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International Migration and Gender Scholarship in South Asia -A Review of Literature

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Abstract

International migration is a global phenomena. According to latest data around 3 percent of the total global population are migrants. Women composed almost half of the total world migrants and part of every cross national migratory movement ie family migration, migration for work, illegal migration, and trafficking. The growing visibility of women in migratory movement resulted into the large number of writings on Gender dynamics of International Migration covering a wide variety of issues and reflecting how each process of migration striating from origin country to adjustment in the receiving country is shaped by gender differences. While majority of work is confined to the experiences of women migrating from Latin America, South East Asia and Africa there has been growing attempt by Scholars from South Asia covering the various facets of International Migration.

Introduction

Migration is a global phenomenon. Throughout human history people have been migrating from one place to another in constant search of food, shelter and security of life. The process of globalization, development of means of communication and transportation has increased

the numbers of migrants in unprecedented ways. It has also changed the way we used to understand migration. At present millions of people cross the border of their nations in order to get better employment opportunities, livelihood, better living standard. The process of migration is just not the physical movement of people, people along with them carry their culture, identity, religious belief, basic values, food habits, language.

The process of migration is a complex process which involves changes at multiple levels. Due to complexity involved in the process of migration, it cannot be seen in isolation from gender dynamics. Migration from a gender perspective is to understand the impact of migration on men and women at various levels-individuals, households, families, societies, cultures, identities, religious beliefs, social structures, value systems, food habits, languages, policies- and vice versa. It examines the inequalities underlying below these differences. Traditionally migration literature has invariably been male dominated. Women were presumed to play a passive role in comparison. In recent times, rise of feminist school and growth in migration of women specifically from third world countries has enforced role of gender as an important analytical tool in migration studies.

Migration of South Asian¹ women is not a recent phenomenon. But because of their small numbers and invisibility they were never given adequate space in the writings on migration. In 20th century few studies came up with the theme of South Asian women migration. At present great length of literature is available on the migration of South Asian women. These studies are incorporating experiences from various disciplines and few of them have multidisciplinary approach. The studies have not only questioned the invisibility of women in the migration studies but also criticized the way western feminists represented them.

The present paper explores the development of incorporation of gender in migration theories. Further the paper will give an over view of development of the literature on South Asian

women migration under various themes like South Asian women as part of diaspora communities, Labour migration of women from South Asia, Problem of Sex Trafficking in South Asia and also impact of male migration on women left behind.

Theoretical Framework

Migration has emerged as an important area of study in last few decades. It is still at nascent stage as a field of inquiry. Initially the researches on migration were dominated by push & pull approach and neoclassical human capital approach. Both these approaches saw migrants as homogeneous group ignoring their diversity (Boyd and Grieco, 1998). The visibility of migrants has also attracted attention of academicians, researchers, and social scientists from other disciplines. For most part of its history migration has largely been studied within the boundaries of other discourses. According to Clifford Jansen (1969:60 cited in King 2012), *“the subject matter of migration has been claimed by many social-science disciplines. Geographers, sociologists and economists (including economic historians) can probably assert the longest engagement, but many other disciplines have also been involved, such as social psychology, political science, anthropology, history, demography, law and, moving across to the humanities, literary, media and cultural studies.”* All disciplines have their theoretical construct, academic boundaries, distinct methodologies, ideological framework and analytical tools. These factors limit the scope for the broader understanding of migration.

In recent times few authors have challenged these disciplinary limitations. Castles (2000:15-25, cited in King, 2012) has argued that disciplinary and paradigmatic closure are the enemy of an effective and sympathetic study of human migration. Whereas Arango (2004:15, cited in King, 2012) has stressed that limiting enquiry to single discipline reduces our understanding of the full complexity of migration processes, and in particular has held back the building of theory. Thus more interdisciplinary and Integrated approach to study migration has been prescribed. The integrated approaches — new economics of migration theory, network theory, institutional theory, cumulative causation theory and migration network theory give more theoretical importance to social context (Boyd and Grieco, 1998). These theories have been criticized for giving too much importance to family / household and social networks replacing individual as unit of analysis.

This was followed by the most recent synthetic approach by Massey and others which does integration at two levels-(a) International migration is defined as consisting of two stages: initiation, or what causes migration to occur; and continuation, or why transnational population flows persist across time and space; and (b) on the basis of this "initiation-continuation" framework, theories are incorporated that differ with respect to theoretical levels (macro versus micro) and/or analytical units (individuals, family/household, nation) (Boyd and Grieco, 1998).

Although these theories widened the scope of study of migration, but migration was still seen as gender neutral concept. In the studies of migration, men were seen as productive migrants while women were seen only as dependent migrants. This conceptualisation of migration ignore the gender dynamics associated with it. The power dynamics within the family, community, state in social, economic and cultural context were ignored. A review of the literature on migration suggests that migrant women's experiences have either been subsumed under that of men or have been completely ignored or misrepresented (Rayaprol 2011).

The traditional understanding of migration as gender neutral phenomenon was challenged in 1970s and 1980s with the advent of feminist movement. During this period large amount of women centric literature on migration was published. They questioned exclusion of women and sexist biases in the researches. But it emerged only as sub-field in migration studies (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2003). Most studies were focussed on sex role, but there was no discussion on power dynamics, race, ethnicity, interaction with other institutions. Thus, rather than helping women they just "stir and add" women to migration researches. The growing third world women migration also faced problem of explanation due to lack of its understanding. This challenged the feminist approach which was more women specific.

A significant development was the publication of International Migration Review special edition on women migration in 1984. In the introductory article, Morkovasic's (1984) conclusion was that in the light of a decade of "research", it was not so much that

female migration was understudied and should be re-discovered, but rather that the existing literature has had little impact on policy makers and the media and that the main body of academic literature on migration has persisted with its male bias (cited in Kofman, 1999 page no 269)

This was followed by period in which gender as a concept emerged across social sciences. The use of term "gender" rather than "sex" is deliberate as it explicitly rejects biological explanations for hierarchies of inequality and power that privilege men and disadvantage women (Boyd and Grieco, 1998). The change in focus from women centred studies to analysis of gender reflected two important development (a) scholars have succeeded in bringing female migration out of the shadows in many disciplines; (b) migration is now viewed as a gendered phenomenon that requires more sophisticated theoretical and analytical tools than sex as a dichotomous variable (Piper, 2005).

According to Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994;6-7),

Gender is an “analytical tool equally relevant to our understanding of men's migration as it is to our understanding of women's migration”. She further emphasised:-

Gender is not simply a variable to be measured, but a set of social relations that organise immigration patterns. The task, then, is not simply to document or highlight the presence of undocumented women who have settled in the United States, or to ask the same questions of immigrant women that are asked of immigrant men, but to begin with an examination of how gender relations facilitate or constrain both women’s and men’s immigration and settlement.... Gender is exercised in relational and dynamic ways, and in this study I examine how the social relations of gender contour women’s and men’s immigration and settlement experiences

Initially, this understanding of migration and gender was only for household, family, community, which were considered gendered, but later jobs, workplace, labour, notion of citizenship, emigration policies, refugee policies, state agencies, sites of consumption, media, were also considered gendered (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003). Thus incorporation of gender in migration studies opened wide area of research. At present gender is seen as an essential analytical tool in understanding migration. In this background, we now move to overview of research in the field of migration of South Asian women.

South Asian Women Migration

Migration from South Asia is a historical phenomena. But until recently there was not much literature available on South Asian women migratory experience. This can be because migration in South Asia has always been considered as male phenomena and women were often seen as passive migrants. It is in late 1990s many studies on focusing on experiences of women in International Migration from the region have started coming up. One of the fundamental reason for this was the growing number of women migration for work from the region. India, Nepal and Srilanka are the major source countries for women migration (Thimothy and Sasikumar (2012). In this paper we look at few broader themes dealing with literature related to South Asian women migration covering various issues like women as part of diaspora community, issues and vulnerabilities associated with their migration for work for example trafficking, exploitation in labour market and impact of male migration on left behind women.

Gender And Diaspora

South Asian women never got adequate space in the earlier work on South Asian diaspora. In the early work on any diaspora group, "Gender has not been problematised in a central way

by scholars (Rayaprol, 2011). It was in late twentieth century that major work on South Asian women started. The women scholars who came from South Asia were pioneers in this area.

This new breed of academicians tried to define themselves with a new perspective and challenged the existing stereotypical image of South Asian women. They further stood against racism in western countries and biased immigration policies.

Aparna Rayaprol (2011) in this regard states: “Since the last decade of the twentieth century, there has been a spate of academic as well as creative writing on, by, and / or about South Asian women in the diaspora: Daspupta’s *A Patchwork Shawl* (1998); Gupta’s *Emerging Voices* (1999); Maira and Srikanth’s *Contours of the Heart* (1996); Puwar and Raghuram’s *South Asian Women in the diaspora* (2003); Shah’s *Dragon Ladies* (1997); Shankar and Srikanth’s *A Part, Yet Apart* (1998); and the Women of South Asian Descent Collective’s *Out Feet Walk the Sky* (1993), all have South Asian or Asian American in the titles/sub-titles of their books.”

Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), *Namesake* (2003), and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) are among the major fictional writings on South Asian Women in diaspora. Margaret Abraham, Shamita Das Dasgupta, Monisha Das Gupta, Rayaprol (2011), Sangeeta R Gupta, Ananya Bhattacharjee, Neelu Kang, Etsuko Marukoa, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Radhika Parameswaran, Aparna Rayaprol, Amita Bhandari Preisser, Nirmal Puwar, Parvati Raghuraman and Sharmila Rudrappa are some other academicians or activists who have written on South Asian women in diaspora covering issues like diaspora identity, space, culture, domestic violence and racial targeting.

Identity and Space

Shamita Dasgupta in *A Patchwork Shawl: Chronicles of South Asian Women in America* (1998) writes: “Who are we? Who are South Asian immigrant women? Any political or research attention levelled at our community has rarely focused on women. The general

populace still tends to perceive us in stereotypes: docile, subservient, passive, politically unaware, asexual and bound by traditions.” She states: “Our lives go beyond the image of the proverbial “good” daughter, the asexual, all-enduring mother who walks three steps behind her men. Passive and insulated womanhood is not our reality.” She has criticized the monopolisation of mainstream by the men and an attempt by them to portray whole of South Asian community as homogeneous. The attempt to scuttle voices of dissent has been challenged by her.

Aparna Rayaprol, in her book *Negotiating Identities: Women in the Indian Diaspora* (1997) has tried to examine the various ways in which South Indian Hindu immigrant women in Pittsburgh (USA) adhere to the values of their native country and also adapt to some of the universal values of the host country. She focused on how immigrant women’s lives are influenced by religion and religious practices. Through feminist perspectives, she has attempted to show how women took the lead in reproduction and recreation of the culture of their community and at the same time, performed balanced, bureaucratic functions at the public and personal sphere.

Ananya Bhattacharjee, a second generation scholar of South Asian origin, in her article *The Habit of Ex-Nomination: Nation, Women and the Indian Bourgeoisie* (1999), critically examined the way in which the immigrant community creates model of woman. The woman is showcased as the representative of the pure nation. There is a systematic indifference toward anything that challenges the prototypes of the Indian women and thus issues such as domestic violence and lesbianism are often ignored by the immigrants.

The idea of ‘Model Minority’² has also been criticized by South Asian women scholars. They argue that myth has been propagated that South Asians were exempt from social problems like unemployment, poverty, racism, delinquency, and familial conflict (Dasgupta, 1998).

This myth has not only biased the general populace but has also been internalised by the community themselves (Dasgupta, 1998). Thus, community tries to hide its concerns and lives its stereotypical image. The community denies the existence of gays, lesbians, and battered women as inconsistent with the Indian heritage, under which they take refuge, as if the acknowledgement of their existence would be an act of self destruction (Gupta, 2006).

Domestic violence

Margaret Abraham has explored the issue of marital violence against South Asian women in the United States in *Ethnicity, Gender and Marital Violence: South Asian Women's Organization in the United States* (1995). She studied this issue from family centric point of view and developed “ethno-gender perspective” which is based on the “intersection of ethnicity and gender as significant analytical category in the discourse on domestic violence”. She states that white feminist activists have also not given adequate space to concerns of South Asian women. She further looked into role played by South Asian Women Organizations (SAWOs) in responding to concerns of South Asian women and in preventing marital violence against South Asian women. Neelu Kang (2006) and Gill & Rehman (2004) have pointed similar experiences faced by activists in Canada and UK where different cultural settings provide major hindrance for them to reach out to victims of domestic violence.

Racial targeting

An interesting research on Muslim diaspora women has been done by Etsuko Marukoa. She has in the backdrop of post 9/11 period in *Wearing “Our Swords”–Post September 11 Activism Among South Asian Muslim Women Student Organizations in New York* (2004) illustrated the experience of South Asian Muslim women in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Majority of her respondents accepted that they themselves or their friend have on more than one occasion felt insecure, even they fear wearing hijab, and more than one time they have encountered verbal or physical attack.

Migration for Work

In migration studies the importance of gendered analysis is important as even when data is available, patriarchal ideology often retards the interpretation of facts (Agarwal, 2006). For long time women were only seen as followers of men in migration. They were considered dependent migrants. This one-sided interpretation also influenced policies to larger extent. In South Asia, globalization and demand of care industry increased numbers of women migrants. Feminisation of migration process reflects dual character - on one hand it reveals economic and social empowerment for female migrants and their families and on other hand migrants find themselves vulnerable to a range of abuses either in the countries of destination or origin (Datta, 2005). South Asian women travel to work as domestic workers, nannies, factory workers etc. in developing world and countries of Middle East for which they require no skills but are often faced with exploitation and ill treatment. These women dominate those occupations in migrant countries that are extension of their traditional role. In addition, few women migrate in professional fields like medicine, engineering, and management. Many of these women are principal wage earners of their family like Sri Lankan domestic workers and Indian nurses in Middle East. Their specific gender related issues become evident when female migrants suffer human abuses because of their dual vulnerability as migrant as well as woman (Dutta, 2005).

Jagannath Adhikari in *Poverty, Globalization and Gendered Labour Migration in Nepal* (2006) has emphasised the poverty is the major reason behind decision regarding women migration. There is direct relationship between education and the destination country. Illiterate and marginally literate migrants go to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. The relatively better off go to US and UK. Further, there difference in attitude towards migrant women. Women who go to US and UK are most respected. While women who migrate to Gulf countries or India are not generally seen in good esteem. Due to importance of remittances and pressure of donor agencies, large number of training institutions for nursing and domestic work have come up in Nepal which re-enforce the reproductive roles of caring and nurturing.

Raghuram (2006) has shown how the debate on feminization of labour migration, UK's medical labour force and migration of women from third world to first world seldom

intersect. She highlights the significant economic contribution that migrant doctors could be making in the medical sector. But she questions despite feminization of the medical profession, its flexibility is not applicable to the migrant women doctors. Percot (2006) shows how the possibility of migration and the higher wages has transformed the status of nursing profession in South India where it was not considered a respectable profession. Comparing different generations of nurses who have migrated to the Gulf she shows how the aspirations of women have also undergone a change and now migration to the Gulf has become a step in an elaborate strategy to ultimately migrate to the western countries.

Few studies have also reflected on the vulnerability of South Asian women in the US labour market and the problems they have encountered. Shah (1998) states: "Among the 1960s era educated Indian immigrants, there is evidence that the relative success of some of the women has been because they have worked longer and harder than their white counterpart. Asian-American women were found to work more hours per year and more consistently through their life cycle, regardless of family circumstances than white women. They were also found to receive lower economic returns than white women with comparable educational backgrounds."

Oishi (2005) has done major work on migration in Asia. Her work shows how despite sharing the same social cultural characteristics countries show different attitudes towards women migration. Her analysis shows that along with structural factors women's migration is shaped by social legitimacy and social acceptance. Countries which have more liberal attitudes towards women's labour force participation send higher numbers of women migrants. In the case of Pakistan and Bangladesh, unlike the case of Sri Lanka, India and Nepal, where poverty and high unemployment have triggered off fairly large-scale female migration, oppressive gender structures may be hindering female mobility (Thimothy and Saikumar, 2012).

Trafficking and Migration for Sex Work

Trafficking, especially in women and in children, is a significant concern on the agenda of governments and non-government actors globally in particular in South Asia. Women from

the region mainly trafficked for the purpose of sex trafficking. Within the region India has become a major destination of trafficked women and girls from the poorer countries such as Bangladesh and Nepal. Women were also trafficked to middle east and South East Asian countries.

Denis Wright in *Forced Labour, Trafficking and Migration of Women in South Asia* (2007) argued that there is inter-linkage between trafficking, migration and forced labour of women in South Asia. He argued that with globalization there is shift in the world labour market with demand for cheap labour. This demand has facilitated great deal to the rise of trafficking, illegal and forced movement of labour in South Asia. Legal route is difficult because of financial and education considerations. The women in order to leave the patriarchal situation prefer to stay in exploitative situation. Blanchet (2006) studied the supply chain which caters to the demand of women for marriage in female deficit area of North Indian State of UP.

Crawford (2010) provides a feminist perspective to understand the trafficking in Nepal. She argues that trafficking in Nepal goes beyond structural explanations like poverty, unemployment and women's low status in society. She argues that other power dynamics presence in the nepalese society like caste, class are integrated elements of the problem of trafficking in women. She also criticized the anti trafficking efforts in the region which is influenced by the morality stand and also often women's right to migrate for work particularly sex work.

Women left behind

Gulati (1993) found that women play active role along with other family members in decision of men to migrate. Initially there is dependence for management of funds, repayment of loans, and for funds for care of dependent members of family. But as the time passes women become more self-dependent and take responsibility of household, education, and health needs. This process breaks down women's isolation, increases their mobility, and brings them into contact with a wider network of institutions that are outside her experience. This results in their gaining confidence in themselves with the length of the stay of the migrant away from home. There are few problems but women generally overcome such issues. In this

family and other networks, including religious networks, play a generally supportive role. But the major effort is usually that of the women immediately affected in coping with the absence of male support.

Conclusion

In academics, migration for large part was seen as gender neutral concept. But the experience of women migrants needs separate attention as due to its complexities the whole process is gendered. The structured gender inequalities make women's experience different from men. The number of women migrants is now almost half of the total world migrants. The space rendered to them in writings on migration is inadequate.

Similar is the experience of women from South Asia who are already a vulnerable group in society. They have got limited space in academic writing on South Asian migration. In most cases they have been perceived as dependent migrants. Due to this in popular parlance it is presumed that women are either migrating as dependants or are trafficked. Thus their migration experience is built around unimportant to victim-hood. Further, it is presumed that women who migrate to the western world get empowered. To certain extent this is true but the migration to alien land without the traditional support system of family also brings new challenges. The recent writings of some of the scholars have tried to portray the experience of South Asian women in western countries. Moreover, they have found space in literature and cinema. These academic writings are limited to aspects of cultural negotiation, identity formation, adjustment to new environment and domestic violence. They have not been able to track the growth of migration of South Asian women, their heterogeneity in terms of ethnicity, education, economic status, participation in labour force, etc. Thus, lack of researches has left large scope for presumptions.

Theoretical construct model of migration & gender is built on researches of white and black feminists. But South Asian case is variant. Migration started in 1990s at higher pace. Most migration in gendered roles. Thus different approach is required to understand migration from South Asian point of view. There is concern for these so-called dependent women (who

work in family owned units without remuneration), single women who migrate for education or for work, issues of domestic violence in alien land where its understanding is different, search for identity etc.

Migration of South Asian women is mostly in traditional gendered roles of house maids, nurses, etc. In these areas their reproductive role is re-emphasised. The experiences of women in these roles and their vulnerabilities, experiences are not well documented. Further, there is state supported policy for providing training to prepare women in Nepal & Sri Lanka for these roles. This is due to large scale dependence of economy without understanding the implications of re-emphasising of traditional roles in alien set-up has made women vulnerable. The women are driven by poverty, unemployment, lack of adequate compensation in home country to migrate. The whole process of migration from decision making to migrate to actual migration is gendered. Women in reproductive age group from traditional background are preferred. They learn no skill set. Thus after few years they are unemployable and sent back. They leave back family and complete support system at home to migrate. Efforts have been made by state to provide training to perform genders role. But no effort to provide support system to migrants after they return.

Various other factors limit the research work on the International Migration of women in the region. Among them data availability is a major issues Due to the social cultural shame attached to the issue there is lack of clear data on the extent of trafficking in the region. Also same is situation on researches on migration for work mostly in case of intra-regional migration of women for work. Many Bangladeshi domestic women workers are illegal migrants in India thus they try to hide their identity. Many Nepali women migrant workers work in the secret sex industry in India.

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