

MONTAGES OF MIGRATION

NEW BARKHA VASTRALAYA



Stories from Jharkhand Migration Survey 2023

Illustrations: Harshika Tripathi

CHRONICLE OF BARKHA

“I haven’t done much”

Twenty-one years old Barkha is a proud, garments-shop owner in the Palkot block of Gumla district of Jharkhand. **She had migrated at the tender age of 15 to Punjab to be employed as a domestic worker. 6 years, and three jobs later, she had amassed enough savings to open her own shop.**

When asked about her almost surreal journey, she quipped,

“

People here say that too... I have not done much, just what needed to be done.” On another instance she recounted, “I don’t have much of a story to offer... I had stayed away from my home for around 7 years, which is why I could manage all this...We were very poor, so the only thing I had in mind was that I had to earn enough money...I don’t have much formal education but I had to do something, so I started working as a domestic worker.



”

Gumla also happens to be one of the districts with highest rates of trafficking of women, where the lines between voluntary migration and trafficking are quite blurred. But that’s a story for another day.

Barkha belongs to the Lohra community, in the Lotwa village of the Palkot block of Gumla. Lohras consider themselves as Adivasis. Despite possessing land, the community is not able to produce much. During our study in Palkot, we were told **it is the women from the Adivasi communities who migrate mostly, as domestic workers.** Other communities do not look upon women’s migration favourably.

While taking us through her journey Barkha reminisced,

“My parents had land but my father had a chronic illness and my mother too had a back problem. My brothers would go to school, so my father had no help when it came to farming. They could not produce much. They worked odd jobs – like carrying and crushing stone from nearby hills whenever houses were being made in the village... I was a child then... I couldn't fathom how I could help, but today I have understood so I am trying. _____”

The story however, has more layers. Barkha mentions,

“At that point, I used to go to school but there were a lot of problems at home so I decided to quit school... My elder cousin was visiting us then, I told her I want to go to Punjab with her...My brothers did not want me to go but my parents agreed... I was a child back then... When my cousin asked if I would want to go with her, I simply agreed... The only thing that was going on in my mind was whether I should write my matriculation examination or leave before that... but eventually I just demanded that my parents allow me to leave... _____”

When talking about her experiences in school, she remembered,

“There was a strict teacher... As a punishment he had made me stand out of the classroom... The aunty who prepared mid-day meals in the school had asked for some help and when I was helping her the teacher had seen me... He then told me ‘You should quit studies and start cooking’... On hearing that I left school.” She added later, “My cousins here fell in love and eloped at a very young age and then got married...Sometimes, I wonder if I had been here, I might have done that too... It was good that I left.” _____

Once in Punjab she did mention feeling very lonely and sad but her mother fell severely ill and her treatment involved a huge expense, so Barkha decided to stay back and send money back home. **She took a loan from her employers and therefore, could not leave before she had repaid the loans. It took her three years to repay the loan.**



**You should quit studies
and start cooking**

गणित

Barkha mentioned that she had come back home after the first Covid -19 induced lockdown, like many other migrant workers, but the conditions at her home forced her to return as soon as the first lockdown was lifted.

Once back in Delhi, she had gone shopping one day and while returning in a bus she heard someone behind her talking in Sadri. She turned back, hearing a familiar language and thus, began her friendship with another woman who was from Ramgarh in Jharkhand and who worked in a boutique in Delhi. It was through her that she landed a job in a boutique, a significant move from being a domestic worker. The job paid her around Rs.30,000 a month besides taking care of her food, stay and travel expenses.

Barkha worked as a boutique attendant for about two years, before returning home. It is here that she learnt the tricks of the garment trade which led to her opening her own shop. **Her mother had warned her against opening the shop but she was adamant. She with the help of a friend started setting up the shop and eventually her family came around too.** She observed that she had started planning for the shop in March 2022, even before returning home from Delhi in June, 2022. She had sent stocks for the shop from Delhi and had used her connections to order more from Jamnagar and Gandhinagar. **Eventually, she had decided that it would be better to sell shoes along with clothes and thus, her shop today is a one-stop fashion solution in Palkot. Barkha has already invested almost Rs. 10 lakhs, her life's savings, to set up the shop.**

Barkha confessed initially she was skeptical of her decision. On the one hand, she had wanted to have her own business but at the same time she was skeptical that she would not be able to earn as much as she earned in Delhi. But now she earns more than her previous salary. Her brother who was a migrant worker too, has now bought a car and rents it out as a business. The family's fortunes have now stabilized and Barkha is in the search of a partner with whom she could start a family, but who would continue to help her to run her business.

Delhi Garments Shop



न्यू बरखा वस्त्रालय



Women's and men's migration as labourers from Jharkhand follow different patterns even though the root causes remain the same. While men might migrate to gain financial independence, visit a new place, be with their friends, along with providing for their families; women almost always migrate when there is financial crisis in the family. Women also migrate to sectors, understood to be feminine, such as domestic work and textile work largely.

Unlike men, women are almost always provided for in terms of food and housing, they often have to face extreme surveillance of a gendered nature at their place of residence. Men are often able to cope with the hardships of living away from their homes in alien cities by falling back on their peer groups with whom they migrate. But women working alone, in a domestic set-up do not have access to such support and often feel lonely and isolated.

Working as a domestic-worker is particularly challenging, as Barkha observed too. She joined work at a young-age and did not have much knowledge about the roles she was expected to perform. But even as she learnt to cook, take care of infants as the case may be, certain challenges persisted, such as -

No fixed working hours

“ —
| Kabhi kabhi night mein bhi dekhna hota tha jab woh log kahi party mein |
| gaye hote the toh — ”

No fixed work contract with defined job roles

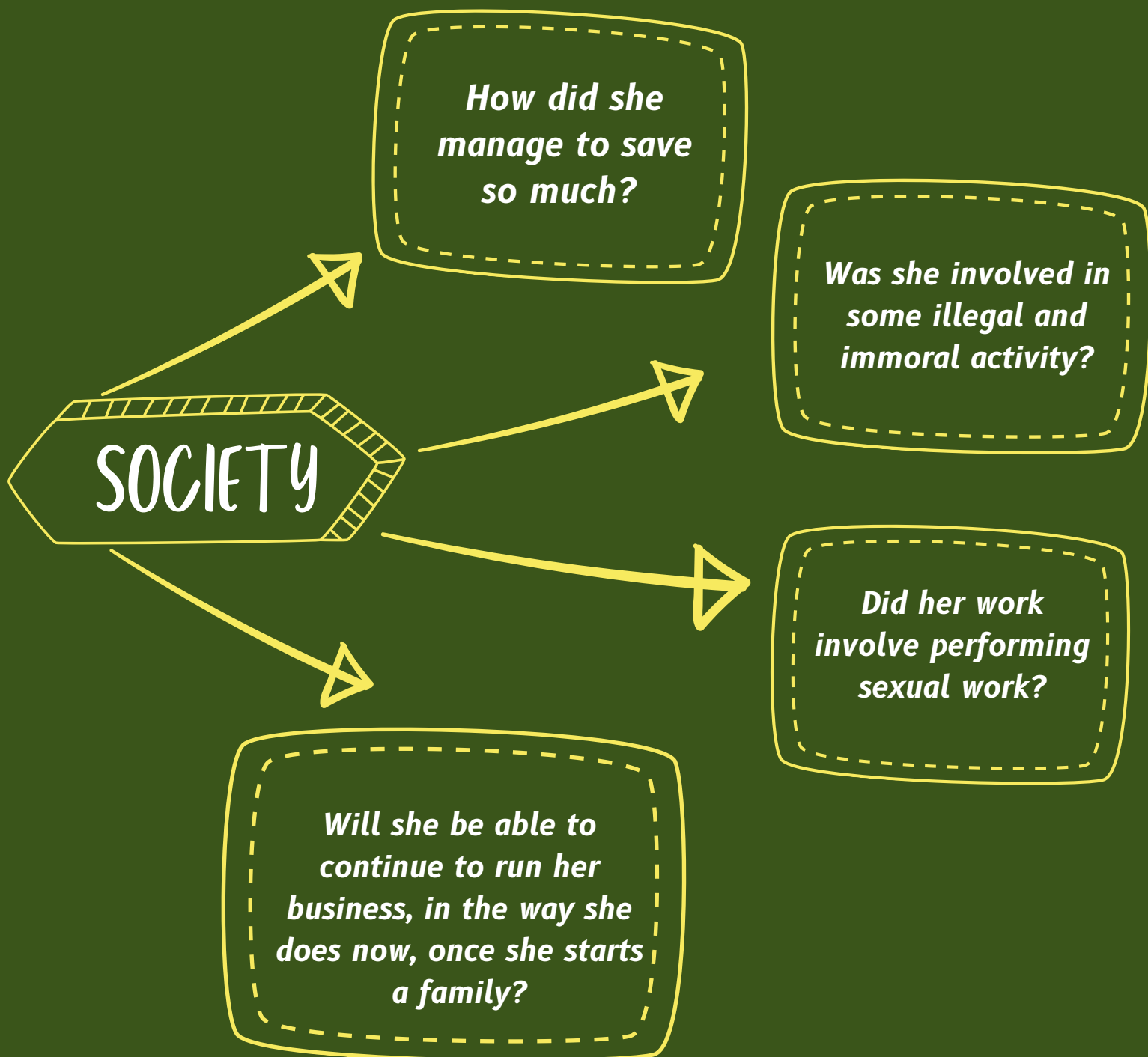
“ —
| Kabhi kabhi wahan ke maid log nahi aate the to kuch kuch kaam karna |
| padta tha — ”

Women-workers are not allowed to possess and use cell-phones or to leave the employer's residence unattended

“ —
| Haan main phone nahi li thi. jab bhi ghar me baat karna hota tha to mai |
| unka telephone se baat kar leti thi aur kabhi kabhi unhi logo ke phone se hi |
| baat kar leti thi. Mann to karta tha ki main bhi phone pakdu lekin waha |
| rakhne hi nahi dete the. Unlogo ka phone ka he showroom tha main bolti |
| bhi thi phir bhi nahi dete the. — ”

Barkha worked in one of the most exploitative sectors of work in the country presently - i.e., **domestic work**. While Barkha was fortunate enough to be able to leave the profession behind and start over with her own shop, not many women from Gumla can boast of such success stories.

Yet, for Barkha success is not unequivocal. Some questions she still has to answer are:



**BARKHA KUMARI AND
HER STORE :
“NEW BARKHA
VASTRALAYA”**

