

Title : Labour Migration and its Social Impact on Post-Soviet Tajikistan : An Overview Along Cinematic Lenses

The issue of migration from different parts of erstwhile USSR to other parts of the world is a common phenomenon ever since the rupture of the Soviet Union in the final decade of the previous century. However, this outmigration is a common phenomenon for the entire Soviet bloc including Russia and East Europe where the lure of a liberal choice had been an apparent and obvious expectation along with attraction of a higher standard of life. In case of Tajikistan, as it is observed and analysed for the last few decades, the situation is markedly distinctive and acute so far the characteristic trends and features of migration is concerned. The smallest of all post-Soviet republics, this Central Asian state had experienced the pressure of economic challenge from the very onset of her independent journey. A land which marked the highest inertia to succumb to the intra-regional migration during the Soviet days had succumbed to the demand of survival by accepting migration to Russia as wage labourers. The remittance received through this process provides a sizable share of the state income and help sustain the traditional family –households in the rural set-ups. This process of migration leads to endless difficulties and challenges to the migrant population in the unknown surroundings where their human rights, dignity, health and moral values are somehow, compromised. On the other, the family which are left behind, comprised of women, children and the elderly, undergo endless miseries, uncertainty and insecurity. Its visible fallout are present in the lopsided gender balance in the family, children brought up with the mothers, and/ or grand-parents causing enormous challenge of upbringing and over and above, the remittance, the money for which the entire challenges are pulled through, often prove to be too irregular and inadequate and not worth such sacrifice on either side. Still, this phenomenon remains a *fait accompli*, a vicious cycle which neither the state, nor the society could either succumb or fully reject.

However, Tajik films, from the very onset of its independent journey had addressed this issue and represented the trauma and tragedy imbedded in the process of labour migration and highlighted the loss it entails in terms of human values. The push and pull factors active behind this migration process is simple economic need. However, the economic migration in its procedural paraphernalia actually contains a number of socio-political, psycho-social and socio-cultural ramifications that the society in both the host land and the immigrant members experience. Experiencing through the cinematic lenses, each of these perspectives emerge as integral part of a very complex process at work where the helplessness of the people involved from various trajectories receive special attention – the storylines move to and fro between the fuzzy zone of dark realism and imagined authenticity. Of course, like every migration, as a process, not only carry the narrative of migration itself but also add into the meta narratives of initiative, agency and enterprise linked with the push factors and pull factors. However, seen from the perspectives of the cinematic representation, this paper needs to restrict itself within frame of representational art and their visual narratives. One interesting feature, common in all the films of concern, is remarkable absence of the details of the lived experiences of the migrant workers in Russia, mostly in Moscow, St. Peter's Burg and some other cities where the construction in the housing industry was ever expanding since the end of the USSR. It was either the lack of opportunity to shoot the films in the host land for various technical, physical and financial reasons, or, because of the overwhelming desire to

concentrate on the trajectories in the native land , in different rural settlements of Tajikistan, that the film directors, across categories refrained from showing much details about the life of the emigrant Tajiks serving as the labour force in the Russian land. However, each films under discussion had subtle yet distinct indication about the difficulties, distress, insecurity , humiliation and hardship entailed in the experience of the emigrants – who mostly were serving as seasonal labourers for the necessary sustenance of their family life. The protagonists, whether a hard-core mafia, or a prisoner of false allegation , or a victim of AIDs due to impure blood contamination each were seen from the wider lenses of victimhood. The same mind-set had guided the film makers’ conscience to develop their own story lines overwhelmingly focussing on the vacuum left by the immigrants in their homeland. These films , created across the two decades of the independent existence of the nascent nation , actually framed their narratives to reflect upon the victimhood on both ends – those who left the family behind and also those families which had to cope up without the presence of the major bread winners. Immigration of the full family hardly occurred in cases of this categories while there are narratives of immigration of the full families as well, for more white collar jobs into Russia and other first world states and they too carry the pangs of loss and keep a trail of vacuum for their country , their representations are yet to be featured in the creative Tajik mindscape to represent as protagonists in the films. It is ,therefore, those migration from the rural sectors, which invariably had caused some or other kind of rupture in the family structure and destroyed the balance and harmony of the traditional village abode , received special attention from the film makers of the new genre. This paper would like to address and investigate the nature of these films, some very remarkable ones, which had their unique representation in the understanding of migration as a process and addressed the indigenous Tajik society in distress from the perspectives of the family , left behind- the women, the children and the elders.

This paper would like to see this entire process through the cinematic lenses and locate as to how these film makers are actually trying to showcase a set of issues linked with this broader phenomenon of migration that leads to a never-ending flow of crises that the society silently undergo and the state simply fail to handle. The paper will also try to focus as to how the approaches of these film directors are changing along the decades and genres they belonged and represented. The paper would like to develop its arguments along the following films (but will not necessarily confine to these alone) :

- a) Frishte Kifti Rosht – Jamshed Usmanov – a film made on and for international platform (2002)
- b) Ovara – Gulandam Mohabbatova and Daler Rakhmatov- a film made with amateurish technological standard reaching huge success for its humane appeal (2005)
- c) Taqvimi Intezorii- Safarbek Soliyev – a film made with remarkable documentation about migration and taking up Russia and Russians as a part of migration process (2005)
- d) Tangno – a film by Muhiddin Muzaffar to critically analyse and understand the ever complex phenomenon from perspectives of each incumbents (2018)
- e) Ant – Rustam Orifi - a film made by a Tajik immigrant worker himself where he had captured the stories of immigrant labourers through the sharp allegories of ants through his experimental lenses (2013)

Each film conceived and created within Tajikistan had enormous challenges of funding and infrastructure, yet, some of them, as mentioned above could capture attention of international audiences and received acknowledgement for the quality of their cinematic components. However, this paper would like to take up a journey along these movies to find as to how and how far the real life challenge had been represented on the reel and the sharp and poignant questions raised through the narratives, visuals and allegories. In fact, the films, taken from the very onset of the current century till the very recent times are to locate the continuity and change, if any, in the process of migration and its understanding, acceptance, rejection and denial in the indigenous Tajik society.

Unemployment and Labour Migration as Major Demographic Feature of Post-Soviet Tajikistan

The problem of unemployment, migration and social imbalance were the acute challenges that Tajik state faced as a successor nation of post-Soviet Central Asia. A society, which had never been highly competitive, and moreover, was stagnant for more than two decades, produced easy going men for whom sustaining family life was not a big challenge. The shift in the economy had driven the society into severe imbalance. Moreover, a protracted civil war over the control of power for almost the whole decade of independence had dilapidated whatever economic infrastructure it had inherited as the raw material producing zone for the Soviet command economy. The initial decade of independence was therefore, indecisive, unsure and vacillating for the new state and uncertain, insecure and ever demanding for its people.

The acute economic impasse after the collapse of the command economy gave way to the outflow of able bodied youth, mainly men, that came up as a grave concern and had its reflection in many significant international platforms. The causal origin of this trend that acted as a survival strategy for the common people, especially the rural population in this small land covered with mountain terrain lies with the lack of employment opportunity and meagre salary structure within the existing employment opportunities. (Abbas, 2007 : 41, UNICEF, 2011) The issue of labour migration is actually answered through a series of interlinked questions, namely -unemployment, migration, remittance, social security and gender balance in the context of post-Soviet Tajik rural society. The films taken into consideration have addressed the complexity of migration and its fall out in the lived experience of the rural society as the new century began to unfold its opportunities and challenges to the newly acquired independence of this Central Asian state. In fact, before delving into the cinematic representation of the issue, one needs to reckon with certain very significant characteristic of the region and its new trend towards out migration. During the Soviet era, when all the fifteen republics were under one supra-national canopy and movement within the USSR was not difficult for its citizens, the rural zone of Inner Asia was the most averse to move out of their social roots, preferred to remain clustered around family and kinsfolks. The ethnographic research of the late Soviet era had mentioned as to how this tendency of the Tajik rural belt had been problematic to mobilise labour forces from this region to white Russia or other labour intensive territories. Ironically, the same region had developed a trend towards out migration when it is both difficult and legally hazardous to go through the processes of movements. Secondly, meticulous investigation through the data on migration records reveal a marked discrepancy in the nature of employments in native country and in the land of emigration. Qualified professionals as teachers and doctors are

forced to opt for jobs of skilled and unskilled labourers in different cities of Russia. It is in the masonry that a large number of the Tajik migrant people work as seasonal labour force in order to sustain their families back home. The process therefore unfolds a multi-layered tragic consequences. The migration is taking place not to pursue any dream for a better life, mostly, it is the only practical way of survival. Moreover, degradation in the professional standard has its obvious impact upon the persons concerned and adds to the sense of humiliation and frustration for a group of able bodied youth. The insecurity of their own lives, standard of living, uncomfortable life away from family and a sense of distance and humiliation in the eyes of the host nation makes the challenges grow endless. The life of the family that remains behind undergoes even more acute distress and challenges. The families lacking able bodied youth develop a strange lopsided balance between the elderly and the minors. It is the women who often need to bear the entire brunt of the families with their men living away from home. The failure of agro-economy to absorb and support the rural population remains the gravest lacuna that leads to the out flow of migration. The impact of this process on the society the lopsided gender balance and its impact upon the children and elderly had been addressed by each of the film directors with a sensible, sensitive poignancy.

In fact, each of these films had indicated the threat to the traditional family structures, their ruptures and disjuncture that impact the society as a whole in comparison to the material gains that remittance brings to sustain and upgrade the standard of life. Each of these films posed a long term perspective on the sustainability and cohesiveness of the rural society where migration appears as a temporary, unnatural and problematic process along with its own baggage of complexities.

The reflections of the migration issue and its multi-layered ramifications had become a matter of grave concern among the upcoming film directors of this land of great cultural inheritance.

The films, created on different perspectives of this matter of major concern brought a further palpability and humane touch in the understanding of the problem and its impact upon the Tajik society and culture while the state seems to be complacent with the remittance it receives from the income of the immigrant labours.

Jamshed Usmanov & His Firishte Kifti Rosht (Artcam International, Asht Village, Fabrica, Rai Cinemafiction, Televisione Svizzera Italiana (TSI), Ventura Film, Tajikistan, France, Switzerland, Italy, 2002)

However, one very interesting coincidence of the time was the unfolding of globalization and the opening of the republics to the outer world – an experience, rather restricted for the common Soviet citizens, or even for the intellectuals and artists. While the state and society were undergoing seamless distress and difficulties, yet, this hard time had also opened up new scope for aspiring and adventurous artists, writers and film makers to explore the world beyond the Soviet perimeter. This out migration was a trend to explore new scope to represent the identity of Central Asia, so far overshadowed by the Russian hegemonic tendency. Some of the early film makers, extremely talented and aspiring for a high quality, world class creations had moved out of Tajikistan and settled in the first world. One such

remarkable character was Jamshed Usmanov, who had settled in France, but made films by and for the Tajik land and people in the initial years of his career.

After the end of civil war it was not easy for Tajikistan to recover her dilapidated economy and social discipline. One can find the rise of mafia gangs as a new social category of all post-soviet society. Tajikistan was no exception. But, there are women and children in the life of these mafia as well. The compromise they go through, yet the principles they hold on to, have been depicted in the film *Firishtey Kifti Rost* through a very subtle moral discourse. Here a mother of a mafia is the central woman character who represented a lost genre of social values, replaced by the corrupt reality of time. Jamshed Usmonov, the director, made his own mother and brother act in the two key roles of his films, yet bagged significant awards and received international acclaim. There are, however, strange common underpinnings in both the Tajik director's works. Jamshed too based his story in the economically battered Tajikistan and depicted Russia as an alien land with endless supplies of evils. This too is a story of transcendence on different layers. *Humro*, was the nonchalant, non repentant negative hero of the story who returned from Russia to see his ailing mother. Here, the role of the mother is largely symbolic, who tried to bring back the good senses in her son. The Islamic fable of Angel on the right creates the ethical backdrop to judge *Humro's* actions once he was back home where he was instantly chased by old enemies and inescapable debts on the one hand and the ailing mother and a little son about whom he was not aware in his Moscow life. While *Humro* made a to and fro between being dutiful son and a slowly growing responsible father, the bonding between the grandmother and the little boy created a very optimistic emotional atmosphere. While as mother the old lady tricked her son to repair the house, especially the entrance gate, as grandmother she confided all her plans about her coming death and funeral ceremony in a most serious, matter of fact manner. The story of the Angels on the right and left shoulders had been narrated by the grandmother to the little boy on the night of her death, that symbolized and explained the link between the title of the film and fable-like story. At least, she could make a ceremonious funeral procession as she dreamt of. But immediately after her demise, the house had to be put to sale to relieve *Humro* all his debts. He makes his journey back to Moscow, but this time along with his son, who carried the message of his grandmother, to be a good man. But they left behind another vulnerable soul, a nurse to his mother whom *Humro* consummated many times, but he refused to look back any more, lest she would be another added baggage in his uncertain life back in the alien land.....

The mother here, symbolized the eternal Central Asian spirit that believes in simple morals – though fails as mother but leaves the message of ultimate truth to the grandson. The fate of the nurse, consciously ignored by the hero and at the face of cruel indifference of the rest of the society undoubtedly implied the position of women in general in a land of acute gender imbalance. Thus, though the parable of Angel claims water tight compartments between good and bad acts, “Usmonov refuses to paint his characters in black and white terms, according a sense of mystery to the motivations and actions of mother and son, right down to the final shot.” (Reviewed by Tom Dawson, Updated 04 November 2004, BBC)

Ovara and Taqvimi Intezorii

(Mohabbatova , Gulandam, Rakhmatov Daler, Ovara(The wonderer), Tajkisan, 2005.,Soliev, Safarbek, Taqvimi Intezori(Calendar of Longing), Tajikistan, 2006)

Other than this internationally acclaimed film with global funding, some films in miserably low budget were made within Tajikistan as subtle yet poignant representation of the crisis. Migration came as a fait accompli for the Tajik state and society, an easy way out to resolve the basic problem of unemployment and a ready and quick solution for the crumbling family structures. The embarrassment of the state for the failure in providing its people is somewhat covered by the laws and regulations created and control measures put forward in the movement regulations. However, as successor nations, movement within amongst the post-Soviet states are simpler and less hazardous in terms of legal paraphernalia. However, there are endless situation of lapse in the legal parameter in case of the emigrant labourers not always with any evil design, but due to practical and genuine causes. The films hinted at the irregularity and uncertainty of the migrants scope of returning /visiting home and family and the agonies and pains related to that as a collective churning for each members of the family left behind. (Personal interview of the author with one of the directors, Daler Rakhmat, Dushanbe, Tajikistan 30th September, 2013)The films under discussion in this segment had focussed on this very painful longing for a rejuvenation and received huge recognition for sensitizing the crisis not only within Tajikistan, but for the entire post-Soviet cultural space.

Safarbek Soliev's "Calendar of Longing" "Taqvimi Intezori" or "Calendar of Expectation" narrates a story of a Tajik family in a remote village and addresses a number of issues that worries the post-Soviet Tajik society in general, like the issue of migration that keeps the villages without young males, the stake of the elderly people who are only bundle of memories of an imposed system of the past and the hapless children deprived of usual parental affection and guidance. One remarkable message of this film is that Russia did not always remain the alien other, to the indigenous society. The character of Ira ,an ethnic Russian married to a Tajik family living in harmony, and continuing her own faith is a remarkable representation of syncretism within the traditional Central Asian milieu. Her life evolving in absence of her husband counting down the calendar provides the main theme of the film and highlights the most telling socio-economic issue of post-soviet Tajik village life. And the little daughter is also a remarkable representation of gender in her formative phase who tried in her innocent way to reduce her mother's suffering by ticking out all the dates in the calendar to reach the day of her father's return . The eternal mother-daughter bonding had been represented in a subtle positive note in a society that suffered from imbalance and insecurity in gender equation. The film also has a broader canvas where a Russian visitor Victor comes to pay homage to his father's grave, who lived there in Soviet era and helped in the civic constructions. Thus ,Russians did not necessarily, represent alien or evils in this film, although they remain a kind of benefactors from above, as claimed in most Soviet pro-government literature. (Personal interview of the author with one of the directors, Safarbek Soliyev, Dushanbe, Tajikistan 2nd October, 2013)

However, Rashmi Doraiswami noticed a general trend towards highlighting the plight of the children and the elderly generation in films of this genre. “The world of the aged is fragile. So too are the worlds of children. There are films being made on children in the republics that conjure up their happiness and sorrow, and the cross they have to bear in a complicated world adults built for them.” (Doraiswami, 2010 : 384-385)

A very touchy representation of this emotional crisis of the children is depicted in a film titled “ Ovara”, made by Gulandom Muhabbatova and Daler Rakhmatov- a unique mother-son team of directors. Although treated quite unsympathetically by the film critic Michael Roulant in Kinokultura, for its low budget and melodramatic acting, this film made a deep imprint in contemporary Tajik spectators for its humane essence and the emotional message it carried. It is also a film set in a village where all the able bodied male are away for livelihood. So life goes on in a slow pace with the elderly people managing the children of the village while the young women managing the everyday need of the family. Here once again the strong and committed grandmother is represented as a pillar to sustain the home and the grandchildren at the absence of the father /son. She took all the initiative for the circumcision of the little boy and carried out the process under all ensuing challenges. But all her suppressed pains and agonies were vented out when she saw a young mother of the village sending her son to a boarding school. Presence of young maidens, both married and unmarried represented a traditional society which is not inherently orthodox , but undoubtedly based on common gender hierarchy. The helplessness of the grand- father in the film, also represents a lost genre – he who lost his eyesight in an accident, could only entertain the village kids by playing his accordion . Abdullo, the child hero of the film is reared up by the grand-parents, in absence of his own parents. He kept moving about the village, like a wonderer , hence the title of the film “Ovara” , after the Bollywood milestone of 1954. (Rajagopalan ,2008 : 112) But there is an emotional vacuum in the child, who deep within misses his father and anxiously waits for his return. Anyway, as the story unfolded one could see the fate of this man (the father) in a Russian jail. The film hinted a chance of false allegation as well implying the vulnerability of the immigrant Tajik workers in Russia. The story unfolded a simple story of longing of a child for his father while, the narrative remained silent about the absence of the mother. One must reckon with the fact that child birth became a matter of grave challenge during the civil war period when many of the labouring mothers died due to lack of proper maternity care, The responsibility of the upbringing of the child rested entirely with the grand parents. And since the grand father lost his eye sight, it was the grand mother who performed all necessary practical responsibilities for the growing child. It was she who tried to organise his circumcision +by selling one of the family cattle , a favourite pet of Abdullojon , the child protagonist. The father of the child was not only absent, he failed his promise of sending back money for organising the ceremony. The grand mother was depicted as a strong matriarch who was not only rearing up the child , but also , a self-imposed guardian for the entire village. One such incidence had been depicted by the directors where a tendency of young mothers to send off their children to charitable homes (incapable of managing the growing child all alone)had been strongly admonished by this elderly lady. This is a vivid description of a traditional village life at the crossroad of multiple challenges and an utmost attempt by the old generation to hold back to the traditional norms and practices, in spite of the all out changes and challenges taking place right in front of them.

Tangno and Ant : Creations of a Different Generation

(Tangno “ Narrow” , Muhiddin Muzaffar, Tajikistan, 2017

“Ant”, Rustam Orifi, Tajikistan, 2013)

In reality, the position of the Tajik workers in Russian land remains vulnerable and insecure from both legal and material perspectives. This position did not improve much even after a series of negotiations taking place between the host nation and the supplier of the labour force. That is further iterated in the comparatively new film Tangno by Muhiddin Muzaffar, made in 2018, slightly before the inroad of the pandemic era. Tangno has marked similarities with Ovara to a large extent, starting from the story line to the treatment of each protagonists, the two films , created in two different decades , by two different directors carry huge resemblance. The issues it had addressed are also very similar. However, the spirit of the film is more intense and tragic while Ovara had a sad humour dusted along its myriad pathways. In Tangno , the protagonist boy also was eligible for his circumcision (just like Abdullojon in Ovara) as it is common in the village life of the Tajik society, but cannot undergo the ceremony as his father failed to bring enough money for the occasion. His melancholy as a lonely boy, kept as out-cast from his own herd that ultimately pushed him towards self-destruction , crates the climactic point of the film. However, the crisis had been salvaged by the collective cooperation of the members of the village , across gender, age and social status. However, the narrative had been further stretched to depict the double edged tragedy of the mother of the adolescent protagonist. She was shown to be adventurous enough to go in search of her husband to Russia and apparently to find him with a new family. However, although the narrative of the cinema posed this as a misunderstanding between an estranged couple, in reality, such break with the families often take place as the unwilling youth shift away from their traditional home abode and try to adjust with the lonely city life with new partners of various temporary conjugality. Tangno , thus, somehow harped further on the same points, iterating the same challenges with much deeper strokes. That neither the state nor the society could address the issue enough ever since 2005 to 2018 – the issue remained the same or had furrowed much deeper wound in the heart of the traditional rural mind-set.

The last film of this theme, although not chronologically the latest , is a powerful allegorical narrative of the immigrant labourers as ants. The vulnerability, helplessness and sensitivity of the migrant people as against the lopsided power balance of the employers of the host nation had been depicted with compelling metaphors in this work. Most significantly , this film is made by an immigrant worker himself, Rushtam Orifi and thus comes up as the first self-representational film in this sphere. (George Butler Gantee, Joseph Shottenfeld, Tajikistan : “Ant” Ia a Movie About Ants – Or Is It ?” , July 7, 2016,pulitzer.org) Like most allegorical stories, this too ends with a poetic justice where an ant bite ultimately leads to a calamity for the perpetrator (a boy lacking humane quotient and subtler sensibility) . The message in the film is firm and direct – that as obscure and insignificant as ants, the immigrant labourers feel the humiliation and have their anger bouts too which may turn sharp and lethal at a strategic moment and teach the perpetrator a lesson of his life.

Although appearing immature or amateurish, each of these films have their own language of protest. A language well understood and internalised by the society in transition. A realisation of the experience of hierarchy and dominance, suffering and torment , dislocation and dysfunctional family rhythm had been acknowledged as obvious outcome of the process , although there is yet any alternative provided or experimented to get rid of it.

Towards a Murky Horizon : A Journey Inconclusive

The question of labour migration from Tajik villages , although technically temporary, and not necessarily entirely illegal to begin with had its endless fallouts in the life of post-Soviet common citizen body. Although migration in various layers began to generate a new flow of movement within and outside the pale of the erstwhile Soviet state. In fact, there were a huge out migration of Russian population away from their homeland in search of a better and more lavish life towards the first world, be that in the USA or different parts of Europe. There were also out migration of other post-Soviet nationalities too following the footsteps of their Russian big brothers. However, the end of cold war and end of the Soviet system had created a steep fall in the image and position of Russia as a coveted destination. Never the less, the Tajik village youth found the answer to their challenges of unemployment and starvation in the dilapidated and desolated land of their former hegemon , the nucleus of the resigned superpower. The expansion of the Russian housing industries and other consumerist enterprises needed cheap and ready labour while, a large number of its ethnic nationals were queuing away to taste the capitalist flavour of the first world , an exuberance they were not allowed to taste on principle for ages, and many of them posed a secret desire to experience that in the world that remained forbidden zone so far. The hapless condition of the Tajik villagers were such that they came to fill the labour vacuum of the Russian republic under seamless distress and the trend that began just after the breakup of the system somehow continue to be in practice as a quick and practical solution for the state and society. Every aspect of the migration pattern, their characteristic features and forms attest their nature to be categorised under forced migration. The films under discussion act both as detailed documentation and the language of protest against the practice. The appeal of the films, created and showcased not only for the CIS countries, but also to the outer world tried to draw serious attention of the UNO and other significant international bodies of social justice. However, the films with their subtle and heartrending representation of human tragedies could act as serious propaganda against such a self-destructive practice and the initiatives went well acknowledged and had effectively appealed common human sensibility. The films acted as eye openers for many within and outside the region concerned and brought the talents of the film makers and artists of this rather obscure territories of the globe entrapped in a spell of poverty and powerless situation.

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