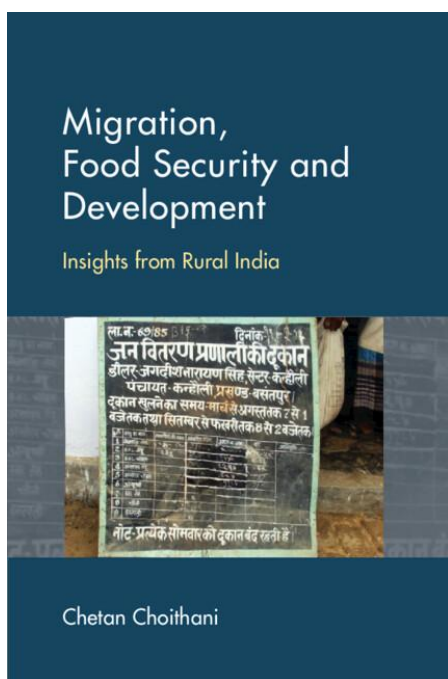


BOOK REVIEW

Entitlements, Livelihoods, and Migration: Rethinking Food Security in Rural India

Dung Le *

Chetan Choithani. 2023. *Migration, Food Security and Development: Insights from Rural India*. Cambridge University Press. 380. ISBN (ebook): 9781108885799, ISBN (hardback): 110884037X.



Chetan Choithani's *Migration, Food Security and Development: Insights from Rural India* is an empirical study of how households in a high-migration district in the state of Bihar use mobility and social protection simultaneously to secure food. The author, a development studies scholar at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru, notes at the outset that policy and academic debates on food security and migration in India have “largely tended to proceed in separate silos” (p. 28). He proposes to close this gap through the combined use of Amartya Sen’s “entitlements” framework (Sen 1981) and the “sustainable livelihoods approach” developed

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by Chambers and Conway (1991)—both of which emphasize access, institutions, and household strategies rather than production alone. Choithani's book is, therefore, best understood as an attempt to bring together two large Indian conversations: one on rural food security—and the performance of public distribution and nutrition schemes in that context—and the other on domestic migration as a household sustenance strategy of the rural poor.

The district of Siwan in Bihar is a credible site for this inquiry. The state faces intersecting issues of low urbanization, high rural poverty, and weak implementation of food-based safety nets. Siwan's population, in particular, is extremely dense, and 95% of it is rural. In 1991–2001, it ranked among the highest on a list of districts experiencing an interstate labour exodus. This makes Siwan representative of spaces where local livelihood opportunities are insufficient and migration has become socially normalized. Choithani's study is based on a survey of 392 households in 10 villages—selected because their age-to-sex ratios signified a substantial absence of men—supplemented by interviews with local officials, the women left behind, and a small number of migrants. The micro-level findings are compared against district-level patterns revealed in the 2001 Census of India migration tables (Office of the Registrar General & Central Commissioner, India 2001) and the scores on the Food Security Outcome Index (FSOI) used in the *Food Security Atlas of Rural Bihar* (WFP and IHD 2009), which show that districts with higher interstate outmigration rates also tend to have higher (better) FSOI values.

The core thesis is presented with clarity. The study shows that underperforming public schemes compel households to seek income opportunities elsewhere. Once migration occurs, it reshapes food access through remittances, changes in who makes household decisions, and the way local officials assess eligibility in the absence of key male members. Hence, the author concludes that “inefficiencies in the social protection nets leave little option for a large majority of rural poor households but to fend for themselves”, but these households “do not appear to be passive actors” (p. 177). The originality of Choithani's approach lies in showing that the relationship between migration and food security is two-way: Gaps in food-based safety nets and rural livelihoods propel migration, and migration then reshapes food access and decision-making back home.

Three aspects of the book constitute particularly noteworthy contributions to the study of migration and rural household sustenance.

First, the book shows that rural households act as relational planners. In Chapter 5, “Connections between Food Safety Nets and Migration”,

Choithani demonstrates that the public distribution system (PDS), the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), and Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) are experienced as elements of a single livelihood strategy that also includes remittances. Migration is seen as a complement to, not a substitute for, these services. This is an important correction to programme-by-programme evaluations.

Second, the book analytically operates at two levels, moving from district-level statistics (which show a positive and significant relationship between outmigration and FSOI values) to village-level narratives that explain how this association is actually produced through women's budgeting, small (but regular) money orders, and seasonal work.

A third strength of the book lies in the careful specification of mediating conditions. The study shows that migration's ability to improve food access depends on factors such as regularity of remittances, the family's position in the local caste and landholding hierarchies, household living arrangements (i.e., nuclear vs. joint or extended families), and administrative responsiveness to women acting as *de facto* heads of the household. The section on the women left behind is especially convincing in highlighting their increased responsibilities due to the migration of their men and—where institutions allow it—their expanded control over household consumption.

The book could have developed several threads more fully, however. For instance, the introduction situates the study within the context of a national agrarian restructuring and “the spate of farmers' suicides” (p. 15), but this distress narrative is not fleshed out in the Siwan chapters. Since the evidence shows that some households in Siwan are coping with scarcity mainly through circulatory migration, the author could have briefly examined why this district has normalized migration rather than self-harm or overt contention—which, in turn, would clarify what is distinctive in western Bihar's socio-cultural fabric and its rural population's handling of agrarian distress.

Likewise, caste divisions are described throughout the book, but there is no theorizing upon this aspect of society at the outset. Chapter 6 reveals that Bansfor and Musahar households are both the most food-insecure and the least mobile. They are confined to brick kilns and casual farm work, and they only occasionally benefit from the NREGS, which leaves them highly vulnerable to sustenance issues. Providing a map of the caste blocs in Siwan early on would have helped consolidate the demonstrations of inequality in the later chapters.

The discussion on social protections also feels more parallel than relational. Chapter 5 documents “operational inefficiencies” across the PDS, NREGS, and ICDS, but it treats them as separate, unrelated entities that do not impinge upon each other—even though they were expanded in the same years, through the same panchayat offices, and for the same marginalized castes. A

triangulated reading would have shown how gaps in one scheme push households towards another scheme or into migration, and how caste-based gatekeeping persists across programmes.

In sum, this book's central lesson is that in places such as Siwan, migration is already part of the food-security system, not outside it. In addition, households have more food on the table when they can layer remittances on top of the benefits they get from the PDS, NREGS, and ICDS, though caste position, landlessness, or unresponsive local offices might prevent that layering. Documenting this rural household sustenance strategy with both district-level data and findings from village interviews, using crisp, straightforward writing, the book considerably enriches the Indian literature on this subject—in particular, by moving the focus away from asking whether migration reduces hunger to an investigation of what social and institutional conditions support such an outcome.

This perspective makes the book helpful for policymakers and non-governmental organizations in high-outmigration states that are looking to make entitlements portable and accessible to the women left behind in rural households (through easier claims processes, for instance). It is also of use to urban welfare officials, who can draw on its logic to justify extending basic protections to migrants at their destinations. The book is also relevant to academics and students in the fields of development, agrarian studies, gender studies, and South Asian politics, offering them a well-constructed district-level case study that can be taught and replicated as a comparative baseline for other rural economies where mobility and uneven delivery of state protections coexist.

Data Availability statement: The data used in this paper is not provided in a repository. This is a book review, which does not have any original primary data included in the work.

Conflict of Interest Statement: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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