

## LEARNING MIGRATION

### RLS Follow-up Workshop

21 June 2024

The panel “Learning Migration” was chaired by Arup K. Sen. The theme carried a nuanced understanding of meanings embedded in different sites of the process of “learning migration” or learning about migration. There were two panellists, Nirvan Pradhan and Sonu Tiwari—both previous year’s Winter Workshop participants and early career scholars whose PhD research works are on migration.

**Nirvaan Pradhan** attempted to establish the linkages between ethnic identity and labouring capacity and situate these within the larger oeuvre of migration and skill development by taking the case of Darjeeling in specific and the northern crest of West Bengal in general as a space where due to the lack of employment opportunities, people started moving out to other states in India as well as to Middle East, Europe, and other countries depending in the skills of the migrant and the amount of brokerage needed. Although one finds the current government policies like “Made in India” or “Skill India” as an optimistic skilling and employment opportunity, scholars like Sanjay Srivastava are cautious about these projects as the heterogeneous nature of the Indian employment structure cannot be painted with one homogenous policy. Taking a cue from Srivastava, Pradhan argues that even in places like Darjeeling, where tea is the main commercial product, it is not just a crop but an agglomeration of ecosystem, living patterns, commercial structure, infrastructure, etc., where labour develops as an emic category, and to understand it one has to take into account the British system of labouring the tea gardens, the ethnic composition, education, cultures of the labouring groups. A century apart, the colonial predicament of viewing the Indo-Nepalese or Gorkhas as possessing certain physical features meant for specific industries continues even today. Pradhan shared his experience of how racial profiling still operates in the hills in seeking recruitment. While speaking to the recruitment agencies in 2019-20 they preferred hiring Indo-Nepalese/Gorkhas due to their perfect physical features for employment in the service sector, hospitality sector like hotels, caregiving etc. However, other groups like the Adivasis of Darjeeling are not considered compatible with the service sector due to their physical appearance. In the neoliberal era, therefore, appearances and physiology became the main criteria for employment in the service sector. The racial explanation in hiring labour and ethnicity served as an identity marker and determining labouring capacities. In the 21st Century, there is a huge recruitment for waiters, runners, part-time workers etc., who do not require high skilling of labour or financial literacy. The most important criteria are youth and gendered assumptions of docility, and manageability and flexibility of responsibility. People recruited from these regions are considered very docile and manageable, i.e., they will not argue back or fight back. In recent years, even if there has been an association of people with place there has been a reinforcement of racial and ethnic identity and particular labouring capacity. A proliferation of intimate industry caters to the growing specific needs of developed countries. It is also due to certain facial features that many MNCs like to hire

these people from the hills of Darjeeling as they look hospitable and speak in a hospitable manner which put customers at ease. Hence young people are hired for their “white skin and kind face which give them an appearance of a kind approachable person.” In the region most of the recruiters offered jobs in luxury hotels, restaurants, airlines and malls. The criteria of height unlike that of appearance might not be relevant for other sectors like IT industries. The recruitment logic has two main parts: first, it is based on the idea of natural qualities, emphasising that physical features like Mongolian face, fair skin and inherited traits are aspects of the Gorkha race; second, social determinism the colonial legacy of inheriting a British style education, fashion sense inspired by globalism and modernity and postcolonial history of involvement in the intimate industries.

**Sonu Tiwari** presented her research on the limits of migration as a climate adaptation technique through the case study of women's labour migration in the Sundarbans Delta. Climate change is introducing a new dimension to human mobility with migration patterns fundamentally regional worldwide, especially in climate hotspots in mountains, flood plains, semi-arid lands and river deltas. With climate change, the frequency, and intensity of disasters are changing manifesting in heavy draughts, floods, rising sea levels etc. These fundamental changes pose significant pressures on households that rely on natural resources and increase the socio-economic vulnerabilities and everyday risks that people confront in these regions. In response to these, individuals and communities, adapt well with various strategies to deal with these risks. One of them is migration from these regions for safety and economic opportunities. To understand the interconnections between climate change and labour migration it is very important to understand the multiple drivers of mobilities and how they intersect with implications of climate change. She referred to two concepts: climate migrants and climate refugees. Climate migrant enthusiasts say that it is meant for voluntary and planned migration which results in increased adaptation and well-being of the people after migration whereas climate refugees are linked to involuntary movements due to environmental push factors resulting in maladaptation and forced migration and displacement. With regards to Sundarbans. seasonal, circular, temporary labour migration has always been a strategy to diversify their livelihoods. In fluid geographies like deltas, households are also affected by erosion which involves continuous relocation from one place to another. Linked to the rivers are the flood control mechanisms in the form of river embankments, etc., and the household had to deal with the apathy of the state as their lands are being forcefully acquired for construction or infrastructure for the public good. In the Sundarbans Delta, recently due to the increasing intensity and frequency of disasters in the last decade, a lot of temporary displacement has also taken place. She tried to provide a schema for a plural and situated understanding of mobility in the coastal margins of the Sundarbans delta through the lived experience of both migrants and those who stayed behind with the particular question of whether labour migration of women allows for a better adaptation as has been demonstrated in the last few years or is it maladaptive. A qualitative methodology was followed by collecting data from two coastal villages in Patharpratima. The term adaptation is used to explain societal change and continuity and has become relevant in climate change-related risk-related discourse. It is a process of deliberate change in decision or making in relation to external stimuli and stress with systematic adaptiveness as its outcome. So, adaptation

is adjustment when looked at climate from a technical top-down approach without considering the socio-political factors when one looks at vulnerability. On the other end of the spectrum is the transformative adaptation that focuses on the political and social roots of vulnerability advocating for fundamental changes in the social system and addressing issues like resource rights and access and government policies. The term adaptation has been critiqued in hazard research as being looked at from a cost-benefit basis and looking at human responses as just adjustments to the threat. IPCC 2018 talked about the limits of adaptation where actors cannot protect their valued objectives like health, well-being, security, and livelihood through migration or through other adaptive strategies often leading to maladaptive forms of adaptation. Her argument aligned with the category of transformative adaptation and it recognises the multifaceted nature of vulnerability and adaptation arguing that migration is hardly transformative for those who migrate and those who stay behind in the delta to deal with the climatic stresses. And this transformation through migration is to watch for whom and how? The 2011 Census data on women labour migrants indicates movement towards the urban centres. The narratives of the migrant women of the delta region align with the claim of the 2011 Census data that young women migrate to the cities for employment opportunities. Most of them migrate alone if their husbands have abandoned them or their maternal home does not have the means or able-bodied male members to migrate outside. In such circumstances, they leave their dependants at home and migrate alone to nearby urban centres like Kolkata. In family migration, women are both wage earners and homemakers. But in many cases, when they have a child the women mostly return to the village due to higher sustainability costs in cities. In the case of remittances, women find it difficult to deal with the local risks associated like rising salinity, rebuilding and reconstruction post-disasters. Most of the women interviewed were working as domestic help were ill-treated and the government finds it difficult to deal with these challenges in the informal labour market like overwork or strenuous work. In the post-pandemic, the instances of reverse migration have increased and there are cases where the families are supporting the migrants in the cities by taking debts and loans just to sustain migration in these areas. In recurrent narratives, women said that migration help them to stay alive and nothing more than that. In the current ecological crisis, there is a major crisis in the care sector where labour migrants and men cannot migrate and are dependent on family members for caregiving role. Migrant women are also providing caregiving roles in their destination areas. Women who are engaged in migrant labour journeys are exposed to risks like living conditions in slums especially during summers. Neither migration nor staying back in these fragile ecosystems nor transformative adaptation has helped women in Sundarbans and has purely become a means to survive.

## **Panel II: Researching Migration**

The session was chaired by Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury who began by posing a few open-ended questions to both the panel and the audience for consideration:

- 1) Whether we are still suffering from colonial co realities in the post-colonial times? This is needed to consider the post-colonial realities of migrants and refugees holistically as far as South Asia is concerned.
- 2) Inquiry on western impact on research in South Asia, global policies like the global compacts and their influences.
- 3) Can refugees and migrants' struggles be considered as experiences to revisit migration and refugee studies? There have been non-human humanitarian interventions too besides humanitarian interventions. In this regard, it's also important to address diversities in South Asia, especially politics. To sum up, can we look for transformative epistemologies in thinking of migration studies? With these, he invited the three panellists to present.

The three panellists, Rajat Kanti Sur, Sucharita Sengupta and Shebeen Mehboob have been researching on migration for quite some time now.

**Rajat Kanti Sur** in his presentation titled **Prostitution and the City: The Transformation of the Red-Light Areas** in Kolkata traced nodes of researching migration through archival history in talking about prostitution and the city of Kolkata. He highlighted prostitution as one of the earliest businesses in this city, but it has changed its course with time. However, at the same time, apart from affecting the “moral character of the youth”, brothels were also being considered as one of the possible threats to the increase of crime in the city. For instance, he talked about the arrest of a middleman, involved in trafficking four young girls from Midnapore, but that was not the only case. There were several criminal cases registered in the areas known for brothel quarters each year in the central and northern parts of the city. Apart from acquisitions of crime, the fear of venereal diseases, especially among British soldiers and officers, compelled the government to include brothels as one of the places for venereal diseases under the Contagious Diseases Act 1868. Through Statute IV of the act (popularly known as *Chouddo Ayine*), the government tried to impose some restrictions on the movements of the prostitutes, asking them to register themselves under the police stations of their locality and subject themselves to periodic medical examinations and necessary treatments of sexually transmitted diseases. Despite all the processes, the colonial government always faced a dilemma regarding accommodating the prostitutes as part of city life. As a result, the census reports or the reports of the municipal administration marked the areas as “crime-prone” primarily due to the “women of ill-fame”. Accepting the girls of the prostitute quarters to the professional theatres in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries could not change the scenario. The proposed speech attempts to analyse the idea of the city, especially its planning, administration, law, and order, through the spectacles of the prostitution business and tries to understand their politics of representation as one of the crucial communities despite facing negligence from the mainstream society.

**Sucharita Sengupta** in her presentation reflected upon the challenges of ethnographic field work drawing from her doctoral work in researching the complexities of forced migration studies. As an interconnected aspect she spoke of how migrant narratives get projected in a researcher's writings (negative/positive). How to talk about the situation, what does the field tell us, how that shapes

our perceptions and how our interlocutors in turn perceive us. For example, during fieldwork, empathy, or the relationship of trust that often a researcher builds with the interlocutors can come in the way of objectivity. In this context, she referred to her fieldwork experience of Camp livelihood of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh; how her perceptions were drastically different from what she would often hear from locals of Bangladesh, that of the Rohingya being “dangerous”, “uncouth”, to not go to the camps alone, there was patronisation as well. Therefore, the question of research and representation for a research or field work in migration is extremely important to address and being a female researcher adds up to the nuances and opens interesting nodes for consideration. Besides ethical considerations that need to be kept in mind, Sengupta also highlighted access and positionality methods of ethnographic research. Being a woman was like a double-edged sword in this context. While it veiled her as a ‘non-suspect’ with bureaucrats for whom women researchers could be confided with unguarded information, on the other hand this had opened interesting nuances metamorphosing into two journeys- one of discovering the field and unearth narratives of disposessions, on the other encapsulating the extremely gendered nature of the field. However, what was more difficult for her was the ‘gaze. She had to constantly negotiate my presence both on and off camps. The pandemic has forced researchers to rethink and conceptualise fieldwork plans. This is especially true in the context of South Asia. These complexities complicate issues related to ethics, integration, and immersion, particularly in today's context of rising political divisions, communal conflicts, mistrust, and disinformation.

**Shebeen Mehboob**, in his presentation entitled **Melodies of Longing: Aesthetic Landscape of Mappila Migration** presented the case of the Mappilas from Malabar which encapsulates both forced and voluntary migration across various epochs. His presentation delves into the significant role that songs and other literary expressions of the Mappila community have played in documenting the diverse historical experience of migrations. The introduction of Islam to Kerala and the genesis of the Mappila community weave into a captivating migration tale, notably through Cheraman Perumal. This Hindu king, reigning over Kerala in the 6th century CE, found inspiration in Islam, forsaking his royal status to journey to Mecca, convert to Islam under Prophet Muhammad's presence, and eventually passed away there. In his final wishes, he entrusted some newly related Arabs to carry his message back to Kerala. These Arabs then anchored along the Kerala coasts, spreading Islam. The descendants from the unions between Arab Muslim traders and local women are known as 'Mappilas', marking the inception of the Mappila Muslims as a distinct multi-ethnic, cross-cultural community along the Indian Ocean. Initially, the Mappilas thrived as the preeminent merchant community in the Indian Ocean until the 15th century, but European incursions saw their maritime dominance wane. This initiated the Mappila community's first migration phase. Subsequent phases included forceful migrations during the British era, where Mappilas were deported to places like Fiji, Mauritius, and the Andaman Islands, followed by massive relocations after the 1921 Malabar Rebellion to Burma, Sri Lanka, and Saudi Arabia. The Mappilas possess a profound connection with music and literature, particularly in how they encapsulate life's various realms, including migration. Their musical tradition, historically rich and still evolving, captures the themes of migration, the complexity of separation, and the joy of

reunion. It positions these migratory phases in parallel with the rich fabric of Mappila songs, positing that these musical forms do not just chronicle historical events but also act as a prism reflecting the profound emotional nuances of mobility. The study places particular emphasis on “Katthupattu” (letter songs), a vibrant and popular category under the Mappila song tradition showcasing how these songs historically served as a vital channel of emotional expression, linking migrant men in the Gulf with their families back in Kerala. Through this lens, his presentation positions Mappila songs as a vibrant reflection of the interwoven stories of migration and cultural identity, unravelling how music captures the complex, multifaceted experiences of hardship, resilience, and joy encountered by the Mappilas throughout their migratory journeys.

Questions and comments in the question-answer session geared around how Rajat Kanti Sur’s research is connected to the question of migration because as Iman Kumar Mitra pointed out, in the question of plague the issue of migration was evident, that plague was happening because of migration. There was a link between public health and urban reimagining of spaces related to the question of migration. Can this be said about the instance of sex workers as well? Sucharita Sengupta was asked to comment upon the question of objectivity-subjectivity and ‘truth’ when it comes to ethnographic research and Social Anthropology. Does Truth in these contexts reflect on the researcher’s positionality or is able to transcend that and speak of the field? Ranabir Samaddar commenting on Shebeen Mehboob’s presentation, referred to migration after partition from the region to Pakistan-Karachi and asked whether Shebeen can reflect on this?

### **Panel 3**

Sibaji Pratim Basu, professor of Political Science, chaired the session. The first speakers of this session were **Anwesha Sengupta** and **Debarati Bagchi**. They talked about their project writing on different issues, history, and contemporary topics from the past three years. They began with their aim to set the book's target groups—the idea is to prepare a set of books on different relevant topics for the common people. The initial thought, as they said, was to design the project to give the school students a basic idea of some of the fundamental principles of nation-building. Later, they expanded the goal and went to the semi-literate groups apart from the school students. They conducted workshops with the school students in different slum areas. They also did the workshop in the community schools.

Both Anwesha and Debarati shared their experiences with the schoolchildren. Their understanding of the partition, language, caste, culture and dress and the details about the war. The interpretation was different, which gave them an idea of the difference in opinions. According to both, this exercise helped me think about the book's content, design and language. Scroll paintings or patachitras made the exercise engaging and interactive for young adults, particularly in semi-urban or rural areas. The exercise of understanding migration through the lens of the children helped them to chalk out the current situation and the diverse minds of the youth and young adults about different indicators of migration, language and urbanisation. They ended the presentation with the idea of interactive teaching, especially on sensitive ideas like migration.

The next speaker on this panel was Gorky Chakraborty. He was talking about the relationship between fieldwork and ethnography. He explained how the field experience made him understand the process of dealing with a practical situation where the methodology still needs to be proven. Therefore, according to Chakraborty, the expertise of a researcher on migration laid on the technique to deal with the positivist methodology and the practical situation. According to Chakraborty, the politics behind the data generation, particularly the data generated between 1991-2011 in the North-eastern states of India, is problematic, and the role of understanding the practical situation to analyse the data has been one of the critical factors in this case. Chakraborty talked about the necessity of cross-disciplinary research to understand the role of migration (both internal and inter-state) in the Northeastern states of India. He also identified three problems a researcher would face while researching in the North-eastern states. Those are a) the imagining of migration, b) the imaginaries of migration, and c) the analysis of the reasons for migration. Chakraborty talked about one of his studies on the Morangs and Motongs near the upper Brahmaputra valley. Chakraborty talked about the region's complexities and understanding of their indigenous archives. According to Chakraborty, the input of a good researcher is the challenge of a teacher to understand the complexities while teaching about migration.

#### **Panel 4**

**Sunandan Roy Chowdhury** while chairing the session began by mentioning the memories of partition and migration. He brought to attention the vast reserve of Bengali literature that has writings on migration and partition. Reference was also drawn to new residents in cities represented in films, such as Ritwik Ghatak's films. Chowdhury mentioned CRG's publication *Pandemic and Precarity*, and pointed out the limited use of data sources from vernacular language in the book volume. Social Sciences often come with their own drawback of limited consideration of sources of data in vernacular language.

**Manjira Saha** spoke of Simanta theke labour'er jatra (The journey of labourer from the border area). Saha talked about her school in Burnpur of Nadia district bordering Bangladesh, and the students of classes 9 to 12 who went missing. On receiving news of the death of one of her students and a number of school children missing on either side of the border, Saha took ahead her research. In the river-bank erosion affected areas of Malda she worked in several schools in border areas of the district, on enrolled students who went missing from school. She found that many such students had gone to Kerala, Mumbai, Noida for working as labourer. Manjira read out from her writings about Singabad railway station on the border of Malda and Bangladesh, and a seven-year-old boy Parbat Mandi who migrated for work and forgot his parents' house, remembering only the name 'Shirshikholai' when he turned 22 years old. Manjira Saha spoke of Saleman who had gone to Kashmir to work in the apple orchards at a time when Article 370 was abrogated and came to the realisation that he hardly knew of the Constitution of India. The speaker also narrated about brides from Murshidabad who migrated to different parts of Kashmir and got stuck in the cycle of human

trafficking. There were details of the experiences of trafficked women in NCR and Pune, who were taken to the Middle-East and were able to escape. The panellist ended with doubts of other school children taking up similar journeys and missing out on their schooling.

**V. Ramaswamy** read out passages from his translated work *The Runaway Boy*, from the *Chandal Jibon Trilogy* written by Manoranjan Byapari. The speaker introduced the translation work on migration and refugees from the then East Bengal, trying to capture the psyche of the migrants. The translated passage described the journey of a lorry (truck) transporting migrants through the scorching heat of the Rahr region of Bengal and the harsh weather condition taking a toll on the travellers. The dejected, dispossessed people, identified as refugees, were labelled as ‘parasites’ as the vehicle reached villages, and were driven to camps, having lost their homesteads. The lorry had no over-head cover and the hot winds burned the refugees who were already in fear of an unknown future, whether they were headed to a desert or to better lives. The thirsty travellers mistook the mirage for River Padma, while an expecting woman gave birth to a baby-girl, and the father of one of the travellers passed away.

In the question-answer session, Sunandan Roy Chowdhury flagged the importance of geography in migration as a theme of discussion; politics in border, political economy, economic condition as agents of developmental practices leading the way to literature and cinema, came out as another theme. Dislocation and irreversible loss as a result of migration, whether forced or voluntary, all have shades of tragedy.

Manjira Saha was asked if she has found out about the compulsions that force people, especially school going children and young adults to migrate, despite knowing the horrific fate of a migrant’s journey. Saha shared that the respondents and their family members often migrate in the hope that they might get lucky and if they do not face tragedies then they may be fortunate to build their dream houses and live better lives with the remittances. There was discussion on how education can help school students and families to rescue acquaintances and children from mishaps of migration and traps of human trafficking. Students often do not give importance to studies and school curriculum, but are more interested in entertainment and fall into traps. Some of them learn at an early age about the easier means of earning money and drop out of school and migrate to other states with the hopes of income generation.

The language of translation often comes with the style of presentation of the translator as well as retains the expressions of the original author in the old text. Ramaswamy noted that Manoranjan Byapari’s work is semi-autobiographical in nature, and he too like most other translators has tried to find a middle path to bring in a new angle and add a different viewpoint, preserving ethics while doing the work. Rajat Roy added that migration writing draws from larger range of data to contextualise a theme, but while using records on migrants one should also keep in mind the problems that migrants face to lend a critical perspective.

