

5. VISIBILISING THE UNDERBELLY OF GLOBAL CAPITALISM: TRANSNATIONAL MOVEMENTS OF LABOUR AS COMMODITY

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Uncertain Journeys: Labour Migration from South Asia edited by A.S. Panneerselvan, Speaking Tiger Publishers 2018; *Undocumented: Stories of Indian Migrants in the Arab Gulf* by Rejimon Kuttapan Penguin Books 2021 and *Gender, Identity and Migration in India* edited by Nasreen Chowdhory and Paula Banerjee, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022

'Migrants are like candles. They burn themselves out, and provide light to others'

AKM Moshin, *Bangalar Katha*

At the annual *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas*, the contribution of overseas Indians and the diaspora is celebrated but amidst the high achievers, presidents, and billionaires, ignored and invisible is the contribution of the low and semi-skilled workers, especially female domestic workers at the lowest rung of the labour hierarchy of those who migrate to the Gulf and S. E Asian migration corridor. They expose themselves to working and living in a world of precarity, in the desperate hope of lifting their families out of poverty. The Gulf countries account for half of India's 18 million emigrants whose official remittances make up nearly a fifth of the total 87 billion USD overall remittance flows into India. Braving indebtedness, exploitative recruitment agencies, the uncertainties of fraud about jobs, wage theft, bonded labour and dire living conditions, health neglect, hunger, sexual harassment and even torture, migrant workers from South Asia risk their all to escape the hopelessness of unemployment at home in order to sustain their families living there.

Chilling and poignant are the stories of victimhood and vulnerability of migrants captured in the long form writings of journalists compiled by A.S. Panneerselvan in *Uncertain Journeys: Labour Migration from South Asia*. Journalist Rejimon Kuttapan's *Undocumented* is a story within a story of the journalist-migrant's tale of rescue encounters of other migrants in Oman. Their Eldorado dreams of escaping poverty have pushed many into deeper dispossession. One such is Appuni from Kerala, whose plight is hauntingly captured in the images of him driving his 800 Maruti car, his home and his coffin. During his 23 years of struggle in Oman, Appunni became a victim of a cycle of indebtedness that is writ into the *kafala* system of contractual guest workers—in bondage to their work sponsor. Appunni slipped from being a documented to an 'undocumented' overstaying migrant, just beyond the clutches of the police, taking up any odd job—even rag-picking—so as to send money home while simultaneously being desperate to return there himself. But once home, with no big house or goods to show for his toil, Appunni was an embarrassment to his family.

Nasreen Chowdhory and Paula Banerjee's edited volume *Gender Identity and Migration in India* at first glance appears to be an odd ensemble of journalistic and academic writings. However, it is arguably appropriate for a journal located in a School of Public Policy whose pedagogic space is also home to a Media and Communications Programme. It is curious that while journalism plays so significant a role in the formulation of public policy, and is the object of public policy, media and communications policy tends to reside almost exclusively in media and communications programs and rarely in public policy programs (Napoli, 2020). This review article is an attempt to engage with the possibilities that the intersection of journalistic and academic perspectives can bring to the policy space around migration governance and politics. As Chowdhory and Banerjee claim of their volume, it is to bridge the gaps between knowledge production in academia and the lived experiences of peoples and communities who constitute the subject and object of forced migration.

What these three texts have in common is a shared vision of the importance of foregrounding the liv-ed/-ing experiences of workers, irrepressibly on the move, the human face behind the macro statistics of labour and remittances; their struggles and resilience in navigating the ill-fitting disciplinary protocols of migration governance and policy regulation. Governance categories of legality and illegality seem irrelevant as Nepali journalist Janak Sapkota realises when he confronts the structure of permissive polities in the Nepal-Gulf migration corridor that facilitates human trafficking under the guise of foreign employment (Kalir and Sur, 2014). More bureaucratisation often leads to greater vulnerability, as underage women or women with minor children who are desperate for work are enabled in their attempt to circumvent the policy 'bans'; the cost however is a high one and not always of a monetary nature.

Similarly, the bonded labour conditions under the *kafala* system of contractual workers force migrants to escape abusive conditions and become undocumented illegals, or to grasp at the allure of free work visas. In a precarious labour market where the commodity on sale is labour, this can entrap migrants into deeper indebtedness. In migration corridors across the globe, categories of legality and illegality are not only unhelpful but worse; they strip the worker of his dignity. In this context, the author Rejimon Kuttapan in *Undocumented* cites the 'Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants' which prefers to use the term 'irregular' migrants, and rejects legal definitions such as illegal which carry the implication of being undeserving of rights (2021,33).

These writings challenge the syndrome of 'seeing like a state' and argue for re-defining migration governance from perspectives that uphold the dignity and humanity of the vulnerable worker. Deepening the critique on inherited international legal and policy perspectives on migration, the academic activist Giorgio Grappi, in his writing in Chowdhory and Banerjee's collection, draws attention to a 2014 figure of 6000 Indians jailed abroad of

which more than half were in the Gulf countries. The reasons cited were mostly related to violations of visa rules—overstay, illegal entry, non-possession of valid documents, and violation of employment contract.

While narratives of victimhood bear witness to the plight of a vulnerable and powerless group, the analyses (both academic and journalistic) in these collections suggest that these precarious working and living conditions do not relate to exceptions or perversions of the system but 'are part of a complex reorganisation of the economy and production at a global scale in the last decades' as Giorgio Grappi in the edited collection *Gender Identity and Migration in India* states (2022,113).

Calling for 'understanding the institutional, political and social conditions that produce precarised conditions', Grappi shifts the focus of the migration discourse away from the 'mere description of a disadvantaged group' requiring humanitarian assistance [100]. Instead, he emphasises that 'migrations must thus be politically analysed and conceptualised vis-a-vis the global transformation of production, power and economy which includes a profound redefinition of state form, its capacity, its role and functions' [114]. It is argued that the vulnerability and powerlessness of migrants are embedded in the victimhood discourse of the international protection regime and need to be politically framed as a product of social relations shaped by institutional racism, labour market segmentation, and border regimes.

Journalists are no less acute in their more rooted analytical observations of the relation of global capitalism to the precarity of the migrant's experience. Witnessing the abject lives of hungry and relentlessly indebted and dispossessed Bangladeshi migrants in Singapore, Porimol Palma in *Uncertain Journeys* tentatively asks 'can human beings be reduced to a commodity within the global free flow of capital and business models?' [Panneerselvan 2018, 53–4].

The spatial and ideological location of the editors and the authors involved is the global south, and this is reflected in the centrality of the logic of inequality which informs these publications. The tension between the global north and global south in epistemic, legal and policy perspectives on migration governance is highlighted in editors Chowdhury and Banerjee's emphasis in *Gender Identity and Migration* on the unhelpful distinction between forced migration and voluntary migration. 'Forced migrants are always vulnerable people irrespective of whether their particular vulnerability comes from poverty or the political situation within society, but that it always results in severe persecution.' Does escaping persecution from life insecurity pose a different risk level, say than that of fleeing livelihood insecurity? [342]. Grappi provocatively takes further the discourse of economic migrants' 'unfreedom' as manifest in their conditions of work both in situations where employers invariably keep the passports of their workers, and in the incarceration of migrants in jails. The majority of the Indians crowding the jails in these countries are there for reasons of the violation of labour and visa regulations [113]. Inherent in the *Kafala* system of being obliged or rather 'bonded' to work for the Gulf employer who secures their legal work visa is the notion of the migrant as a guest contract worker. Those who jump their bondage on account of the abuse and exploitation they experience become undocumented, visa overstayers, and deportable.

While all three publications present the overwhelming material reality of migration, they also highlight that migration has become an integral or naturalised part of the lives of women and girls. Chowdhury and Banerjee invoke a feminist methodology and gender as an important category of analysis for migration studies. Gender draws attention not only to the different reasons why women and men migrate and their differentiated experiences but also to the 'feminisation' of migration, that is the 'emasculatation' of migrants especially forced migration, their embedding in a victimhood discourse and the naturalisation of their powerlessness and

disenfranchisement (Kapoor, 2013). The case studies purport to represent the 'subject position of women migrants' and their agency as demonstrated in the 'choice' to migrate. They would have been more persuasive if the edited volume had provided a robust conceptual framing of the theme of gendering or infantilisation of the migration discourse (Johnson, 2011) (Manchanda, 2023). Also, the editors state they welcome authors' insistence on 'expanding the understanding of gender, social reproduction and belonging'. However, this reader frankly wondered about the logic of coherence of a book on migration when reading this eclectic grouping of chapters, including 'Women in India's CPI (Maoist) ranks', 'Gender, Gun and Guerrillas: Peoples War of Nepal' and 'The Reproducers and Facilitators of India's Gestational Surrogacy Market'.

In visibilising the multiple aspects of women on the move for labour, of note is Sailaja Menon's chapter 'If only I were a Male' in *Gender Identity and Migration*. It introduces the feminisation of domestic work and the continued undervaluation of unpaid and paid domestic work, and indeed even its recognition as work. Increasingly though, feminist labour studies scholars are analysing women's reproductive work not only as producing labour units but also as people and social relations. Menon locates the expanding economy of care within the context of the transnational globalised economy that now enters our homes not only with consumer products but also with the emerging economy of care. That economy is driven by urban middle class women stepping out to work and creating the demand conditions for girls and women from marginalised communities in the rural areas to migrate to the cities for work. Menon states that according to the National Domestic Workers Union, women, and children make up 90 percent of the 20 million domestic workers enumerated.

Menon co-joins these women on the move for work with women's migration for marriage. Over 20 million women move every year to their husband's homes. A large proportion of these poorly-educated young women from the rural areas swell the unorganised labour force. Menon

stops short of engaging with the issue of the invisibilisation of women's internal labour migration often getting camouflaged as marriage migration (Mazumdar, 2013), although she recognises that girls and women from tribal communities migrate for work not only on account of land alienation but also on account of aspiring to lives different from those that they lead. Too often, policy studies tend to conflate such labour migrations as human trafficking for slave domestic labour and sexual exploitation and seek to block women's access. Menon's essay dovetails with more comprehensive studies such as that of Neha Wadhawan (Wadhawan, 2022) which confronts the invisibilisation of women's labour migration, and advances the overwhelming reason of marriage migration, which obscures the secondary reason of post-marriage labour.

It is to the writings of journalists that we turn to bear witness to women's subject experiences of external labour migration. There is Rejimon Kuttapan's delicate representation of Jumaila's story that allows us a glimpse into the situation of Arabs (falsely presenting themselves as Sheikhs) contracting interim marriages and the impossibility of acquiring citizenship in the Gulf. This time the 'Sheikh', in reality a small farmer, took young Jumaila from Kerala back with him to his family of wives and children in Oman. Jumaila bore him two sons but unable to bear abuse, hunger and ill treatment that was meted out to both her and her sons, she escaped when her husband wanted to prostitute her. An absconding Jumaila lost her family visa. She luckily got a work visa as a domestic worker and was able to stay close to her sons. However, once the sponsors left, she became illegal and deportable. Eventually she was summoned by the Oman Ministry of Interior for a hearing pending likely deportation. Fortunately, the Omani officials granted the plea of her elder son, an Omani citizen, to become her Arab work-visa sponsor! (111-112).

Kuttapan and Panneerselvan's edited collections recount horror tales of victimhood and abuse of vulnerable women migrants. The women are exploited by greedy recruitment agencies that extort upwards of a lakh,

deepening their indebtedness. South Asian countries have imposed multiple 'protective' gender bans to restrict women below 30 years, or proscribe women with young children from migrating and also impose bureaucratized monitoring of children left behind by migrating women. Such restrictions mean that a journey to Saudi Arabia which takes a few hours can take up to 336 days, a protracted period when woman migrants in transit are at the mercy of human smugglers. Not only have these gender bans been found to be ineffective but they have also intensified women's vulnerability. Moreover, it makes women objects or targets of governance rather than agents for their own empowerment.

Reading agency in the lives of these persecuted migrant women domestic workers appears to be at odds with the dominant discourse of victimization narrated in the exemplary horror stories of migrants; the young Sri Lankan, Rizana, who was executed in Saudi Arabia on charges of infanticide and Ariyawathie, who was tortured by her employer in Saudi Arabia with hot nails and sharp objects being stuck into her body. Can agency be gleaned in the desperate choice to migrate, and in their resilience in contriving possibilities of escape or indeed, to want to re-migrate despite it all going wrong? It is important to tease out the meaning that women themselves attach to their experiences of virtual bondage—of continuous overwork, sleep deprivation (two hours of sleep in a night), hunger, health negligence and sexual predation. Thulasi Muttalingam was struck by some of the women speaking of their experiences as being empowering. 'I loved the freedom in Saudi Arabia to evaluate and understand myself as a person. Over here we face a barrage of criticism from family friends on how to behave,' says one of her interviewees, Stella [150-151]. It was not that Stella enjoyed any freedom to go out, it was constant work with barely six hours of sleep and even her weekly outing for shopping was under supervision. However, Stella enjoyed for the first time the 'freedom to process my own thoughts' she said. She worked as hard at home but in Saudi Arabia, the domestic work she did was valued. Ironically, she felt like a person with rights; and an exploration of the same would present interesting narratives.

Finally, a tailpiece about the regional or South Asian canvas in these works. The Panos collection of writings on the South Asian migrant experiences maps similarities in the narrative of persecution as well as indicates the need for a regional policy response to deal with the systemic problems of the precarious conditions of labour under global capitalism. Limited was the state's form and capacity (and the political will) to protect migrating citizens' rights. Suggestive was the need to develop a regional response to obviate competitive beggaring of wages amongst each other. Kuttapan brings alive the human story of fraternal solidarities across our states' difficult borders. Majeed, hurt and bleeding in the foot, survived his desert crossing in Oman to return to Kerala because two Pakistani Pathans carried him to the border. Jahanara from Bangladesh was lost having fled her abusive employer but at the migrant hive of Deira in UAE, she found Ratna from Mumbai, who offered her fish fry and the warmth and love of a family.

These three publications are important contributions to the growing interdisciplinary field of migration studies, bringing in scholarly perspectives and policy analyses from the global south. These writings, in visibilising and analysing the interconnection between gender, migration and labour, should pave the way for more informed research and policy making that is responsive to the complexity of not only why, but how women migrate. These writings caution against unhelpful gender bans that deny women agency. They remind us of the importance of taking into account the impact of migration on women's employment in the policy discussions among the stakeholders.

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