

Metamorphosis of the Migrant

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This paper is designed to do two things. First, it will try to bring together a number of different case studies, from different locations in India, and elsewhere in the subcontinent, by way of providing empirical details necessary to substantiate the larger argument made in the panel. In doing so, it will draw upon both primary research, based on ethnography and fieldwork by the presenter, and secondary literature, borrowing from research done by other scholars in the field, especially in the context of other Asian countries. The overall aim here will be to draw out certain commonalities or parallels showing the construction of new and composite migrant identities, that combine elements of past with elements of belonging to a new context, which are often held together in a palpable tension. The second objective of the paper is to tease out the larger theoretical implications of the case studies presented by the other papers in this panel: Besides the reconfiguration of the migrant identity, this will include unpacking the new historical conditions that make it necessary for the migrant to undergo what is being described as a metamorphosis. The paper will explore two different dimensions of these conditions, with the help of immediate examples provided by other papers in the panel. These involve looking into the recent changes in the economic and political dimensions that are germane to the process under study. We will specifically discuss how the new modes and spaces of labour and consumption introduced by globalization have created a place for accommodating the migrant in the service sector in a manner that commodifies and incentivizes her migrant identity. At the same time, the paper will briefly analyse how the logic of electoral and political mobilizations, propelled by populism, pushes increasingly towards certain forms of biological, racial and communitarian interpellation rather than anonymous citizenship. The changes taking place in these two spheres need to be perceived in the light of the technologically mediated current ecology of cultural representations, with the framings and adjustments that are made possible by this ecology, which will be illustrated with instances. It is in keeping with these larger structural conditions, the paper wants to contend, that one must locate the transformations of the migrant identity. By way of conclusion the paper will speculate on the larger implications of rethinking the figure of the migrant and what it means for democratic politics at home and in the world today. The speculations will include possibilities of thinking progressive transnational solidarities as well as global networks of support for conservative regimes to come.