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Towards contextualised, disaggregated and intersectional understandings of migration in India

Priya Deshingkar

New patterns of mobility are continuously shaping and being shaped by macro processes of liberalisation and capitalism on the one hand and local processes embedded in culture, class, ethnicity and race on the other hand. India is no exception and new transregional alliances as well as actors and institutions are shaping the “power geometry” (Massey, 1993) of migration by determining who migrates, why, where and under what circumstances. There has been an increase in certain forms of migrant labour such as construction work, care work and industrial labour or, what Sassen (2001) calls the “real work” of modern societies.

But these new configurations of mobility, particularly those of poorer social groups are inadequately addressed in migration theory and policy in India. Part of the reason for this is that theories have not been revisited based on emerging empirical evidence. Another reason is the scalar politics of migration that invisibilises the poor and their experiences of migrant labour markets. In other words state and its institutions in India have different approaches to different categories of migrants according to their socio-spatial positioning; the uneducated poor, whose journeys are mainly local or into peripheral spaces, have not received the same attention as the educated classes who move longer distances into formal jobs and urban centres. It can be speculated that the underlying causes for these differences are closely linked to caste, tribe, religion and gender-based power relations. A third reason is the tendency of the public and policy discourse on migration into low-paid work to draw on cross-sectional analysis at a single point in time rather than taking into account longitudinal dynamics over the life-course of migrants.

There is a need to challenge these perceptions with new evidence on the specificities of migration through contextualised and intersectional analyses. With this objective in mind, this commentary discusses emerging evidence about the experience of migrant construction workers. Such migration is of huge current significance all over the world and also in India. Construction work and brick kiln work together employ millions of adults worldwide and, according to WIEGO (2016) at least 30 million in India. The significance of this work derives from the fact that it is abundantly available in larger towns and cities and barriers to entry are low; formal education is not needed.

I start with the conceptual underpinnings that are often employed in the Indian discourse on migration for construction work and how these convey a lopsided view of migration. One example is the concept of “footloose labour” (Breman, 1996), a term coined to describe disenfranchised workers driven out by collapsing agriculture only to be exploited by urban capitalists. Another term that is often used in India to describe such migration is “distress migration” (Breman, 1978; Keshri & Bhagat, 2010) based on the notion that it is driven by rural distress. Finally, the employment of most construction workers in the urban informal sector is also viewed as a failure of development based on theories such as the Haris-Todaro model and dependency theories which fear that informal sector employment further

entrenches poverty rather than reducing it (for a discussion of these concepts see Ghani & Kanbur, 2013, p. 17; GOI, 2008). These concepts portray migrants as victims of failed development without any agency. But conversations with migrants show that their experiences do not fit neatly into such conceptualisations. There are a host of complex social and economic reasons for migrating into construction work including better earning prospects (higher incomes, more regular work and the ability to remit money home) as well as the desire to experience urban lifestyles and become a modern person. Escaping caste dynamics in rural societies and preferring the relatively anonymous work environment in urban areas is also a commonly cited reason (Shah, 2006; Deshingkar & Akter, 2009). While poverty is no doubt a proximate driver, many migrants feel that migrating to urban areas offers them chances for positive change and a move away from being trapped in agriculture and rural societies. Migrants' perspectives of where they are coming from and where they are going to highlight other reasons for accepting such work as well. For women such migration can be an effort to break away from gender-based restrictions that cannot be overthrown *in situ*. For example, interviews with Muslim men and women at construction sites revealed that they had migrated because women are not allowed to work outside the home in their villages and they would have to depend on one income alone (personal communication, December 2007).

That there are multiple risks and vulnerabilities is not in doubt. A majority of construction workers and labour migrants in general are uninsured against risk, unable to access state welfare programmes or social protection and prone to injury and death at worksites. One shock can set the household back to a position that is worse than where it started from. But it is important to recognise that these risks and vulnerabilities are symptomatic of a state that is uninformed and unsympathetic to migrants. The systematic exclusion of migrants is also symptomatic of the power dynamics of labour markets where employers are not afraid of the law and flout labour regulations with impunity.

Linked to this are the scalar politics of migration where the activities and power dynamics in the spaces occupied by the poor remain invisible and undifferentiated in national statistics and policy. For example the Indian census does not provide information on temporary and seasonal migration in which the poor and lower castes and tribes are heavily represented and the National Sample Survey did not collect temporary migration data until 1999-2000. (Kesri & Bhagat, 2010). Furthermore, national statistics do not collect information on secondary occupations or break them down by actual caste and tribe and these blind spots in the data cause a misrepresentation of the relationship between migration and poverty (Deshingkar & Farrington, 2009). As De Haan and Yaqub (2009, p. 1) note "Much of the migration of the poorest is not seriously recognized, and nor are major categories of the poorest migrants." Indeed both theory and policy reflect a very crude understanding of the functionings of labour markets for poor migrants. A construction worker is not seen as a person with a distinct caste, regional or gender identity, despite the existence of ample empirical evidence which shows that construction workers are a highly differentiated group with specific communities being preferred for specific tasks such as the Vaddis from Chittoor who are recognised as skilled stone workers, the workers from Mahabubnagar who are preferred by recruitment agents for dam building or the rod-benders from Orissa who command a greater price than local workers in many cities (Farrington, Deshingkar, Johnson & Start, 2006; Shah, 2006). Women have extremely limited prospects for acquiring skills in construction and are routinely paid less than men because they are perceived as physically weak and unable to learn in the same

way as men. Tribals and Dalits are often employed in brick kilns where the working conditions and terms of remuneration are arguably worse than regular building work. Here too the discursive construction of their identities “lazy”, “alcoholics” and “needing to be controlled” justify the exploitative patterns of recruitment and work. These examples illustrate how social constructs of identity and capability can have a profound bearing on the type of work that a worker is perceived to be able to do, the conditions in which they are employed and their prospects for changing their lives. Yet theory, policy and statistics treat them as an undifferentiated mass, without any understanding of the power dynamics that are mediated by class, caste, gender and tribe.

Finally, human rights and moral discourses on low paid migration, which are increasingly influencing policy, have tended to view the drivers and outcomes of migration in a cross-sectional way rather than taking a long-term perspective. This results in a focus on the proximate causes of migration and working conditions at destination without an examination of the outcomes over a period of time. The characteristics of such work that are typically highlighted in this discourse include low wages, insecure terms of employment without written contracts, lack of insurance against risk and inadequate protection by the state. This is at odds with the accounts of poor migrants who enter such exploitative work as a trade-off: harsh working conditions and poor pay are accepted in order to build up assets and invest in education and other poverty reducing uses to put the household on an upward trajectory in the future. It is very common to hear migrants saying “I am doing this so that my children can get an education and not become manual labourers themselves”. Not everyone is fortunate enough to do this - the poorest migrants who take their families with them are failed by the state as they cannot access education in the city. This failure of governance arguably has its roots in the negative approach to migration which is driven by faulty concepts and a poor understanding of migration dynamics.

The recruitment of construction workers has also been highly controversial and viewed with great suspicion by researchers and development practitioners alike. Construction workers are often recruited from poor and remote regions by an organised migration industry consisting of multiple tiers of agents (Picherit, 2009; Mosse, Gupta & Shah, 2005). Recruitment against advances – or debt migration is seen as a trap putting the migrant in a continuous cycle of borrowing and repaying. The chain of agents is often so long and complex that the workers might never meet their employer or know who he is. Recruitment agents have a high degree of control over living and working conditions as well as remuneration and are thus in a powerful position. Stories of exploitation and mistreatment of migrant construction workers are highlighted in the press. Each layer of intermediary takes a cut of the migrant’s salary and it is for this reason that they have been maligned as traders in human flesh. It is not uncommon to hear in migration conferences around the country “we should eliminate the middleman”.

Here too the accounts of the migrant workers show a different aspect of the process. For many of the socially excluded communities who migrate through agents, accessing large sums of money through the formal banking system is almost impossible. The lack of collateral, identity documents and previous loan histories are some of the problems they face. Also banks typically do not lend for weddings, religious pilgrimages and other social purposes which are enormously important in their meaning systems as markers of status.

While migrants are aware of the exploitation by agents they also recognise that they cannot source work without them and view it as a necessary cost that must be met now in order to secure a better future for themselves and their children.

In conclusion, a different approach is needed to understanding labour migration in India. There is a need for policy to be informed by emerging evidence on the specificities of migration configurations in different contexts across the country. Due attention needs to be paid to the intersectional dynamics of migration, recognising the role of social differentiators and discourses in shaping the outcomes of migration. There is also a need to consider temporalities in the analysis of migration which recognises the importance of time as well as spatial dynamics, and finally there is a need for political commitment to understanding the types of migration that the poor engage in and working on ways to support them in their struggle for a better future.

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