

Re-thinking media representation of migrant domestic workers in Bengali mainstream dailies during the pandemic: A feminist intervention

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Abstract

Migration is a dynamic and transformative process of human civilization. In contemporary neo-liberal socio-political and economic structure, one of the most complex and distinct migratory phenomena is the gendered migration of female labourers in urban spaces, as it is no longer a male-dominated linear process of analyzing socio-political movement. The definition of the term "migration" is ever-evolving as new incidents and events keep taking place every now and then, leaving a room for social scientists to evaluate. The sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent imposition of an unplanned lockdown nationwide has visibilized the exploitative, oppressive, and inhumane state/nature of the work culture of invisibilized migrant workers from unorganised and informal sectors through mainstream media representation and also has brought it to public discourse. The subject of the paper attempts to intervene at this juncture to re-think the mainstream media representation of the gendered migration of women workers, especially those engaged in domestic work, through an intersectional feminist lens.

The paper proposes to counter the very understanding of migration as a "malestream" process that blindly otherizes women or the gender factor as an active agent of migration concerning the popular idea of domestic work as a non-independent work. It has been perceived as an extra source of income to run the family that indelibly posits it as an auxiliary or additional to that of its male counterpart. Domestic workers face double challenges when it comes to representing their voice and demanding equal rights as a working class. It is certainly an identity as well as a humanitarian crisis. West Bengal is a state that has had a long history of migrants since partition. Kolkata, the metro city of West Bengal, is where thousands of domestic workers migrate from different rural areas of other districts of the state for work.

The research work tries to understand rather examine the language and politics of Bengali mainstream media representation through newspaper reporting and the formation of news discourse of the working-class, having intersected with gender and migration, that shapes the perceived reality of labour as a class in the public sphere. For conducting the study, five leading mainstream Bengali newspapers, such as Ananda Bazar Patrika, Ei Samay, Bartaman, Ganshakti,

and Sangbad Pratidin over the period of time, starting from March 2020 to December 2021, have been taken into consideration as a sample of the research work.

The communicative practice of mainstream mediation through representation interprets and dominates the process of signification of any socio-political event. The hegemony of news culture constitutes the news media as a central institution for representation and an establishment for engineering hegemonic consent of the elite class, the ruled. The Bengali news culture and the style of journalism frame the reality for its audience. To situate the problematic understanding of media language for class struggle and class movements for rights, the media framing analysis of class representation must be rechecked. The study also tends to understand and comment on the intricacies of governmentality, state of displacement, and gendered labour rights in Bengali mainstream media representation.