

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

Chapter One:

The politics of gender and informal work in mainstream mediation of pandemic-induced migration

The COVID-19 pandemic has apparently been a curtain raiser for the emerging migrant crisis in India, indicating as many factors going wrong as possible. However, a more just argument can point toward the fact that it has also been a real whistleblower to “other” prevalent and parallel problems and realities that have seemed to get suppressed under the media’s suddenly propagated meta-narrative of migrant crisis representation. Among the various devastating imageries spurting out of different corners of the country, the images of thousands of migrant workers taking to the streets on foot, trashing borders of their home states, and dying of exhaustion are some of the earliest indicators of a bigger humanitarian crisis that unabashedly nullifies the ever-replenishing narrative of development. It took a pandemic to expose the precarious condition of the informal labour market and the vulnerable, exploitative lives of migrant workers before the mass civil society and make a ruckus over it on front pages and prime times. At this juncture, it may seem that the whole phenomena have had its fair amount of mainstream media attention, but there are many questions including gender, working class, and politics of representation remain unanswered. It is certain that the whole game of media presentation and representation of those events requires re-examination and analysis to tap on the segments that have been absent, silenced, and otherized.

Gender, informal work, and migration

The pandemic has sparked the debate and discussion on migrant workers working in informal sectors. However, the question of gender at the intersection of labour and migration remained mostly unattended in both mainstream mediation and the public sphere (Fraser, 1990). The debate of two dominant feminist paradigms regarding conceptualizing and idealizing women’s work has been contributing to manifold research methods and analyses, the introspection of which in this segment, to understand the crisis of ideation of women’s work in mass mediation of the same is thoroughly required. The post-structuralist feminist stance in the post-modern turn of cultural transformation emphasizes the theorization of reality through linguistic construction of it as feminist theorists have often pointed out the power of language in constitutionalizing the socio-political location of a construction of an idea and perception. Whereas, the materialist

feminist analysis strongly criticizes it for allowing for the cultural turn (Safuta) engaging into what is termed as 'neo-liberal instrumentalism'. It is argued that the subordination of women's labour has a material base and is invariably attached to the political economy of a capitalist-patriarchal society (Safuta) as the materialist feminist analysis deploys the sexual division of labour analysis within the capitalist set-up and describes how the production relations of men and women work under the gendered redistribution of material resources (folbre). The linguistic pattern of explaining the nature of matter by default takes it under the cultural spectrum of the conceptualization of matter. Hence, in this light, it is imperative to focus on the lingo-cultural structure of the concept of women's work in relation to the capitalist social reproduction of the idea of the same as secondary, surplus, and non-independent in the public and private sphere. The intersectional approach to post-structuralist and materialist feminist methods will allow the paper to examine and analyse the structural inequalities of women's work and their subjective experiences in order to claim recognition. This will also help to break down the dominant idea of migrant workers and the popular yet silent exclusion of migrant women's paid domestic work.

Media as a framing tool for the formation of mass ideology

The question of media as a mere representation of realities has long been contested for its simplistic-linear and inept approach to looking at the functioning of media in mediating the symbolic meaning of an event. The semiotic analysis of mediated texts links the cultural reproduction of mediated ideas to the structuration of social realities. The dialectics among social systems, the communicative process, and the participation of social actors generates the idea of 'self'. By imparting Erving Goffman's Media Framing Theory, the analysis of media representation makes an attempt to trace and extricate the genealogy of 'mass political ideology.' The application of media framing theory would conveniently allow the analytical method to engage with the hegemonic study of socio-political events that would contribute to grasping a better understanding of contextualising the critical axioms of the prevalent intersectional factors.

Hegemony plays a significant role in constituting the social meaning of a language or text and how they are being perceived by having their historical cultural traditional influences unmodified in them. With the introduction of critical feminist studies to cultural studies, a new horizon for critiquing the critique has unfolded. Hegemony in media from a gendered perspective bears the responsibility to include the narratives of the excludeds. The feminist re-reading of hegemonic

studies of media production in post-metoo 21st-century gender politics has broadened up the capacity to identify new underlying structural dimensions and has also sparked opportunities to pose the question of the class of historically otherized and anatomy of gender representation within the structural hierarchy in media organizations where the decision-making process is directly or indirectly influenced by the politics and ideology of the ownership which is predominantly occupied by men indicating pervasive male domination over communicative space. The fundamental question here is how the language of the news (Bell, 1996) is constructed within neo-liberal production ethics? And does the hegemony of neo-liberal language contribute to the manufacture of consent? Do the dominant culture and the burden of grand narrative affect the cognitive behaviour of the people at the receiving end? The media reception theory suggests the persuasive analysis of media messages to get a hold of a transclass audience.

Pandemic, media, visibility/invisibility, and women's work

The question of visibility and invisibility in terms of politics of acquired communicative spaces in different forms of media spaces such as print, electronic, audio-visual, online etc. has been omnipresent when it comes to the question of representing gender intersecting with labour and class. The pandemic has been an eye opener to the precarious situation of the livelihoods of migrant workers. However, as discussed above in the paper, that representation too must be problematized and contested through the lens of gender inclusivity. The reporting and coverage of migration-related events during the pandemic under the corporate monopolization and captivity of the indigenous market actually put the house-policy stances of media organizations under thorough scrutiny of the same for the rapid manufacturing of corporatized views among the media audiences has been debated critically for having devolved and neglected the representation of working-class historically.

Visibility as a key factor in media studies and representation politics has foundations in the sociological, symbolic, and technological axis (Mateus, 2017). In the case of print media, the technological axis can be understood mainly in terms of advancing reachability, accessibility, producing photographic images, research, and demographic penetration among many other pertinent determinants. The feminist analysis of the concept of visibility in spatial politics of communication and contextualizing it in the realm of gendered labour studies is to be revisited in

the paper to investigate and interpret the configuration of media visibility or invisibility and that of domestic work as independent work disproportionately done by women concerning labour migration.

As described by Foucault that the functioning of visibility resides in the structure and functionality of power within a certain internal arrangement of production (Hegde, 2016). Thus, the spectacle of women's invisibility and visibility in mass culture reveals the dichotomous regulation of women's representation in the public sphere. the paper formulates an argument to contest the dichotomous representation of women's bodies as objects and the opacity of autonomous narratives by women as subjects. The texturing of the visibility or invisibility of women in mass mediation questions the representational type of women in both internalized and externalized masculine capitalist modernist society.

Bengal has always played a very prominent role in India's pre- and post-independence journalism practice. Indian journalism in its colonial and post-colonial period has been deeply moved by the Bengali intelligentsia. The Bengali Press navigated its journalistic path with an orientalist approach to occidental means of production that had been introduced by James Augustus Hickey. The iconic example of Raja Rammohan Roy and the reflection of his socio-religio-liberal thought in the newspaper he published as a form of resistance to the colonial power and domination over natives paved the way to the formation of a nationalist identity among the people of the soil that was followed and carried out by journalists from different generations transforming a nationalist identity to the Indian nationalist identity (Chattopadhyay). What started from the period of Sambad Prabhakar, The Hindu Patriot, and many others had transformed immensely during the period of AmritaBazar Patrika, Ananda Bazar Patrika, The Statesman, etc. Transformation is the key word in this whole journey of both Bengali and Indian Journalism. It is mentionable that apart from the famous or popular newspapers there were newspapers like Chashi Majur (Chakraborty) representing the interest of the working class in the agrarian sector of Bengal. The motive to point out the history is to illuminate the subaltern voice that was present there claiming their space.

The post-independent India witnessed the rise and politics of the comparatively new word 'media' which is actually a conglomerate, converged and post-industrial formation of a communication industry having adopted commerciality as its core economic base. The

introduction of globalization to India has contributed to the neo-liberal foundation not only to the Indian economic market but to the socio-cultural sphere through its production. The rapid change has been marked by changes in ownership patterns and house policies in mainstream newspapers that have emerged as an industry, a business model with a promise to public service. The existence and thriving power of print media has been challenged and threatened by every inception of a relatively new mediation form with the help of new technology. However, the relevance of newspapers as press remains the same to date. Bengali Journalism in post-independence West Bengal has been through several transformations under several prominent editors from different political regimes of the state. The paper interprets and introspects the structural transformation and linguistic transformation of Bengali mainstream newspapers dominant and prominent in print culture. The question though remains the same from history to the present, whose media? whose interest? whose Journalism? and whose representation? The research embarks upon a journey of investigation and upon an investigation of a journey which has indeed evolved but again whose evolution is this? By positing the question of working class representation in light of gender relations and gender-class dynamics employing the intersectional feminist-marxist analytical method will dissect and help understand the overlapping complexities of different factors.

Research Methodology

The research method that has been applied for the primary analysis is the thematic analysis of the in-depth interviews of print media journalists, editors, and domestic workers. The thematic analysis of in-depth interviews has been chosen over the quantitative method of analysis to better understand the sexual politics in media organizations in the post-metoo situation, news production, the location of working class in the communicative space, and gender representation.

The research methodology also includes Textual analysis of the texts of different news articles in different Bengali mainstream newspapers. The

List of analytical methods and concepts in the research:

Feminist Media Analysis:

Feminist critique of Political Economy:

Commerciality:

Neo-liberalism:

Marxist analysis of media production:

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