declining from 1981 to 2001, followed by an increase in 2011. FME from urban place of last residence declined from 4.0% to 2.9% before rising to 3.3%, while FME from rural place of last residence declined marginally from 1.6% to 1.5% before increasing to 1.8%.

FME from ‘elsewhere in the district of enumeration’ constituted the least percentage distribution among all other places of last residence, with percentage declining from 1.3% (1981) to 1.0% (2001) and again increasing to 1.4% (2011). Within the place of last residence being ‘elsewhere in the district of enumeration’, percentage distribution of FME is higher from last residence being urban than it being rural through all the years of study.

The percentage distribution of FME over the years in the place of last residence being ‘in other districts of the state of enumeration’ is 2.9% (1981), 2.7% (1991), 2.5% (2001), and 2.8% (2011). The percentage FME from rural place of last residence of this stream remained almost stable throughout the years of study by first decreasing by 0.2% (from 2.4% in 1981 to 2.2% in 1991) and then increased after 1991 by 0.2% (2.4% in 2001) and 0.1% (2.5% in 2011), contrasting with the general declining trend observed in other categories until 2001.

FME from ‘states in India beyond the state of enumeration’ has the maximum share of percentage distribution among all other places of last residence. After a significant decline from 4.7% (1981) to 3.8% (1991), FME from ‘states in India beyond the state of enumeration’ increased to 4.0% (2001) and became highest at 4.3% (2011).

From 1981 to 2001 the FME has decreased in all places of last residence considered in the study except for FME from the rural place of last residence from ‘in other districts of the state of enumeration’. The subsequent decade (2001-2011) marked a reversal, with increase in percentage distribution of FME observed in all the categories and sub-categories (total, rural, and urban) of place of last residence.

Within all the streams of place of last residence, ‘Within the state of enumeration but outside the place of enumeration’ has the highest difference in percentage distribution of FME among urban and rural last place of residence, 3.7% vs 1.4% (1981), 3.6% vs 1.3% (1991), 2.7% vs 1.3% (2001) and 3.1% vs 1.6% (2011). Also, in last residence being ‘elsewhere in the district of enumeration’ the urban percentage is about twice the rural percentage of FME through all the years of study. For last residence being ‘states in India beyond the state of enumeration’ percentage of urban FME is higher than percentage of rural FME

in all years of study except for 2001 where percentage of rural FME (4.2%) is higher than the percentage of urban FME (3.9%).

Table 2 Percentage Growth of Female Internal Migrants in India for the purpose of employment 1981-2011

Year	Population of India	Total migrants	Total Female Migrants	FME	FME in Greater Mumbai
1981-1991	22.4	12.2	15.7	7.3	-16.5
1991-2001	22.5	35.5	32.7	22.9	65.7
2001-2011	17.9	44.9	40.1	74.3	-17.8

Source: D-tables, Census of India (1981-2011)

Table 2 delineates the percentage growth rates of female internal migrants for employment (FME) in India over three intercensal periods (1981–1991, 1991–2001, 2001–2011), benchmarked against national population expansion, total migrants, and total female migrants, with a spotlight on Greater Mumbai. India's population registered robust decadal growth of 22.4% (1981-1991) and 22.5% (1991-2001), decelerating to 17.9% (2001-2011). Total internal migrants exhibited pronounced acceleration, from a modest 12.2% to 35.5% and culminating at 44.9%, reflecting urbanization and economic liberalization's pull. Female migrants mirrored this momentum, advancing from 15.7% to 32.7% and 40.1%. Female migrants for employment (FME) in India showed the maximum percentage growth by rising from 7.3% (1981-91), then increasing to 22.9% during 1991-2001 and peaking at 74.3% in 2001-11. In contrast, Greater Mumbai's FME inflows displayed pronounced volatility: contraction (-16.5%, 1981-1991) amid saturation, rebound (65.7%, 1991-2001), and renewed decline (-17.8%, 2001-2011).

Table 3 Trend of percentage share of FME in Greater Mumbai (1981-2011)

Year	Total migrants of Population in India	Female migrants of total migrants in India	FME in India of total female migrants in India	FME in Greater Mumbai of Total FME in India
1981	30.2	40.3	0.9	2.2
1991	27.7	72.3	1.8	2.5
2001	30.6	70.3	1.7	2.4
2011	37.6	67.9	2.1	3.1

Source: D-tables, Census of India (1981-2011)

Table 3 represents the trend of percentage share of FME in Greater Mumbai (1981-2011). Migrants as a percentage of the total population of India increased from 30.2% in 1981 to 37.6% in 2011, with a notable 6.3 percentage increase during the final decade (2001-2011). The percentage of female migrants of total migrants in India has increased rapidly from 40.3% in 1981 to 72.3% in 1991 after which it decreased by 2% by 2001(70.3%) and again decreased to 67.9% by 2011. The percentage share of FME in India of total female migrants in the country has consistently increased from 0.9% (1981) to 1.8% (1991) followed by a dip in 2001 of 0.1% (1.7%) and again increasing the share to 2.1% (2011). The FME percentage share in Greater Mumbai of total FME in India has expanded substantially over the three decades from 2.2% in 1981 to 3.1% 2011.

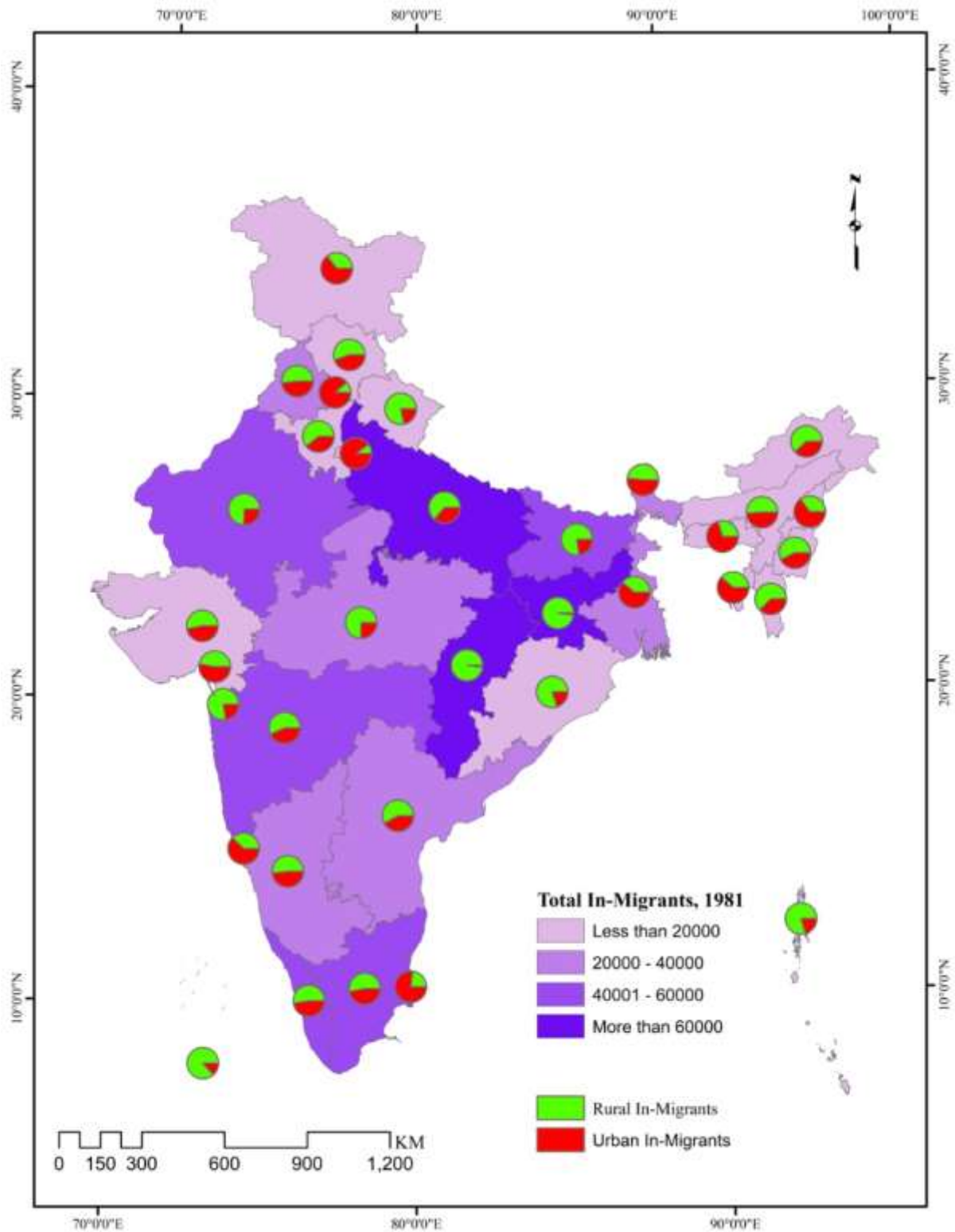


Fig.1 State-wise distribution of FME in India (1981)

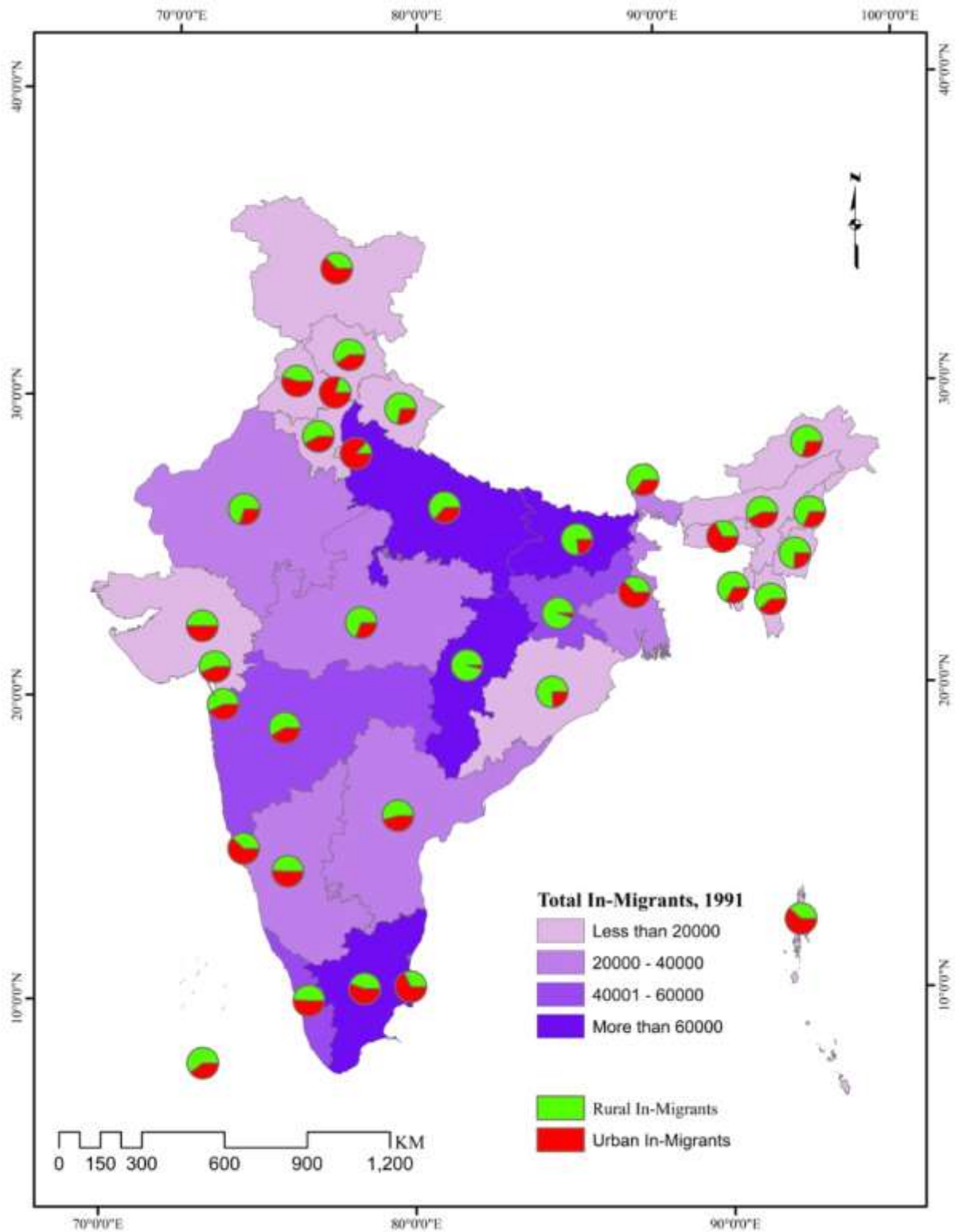


Figure..2 State-wise Distribution of FME in India 1991

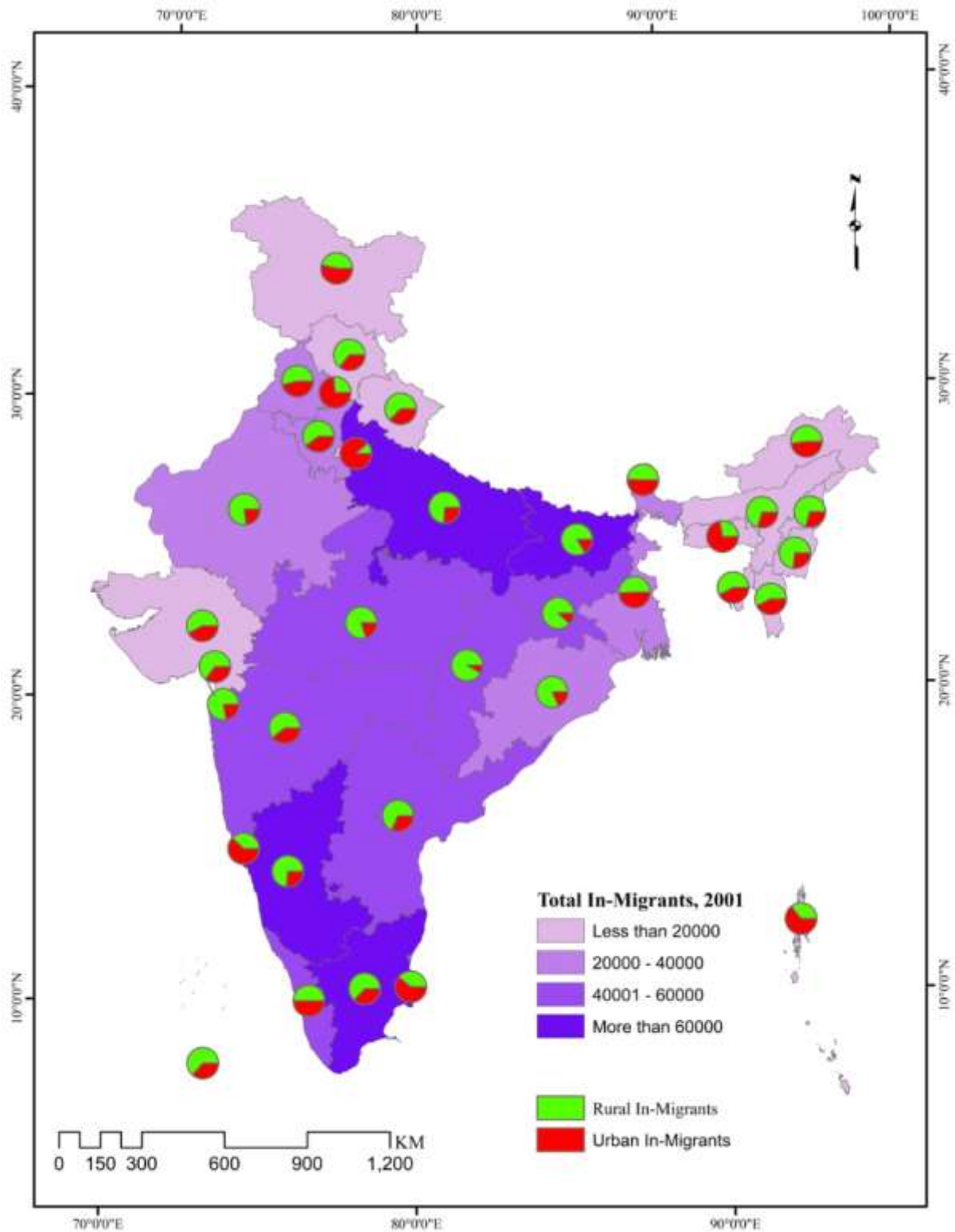


Figure.3 State-wise Distribution of FME in India 2001

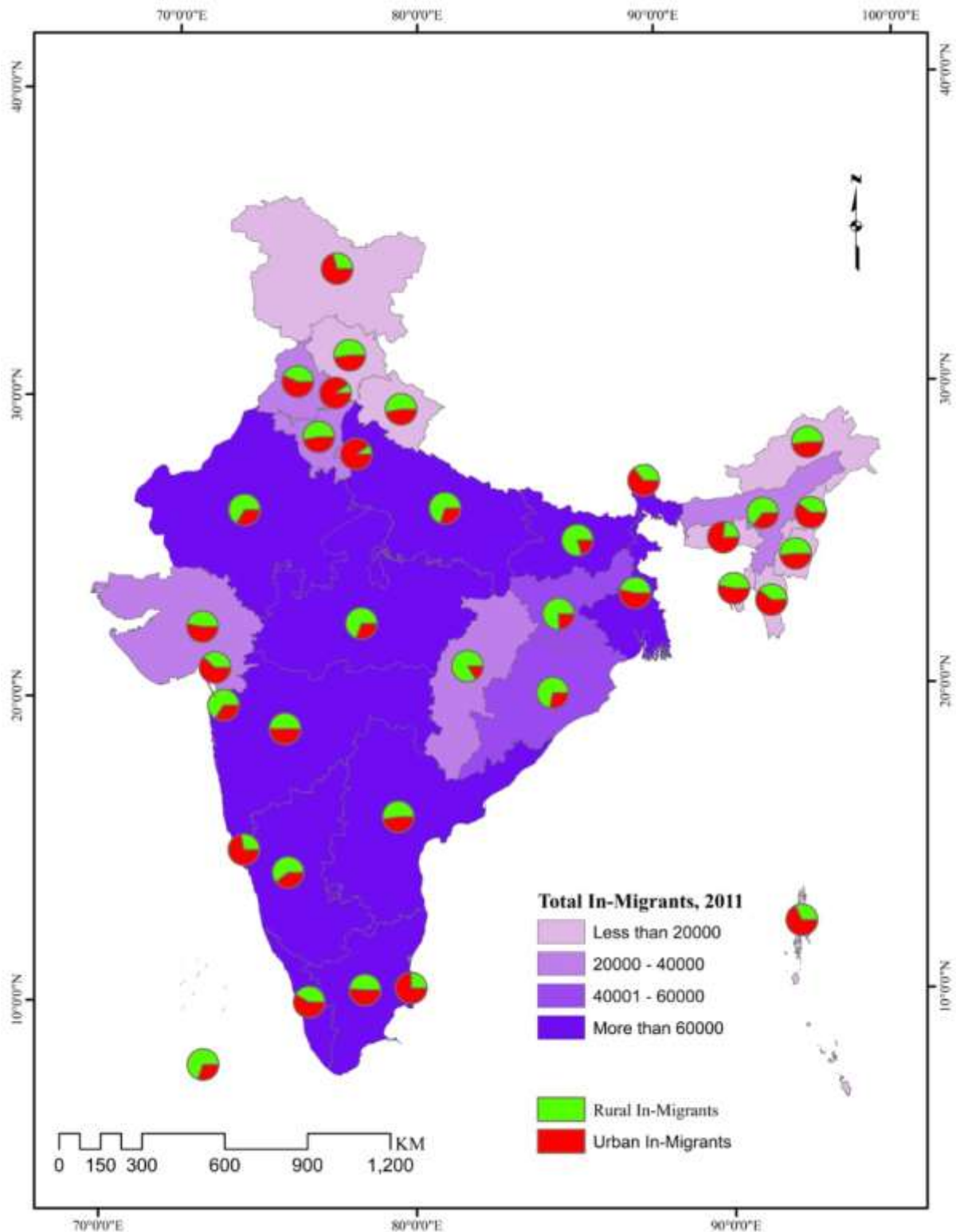


Figure.4 State-wise Distribution of FME in India 2011

The maps here represent an analysis of the state-wise distribution of Female Migrants for Employment (FME) in India from 1981 to 2011. It reveals spatial disparities and a major reorganization of female labour migration patterns, characterized by significant inter-state divergence and a distinct rural-to-urban transition. Uttar Pradesh (244,890), Bihar (148,008) and Rajasthan (64,358) together accounted for a

dominant share of total FME in India. This marks a decisive shift from the historical patterns of the 1980s and 1990s, where states like Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, often grouped with Madhya Pradesh and Bihar, reported very high numbers that subsequently decreased. The decline in FME in Chhattisgarh (from 131,087 in 1981 to 39,581 in 2011) and Jharkhand (from 64,611 to 46,381) is evident.

The period, particularly 2001-2011, was characterized by explosive absolute growth in several states, far exceeding the national average trend. NCT of Delhi experienced a staggering 161% increase in FME (14,146 to 36,871). Uttarakhand (44% growth), Haryana (68% growth), Rajasthan (70% growth) and Uttar Pradesh (80% growth) also reported massive expansions in their FME populations.

Several states, particularly in central and eastern India, witnessed absolute declines or stagnation. As noted, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand saw sharp reductions. Goa, Daman & Diu, and Andaman & Nicobar Islands also registered declining FME counts over the long term. Southern states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka, while maintaining substantial absolute numbers, generally showed more modest growth rates compared to the high-growth northern states, indicating a possible relative shift in the center of gravity for female labour migration.

A critical and consistent finding across virtually all states is the faster growth of the urban FME component compared to the rural. This has led to a significant increase in the urban share of each state's total FME over the decades. In Uttarakhand, the urban FME multiplied nearly six-fold (1,385 to 8,223) while rural FME grew by only 80%. In NCT of Delhi, the urban stream grew by 169% (12,188 to 32,803) between 2001-2011. Even in highly rural states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, urban FME growth rates outpaced rural growth significantly in the final decade. This trend shown by north-eastern states confirm that the national increase in FME is intrinsically linked to urbanization, with economic opportunities in towns and cities becoming the principal draw for female employment migrants from all regions.

Table.4 FME in Greater Mumbai by State/UT and Place (Rural-Urban) of Last Residence

Last State of residence	R/U status of place of last residence	1981	1991	2001	2011
Andhra Pradesh	Total	3166	4573	5,979	7,828
	Rural	2038	2924	3,809	4,136
	Urban	1129	1584	2,039	3,425
Assam	Total	45	130	215	999
	Rural	25	66	106	484
	Urban	20	61	102	473
Bihar	Total	502	1154	1,806	8,090
	Rural	539	891	1,243	5,800
	Urban	144	334	523	2,058
Gujrat	Total	6687	6183	5,678	14,722
	Rural	3988	3635	3,281	8,157
	Urban	2694	2463	2,231	6,080
Haryana	Total	147	249	351	1149
	Rural	112	172	231	573
	Urban	35	74	113	549
	Total	25	48	71	369

Himachal Pradesh	Rural	15	28	41	182
	Urban	10	20	29	177
Jammu and Kashmir	Total	60	73	86	410
	Rural	15	19	23	100
	Urban	45	53	61	309
Karnataka	Total	11316	11545	11,773	18,774
	Rural	5000	6149	7,298	10,826
	Urban	6312	5256	4,200	7,407
Kerala	Total	7168	7317	7,465	9,547
	Rural	4587	4391	4,194	4,795
	Urban	2521	2837	3,152	4,501
Madhya Pradesh	Total	704	1153	1,602	5,248
	Rural	306	564	821	1,830
	Urban	308	527	746	3,194
Manipur	Total	10	22	34	482
	Rural	10	14	17	228
	Urban	0	9	17	244
Meghalaya	Total	0	19	37	131
	Rural	0	3	6	19
	Urban	0	16	31	108
Nagaland	Total	0	4	8	67
	Rural	0	2	3	19
	Urban	0	3	5	44
Odisha	Total	111	474	836	2,886
	Rural	91	317	543	1,789
	Urban	20	150	279	1002
Punjab	Total	355	407	459	1498
	Rural	155	161	166	441
	Urban	200	240	280	1015
Rajasthan	Total	902	1362	1,821	8,334
	Rural	580	840	1,100	5,025
	Urban	322	499	676	3,030
Sikkim	Total	0	5	10	43
	Rural	0	2	4	12
	Urban	0	3	6	30
Tamil Nadu	Total	3299	4109	4,919	7,674
	Rural	1468	1934	2,400	3,675
	Urban	1831	2134	2,436	3,793
Tripura	Total	5	8.5	12	33
	Rural	0	2	3	17

	Urban	5	7	9	16
Uttar Pradesh	Total	5630	8328	11,025	49,181
	Rural	3946	5971	7,996	36,997
	Urban	1684	2206	2,728	10,527
West Bengal	Total	904	2154	3,403	10,931
	Rural	185	544	903	3,248
	Urban	719	1579	2,438	7,430
Andaman and Nicobar Islands	Total	0	4	8	37
	Rural	0	1	2	20
	Urban	0	3	6	17
Arunachal Pradesh	Total	0	4	8	15
	Rural	0	1	1	11
	Urban	0	3	6	4
Chandigarh	Total	0	34	68	117
	Rural	0	5	9	22
	Urban	0	30	59	89
Dadra and Nagar Haveli	Total	0	3	6	9
	Rural	0	2	4	1
	Urban	0	1	2	4
Delhi	Total	376	720	1,063	4,076
	Rural	20	58	95	413
	Urban	356	651	946	3,624
Goa	Total	2946	2141	1336	2,097
	Rural	1510	1055	599	765
	Urban	1436	1067	697	1263
Lakshadweep	Total	0	1	1	13
	Rural	0	0	0	5
	Urban	0	1	1	8
Mizoram	Total	0	2	4	36
	Rural	0	2	3	7
	Urban	0	1	1	29
Pondicherry	Total	15	20	25	16
	Rural	0	4	8	0
	Urban	15	16	16	16
Uttarakhand	Total	0	0	0	1098
	Rural	0	0	0	601
	Urban	0	0	0	475
Jharkhand	Total	0	0	0	2,347
	Rural	0	0	0	1336
	Urban	0	0	0	947

Chhattisgarh	Total	0	0	0	1026
	Rural	0	0	0	531
	Urban	0	0	0	472
Daman & Diu	Total	0	16	31	33
	Rural	0	7	13	16
	Urban	0	9	17	15

Source: D-tables, Census of India (1981-2011)

Table 4 represents an analysis of Female Migrants for Employment (FME) in Greater Mumbai by state of last residence from 1981 to 2011. It reveals a fluctuating restructuring of its migrant catchment areas. The city has transitioned from drawing primarily from neighboring and southern states to becoming the premier national destination for female labour migrants, with an overwhelming and accelerating influx from the northern Hindi heartland.

The most profound finding is the meteoric rise of Uttar Pradesh as the dominant source of FME for Greater Mumbai. From a substantial base of 5,630 in 1981, the contribution of Uttar Pradesh exploded to 49,181 by 2011, an increase of over 770% in the final decade alone. By 2011, migrants from Uttar Pradesh constituted a commanding plurality of Greater Mumbai's FME. This trend is part of a broader "Northern Corridor" effect, with similarly explosive growth observed from Bihar (1,806 to 8,090), Rajasthan (1,821 to 8,334), and, notably for the first time in 2011, the new states of Uttarakhand (1,098) and Jharkhand (2,347). This consolidates Greater Mumbai's reach deep into the Gangetic plains.

In contrast of this, traditional major source states exhibited relative stagnation or decline. While Karnataka and Kerala remained significant in absolute numbers (18,774 and 9,547 in 2011, respectively), their growth rates over the thirty-year period were modest compared to the hyper-growth from the north. Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu also showed steady but slower growth. Goa, a neighboring state, saw its FME contribution decline sharply from 2,946 in 1981 to 1,336 in 2001 before a partial recovery.

Greater Mumbai's gravitational pull expanded nationally as states with negligible or zero representation in 1981, including several in the Northeast (e.g., Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland), the Himalayan region (Sikkim), and the newly formed states, recorded their presence by 2011. This indicates that Greater Mumbai's labour market attracts women from across the entire subcontinent, transforming it from a regional to a truly national magnet.

Across all major source states, the rural component of FME to Greater Mumbai consistently forms the majority. For instance, in 2011, 75% of migrants from Uttar Pradesh and 72% from Bihar listed a rural last residence. This underscores the city's primary role as a destination for women moving directly from rural agrarian economies. However, the data also reveal a significant and often faster-growing urban stream. The urban component from states like West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, and Delhi grew at a particularly rapid pace, suggesting that Greater Mumbai also attracts women from smaller towns and cities, indicating a pattern of secondary step-wise migration within broader urban systems.

The evolution of FME sources for Greater Mumbai follows a clear temporal sequence. During 1981-1991, dominance by neighboring and southern states (Karnataka, Kerala, Goa, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat) existed. Followed by consolidation of these streams and the early, steady rise of the Northern states (Uttar Pradesh, Bihar) during 1991-2001. The "Great Leap," characterized by the absolute and relative dominance of the Northern Hindi heartland states, complemented by the emergence of a pan-Indian footprint became much more evident during 2001-2011

Summary

The analysis of Census data from 1981 to 2011 reveals significant transformations in Female Migration for Employment (FME) in India, characterized by modest overall proportions but dynamic growth and dramatic spatial reconfiguration. At the national level, FME as a percentage of total female migrants remained relatively stable but low across the first three decades, 1.9% (1981), 1.8% (1991), and 1.7% (2001), before increasing to 2.1% in 2011. A persistent rural-urban differential characterizes FME throughout the period, with urban-origin women consistently migrating for employment at rates approximately two to two-and-a-half times higher than their rural counterparts. However, this gap narrows considerably for long-distance inter-state migration, where by 2011 rural rates (4.2%) nearly converged with urban rates (4.5%), suggesting that distance erodes traditional barriers for rural women pursuing metropolitan opportunities.

The most striking finding is the emergence of inter-state migration as the dominant and fastest-growing FME stream. FME from 'states in India beyond the state of enumeration' consistently represented the largest share across all census years, increasing from 4.7% in 1981 to 4.3% in 2011 after mid-period fluctuations. The 2001-2011 decade witnessed explosive growth, with national FME surging by 74.3%, far outpacing population growth (17.9%) and total female migration (40.1%), reflecting post-liberalization service sector expansion and rising female labour force participation.

State-wise analysis reveals a profound spatial reconfiguration from diffused patterns to a pronounced north-central core-periphery structure. By 2011, Uttar Pradesh (244,890), Bihar (148,008), and Rajasthan (64,358) together accounted for a dominant share of national FME, eclipsing traditional source states like Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, which experienced sharp declines. The period 2001-2011 witnessed hyper-growth in the Indo-Gangetic corridor, with NCT Delhi recording a 161% increase, while southern states showed relative stagnation.

Greater Mumbai's FME profile underwent a seismic transformation, evolving from regional southern and neighboring state dominance to national preeminence. The most dramatic shift was Uttar Pradesh's meteoric rise, from 5,630 migrants in 1981 to 49,181 in 2011, an increase of over 770%, establishing the northern Hindi heartland as Mumbai's primary catchment area. Despite this northern dominance, rural origins prevail (75% of UP migrants and 72% of Bihar migrants to Mumbai), underscoring the city's role in absorbing women directly from agrarian economies. These findings collectively demonstrate that FME, while proportionally modest, represents the fastest-growing migration stream, spatially concentrated in inter-state movements and increasingly funneled through metropolitan destinations like Mumbai.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a profound transformation in Female Migration for Employment (FME) in India between 1981 and 2011, characterized by modest overall proportions but explosive growth at the margins, particularly in inter-state migration streams. The national-level increase in FME from 1.9% to 2.1% of total female migrants, coupled with the 74.3% decadal growth during 2001-2011, empirically validates the phenomenon of "feminization of migration" identified in global and Indian scholarship [11,5]. This acceleration coincides with post-liberalization economic restructuring, suggesting that service sector expansion and metropolitan labour demand have created new opportunities for female labour force participation [2,12]. The emergence of inter-state migration as the dominant FME stream represents a significant departure from historical patterns where female migration was predominantly short-distance and marriage-related [4]. The finding that rural women's inter-state migration rate (4.2%) nearly converged

with urban women's rate (4.5%) by 2011 challenges traditional assumptions that long-distance migration is primarily an urban phenomenon. This convergence suggests that economic distress in rural agrarian economies, combined with improved information networks and transport connectivity, has enabled rural women to access metropolitan labour markets [20,15]. However, the persistent rural-urban differential in shorter-distance migration streams indicates that barriers to mobility remain context-specific.

The spatial reconfiguration documented in this study, with Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Rajasthan emerging as dominant source regions by 2011, represents a fundamental restructuring of India's migration geography. This "northern corridor" phenomenon, evidenced by Uttar Pradesh's 770% increase in FME contribution to Greater Mumbai, supplants the southern and western dominance observed in earlier decades [13]. The decline of traditional source states like Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand further underscores this spatial shift. These findings align with contemporary scholarship documenting the rise of the Indo-Gangetic plain as a primary sending region for female labour migrants [2,1].

Greater Mumbai's transformation from a regional to a national magnet for FME reflects broader patterns of urbanization and metropolitan concentration of female employment opportunities. The predominance of rural origins among migrants (75% from Uttar Pradesh, 72% from Bihar) underscores the city's role in absorbing women directly from agrarian economies, consistent with findings from qualitative studies on domestic work and informal sector employment [17,10]. Yet the simultaneous growth of urban-origin streams suggests complex migration hierarchies, including step-wise migration from smaller towns [20]. These findings carry significant implications for policy. The concentration of FME in inter-state streams and metropolitan destinations calls for coordinated policy responses across source and destination states, including skill development in sending regions, improved working conditions and social protection in destination industries, and investments in affordable housing, transport, and childcare infrastructure [21,22]. The persistence of rural-origin migrants in informal sectors also highlights the need for labour law enforcement and gender-sensitive migration policies that recognize women as independent economic actors rather than dependents [13,14].

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the trends and patterns of Female Migration for Employment (FME) in India between 1981 and 2011, with a specific focus on Greater Mumbai. Through systematic analysis of Census data across four decades, the research has documented a narrative of modest overall proportions but dramatic transformation at the margins. While FME as a percentage of total female migrants increased only marginally from 1.9% to 2.1% over the period, the decadal growth of 74.3% during 2001-2011 reveals that employment-driven female migration represents the fastest-growing migration stream in contemporary India.

The analysis establishes three key findings. First, inter-state migration has emerged as the dominant and fastest-growing FME stream, with rural-urban differentials narrowing considerably for long-distance movement. By 2011, rural women's inter-state migration rate (4.2%) nearly converged with urban women's rate (4.5%), suggesting that distance increasingly erodes traditional barriers for rural women pursuing metropolitan employment opportunities. Second, a profound spatial reconfiguration has occurred, with the northern Hindi heartland, particularly Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Rajasthan, supplanting traditional southern and western source regions. This shift reflects the interplay of agrarian distress in sending regions and service sector expansion in metropolitan destinations. Third, Greater Mumbai has transformed from a regional magnet to a truly national destination for female employment migrants, with

Uttar Pradesh's contribution surging by over 770% across the study period. Despite this northern dominance, rural origins consistently prevail, underscoring the city's role in absorbing women directly from agrarian economies.

These findings contribute to migration scholarship by providing empirical documentation of feminization patterns over an extended temporal span, identifying the critical post-liberalization decade as a period of accelerated change, and revealing the emergence of distinct migration corridors connecting northern source regions to metropolitan destinations. The study also highlights persistent data limitations in official sources, particularly the binary classification of migration reasons that conflates marriage with employment motives, perpetuating the statistical invisibility of women's economic mobility.

For policy, the findings underscore the need for coordinated interventions across source and destination states. Skill development programs in sending regions, improved working conditions and social protection in informal sectors where female migrants concentrate, and investments in urban infrastructure, including affordable housing, childcare, and transport, are essential to support women's labour force participation. Ultimately, recognizing female migrants as independent economic actors rather than dependents is fundamental to designing effective, gender-sensitive migration policies that address both the opportunities and vulnerabilities inherent in women's employment migration.

Policy Frameworks and Interventions

Migration scholarship has identified significant gaps in policy responses to female employment migration. Kumar et al. note that India's labour policies remain oriented toward formal sector workers, leaving the vast majority of female migrants, who work in informal sectors, without adequate protection [2]. Pandey called for interventions that address the specific vulnerabilities of seasonal women migrants, including access to housing, healthcare, and childcare (14). Ghatak emphasizes the need for gender-sensitive migration policies that recognize women as independent economic actors rather than merely dependents [12].

Mazumdar highlights the importance of source-destination coordination, arguing that policies must address both the push factors in sending regions and the pull factors in receiving regions [20]. She advocates for investments in skill development in source regions, improved working conditions in destination industries, and stronger social protection mechanisms for migrant workers [20]. Alam et al. focus on urban infrastructure, recommending improvements in public transport, affordable housing, and childcare facilities to reduce barriers to women's employment [21]. Bhaskar calls for reforms in labour law enforcement, arguing that existing regulations are inadequately implemented in sectors where female migrants are concentrated [22]. The present study's findings, particularly the emergence of inter-state migration as the dominant stream and the concentration of FME in metropolitan destinations like Mumbai, carry direct implications for policy formulation in areas ranging from skill development to urban infrastructure and social protection.

Limitations of the Study

This study, while providing comprehensive insights into long-term trends of Female Migration for Employment (FME) in India, is constrained by certain limitations inherent to secondary data analysis. First, the reliance on Census of India data introduces methodological challenges related to the binary classification of migration reasons. Census data records only a single reason for migration, conflating overlapping motives such as marriage and employment. Women who migrate for marriage but

subsequently enter the workforce are not captured as employment migrants, leading to systematic undercounting of FME. This limitation is particularly significant given that approximately 87% of female migration is attributed to marriage [1], potentially masking the true extent of women's economic mobility. Additionally, social desirability bias may contribute to underreporting of women's economic activity, further distorting the data.

Second, the study is restricted to the temporal span of 1981 to 2011, as post-2011 Census migration data disaggregated by reason for migration remains unavailable at the time of analysis. This limitation prevents the examination of more recent trends, including the impacts of policy shifts, the COVID-19 pandemic, and evolving labour market dynamics on female employment migration. Furthermore, the absence of longitudinal data within Census sources constrains the ability to track individual migration trajectories or capture circulatory and seasonal migration patterns, which are prevalent among female labour migrants. The analysis is also limited to quantitative data, lacking qualitative insights into migrant experiences, decision-making processes, and outcomes post-migration.

Strengths of the Study

This study makes several distinctive contributions to the scholarship on female migration in India. Its primary strength lies in the comprehensive temporal coverage spanning four decades (1981-2011), enabling the identification of structural shifts and long-term patterns that single-year or short-term studies cannot capture. By systematically analyzing multiple census rounds, the study documents the critical transformation of FME from a marginal stream to the fastest-growing migration category, particularly during the post-liberalization decade of 2001-2011. The focus on Greater Mumbai as a strategic case study provides granular insights into how a premier metropolitan destination absorbs female labour migrants, with detailed analysis of source state contributions and rural-urban origins across the entire study period. Methodologically, the study offers a rigorous disaggregated analysis by migration stream (intra-district, inter-district, and inter-state) and by rural-urban origin, revealing nuanced patterns such as the narrowing rural-urban gap in long-distance migration and the emergence of inter-state movement as the dominant FME stream. The state-wise mapping of FME distribution across four census years visually and empirically demonstrates the profound spatial reconfiguration from southern to northern source region dominance. Furthermore, by establishing the macro-level context of migration trends, this study provides an essential foundation for subsequent primary research on migrant experiences, livelihoods, and outcomes. The findings carry direct policy relevance, offering evidence-based insights for interventions in skill development, urban infrastructure, social protection, and source-destination coordination.

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