



DALITS AND MIGRATION ABROAD: CALL FOR PROPOSALS

1. Introduction

Globalization has ushered in new opportunities for international migration, with a growing number of Indians choosing to go abroad hoping for a better life for themselves and their families. While often times the decision to migrate is described as the “choice” of a prospective migrant, such a “choice” is sometimes made by those in unequal situations, with unequal means and access to these opportunities. The short note herein below explores the relevance of research on Dalits and their migration experience.

2. Migration, Vulnerable Groups and Challenges

Aware of these constraints, the international migration discourse has placed an emphasis on studying and addressing the challenges faced in migration by vulnerable groups such as women, children, those in “irregular” situation etc. For instance, studies on women migrating abroad show the distinct gendered hierarchy of occupational roles.¹ Overseas domestic service is a common occupation for migrant women.² Of the various migration corridors pursued in India, the Gulf continues to be a dominant category. The labour market for women in the Gulf mirrors the dominant sexual division of labour, with relatively lower-end positions filled in by migrant women, who are predominantly engaged as domestic workers and low-end service providers (housemaids, babysitters, caregivers, cleaners, etc. For instance, estimates from the Protector General of Emigrants’ (PGE) India office demonstrate that the most dominant occupation amongst women workers continues to be household work (PGE data 2010).

These migrant women domestic workers are considered to be extremely susceptible to exploitation.³ Many female migrant workers are dependent on

¹ At the lower end of the skills spectrum, women migrants pick fruits and vegetables, manufacture garments and other items, process meat and poultry, work as nursing home and hospital aides, clean restaurants and hotels, and provide myriad other services.

² Susan Forbes Martin, “Women and Migration”, UN Division for the Advancement of Women, Consultative Meeting on “Migration and Mobility and How this Movement affects Women, Malmo, Sweden, CM/MMW/2003/WP.1, 14 January 2004.

³ Housemaids are particularly vulnerable because they work in closed doors of the houses where their conditions of work and exploitation are invisible to open societies and authorities concerned. These occupations neither are legally protected nor are clearly defined. Although the protection of many existing

employers for legal status, basic needs such as housing and food, and the payment of due wages, which employers may and often arbitrarily withhold in order to ensure compliance. Instances of harassment in the form of non-payment or under-payment of wages, excessive working hours, verbal/physical abuse, sexual harassment, etc are not uncommon. Indeed, seized of these concerns a UN Women Project to Empower Women Domestic Workers in the Gulf is underway at the India Centre for Migration (ICM)⁴ to study the challenges faced by these women workers and envision specific programmatic interventions, policies and capacity building measures across the relevant stakeholders that would help empower these women at various stages of the migration lifecycle.

3. Caste, Internal Migration and the Dalit Experience

The Dalits (also known as Untouchables, *Harijans*, or Scheduled Castes) have historically been poor, deprived of basic human rights, and treated as social inferiors in India. They still face economic, social, cultural, and political discrimination in the name of caste. “Centuries of this ‘hidden apartheid’ that has perpetuated discrimination and denial of their human rights, has resulted not only in Dalits representing a disproportionate amount of the poor in India, but also in the creation of numerous other obstacles that hinder Dalit’s ability to change their situation” (Artis et al, 2003: 9). A singular challenge therefore in contemporary India is to articulate ways in which this historically marginalized section of our society can be brought into the mainstream and become part of the economic growth story in India.

In the wider universe of research on migration, compared to work on women and irregular migrants, Dalits as a vulnerable group have rarely been studied. While the dynamics of caste and its impact on internal migration has received some significant attention in recent years⁵, little is known about Dalits and their

ILO Conventions technically apply to domestic workers, they have not been often extended or applied to protect domestic workers due to traditional perceptions of domestic workers as 'helpers' rather than 'workers' and the location of employment is in private households rather than in commercial enterprises (Sharma and Iyer, 2010).

⁴ The ICM serves as think tank for the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs on all matters related to international migration. The ICM undertakes empirical, analytical and policy related research, implements pilot projects to document good practices and assists in capacity building at the sub-national level amongst stakeholders in the field.

⁵ Circular migration is particularly high among the poor, scheduled castes (SCs), scheduled tribes (STs) and Muslims. In the tribal districts of southern Madhya Pradesh, 65% of households included migrants (Mosse et al., 1997). In Jharkhand, a study of twelve villages found that one-third of the households had at least one member migrating. Short-term migration was higher among poorer groups, involving over 80% of the landless and 88% of illiterate people and migration among SCs and STs was nearly twice that of upper castes (15% of the SC/ST households compared to 8% of upper caste households) (Dayal and Karan, 2003). In Rajasthan, 95% of the migrants congregating at Chakoris (recruiting points) are dalits coming from Bhilwara, Ajmer, Tonk and Kota areas of Rajasthan (Jagori 2001). There are extremely high

migration experience abroad. Dalits often migrate in search of work. Although poor non-Dalits migrate in search of employment, Dalits are much more afflicted by migration. The main cause of this migration is lack of land ownership, exacerbated by droughts. The majority of Dalits in rural areas have no financial recourses, such as loans, to survive economic hardships (Fernando, Macwan, & Ramanathan, 2004). Though few studies claim that economic liberalization in India has given the opportunity to Dalits to break away from the “established norms of villages and work with dignity”⁶, migration to urban centres is still believed to be a hard prospect for Dalits unless the Government would emphasise more on “skill development” and “education”.⁷

4. Dalits & Socio-economic Status in India

Dalits make up approximately 170 million of India’s billion people (Minority Rights Group International, 2006). Many are agricultural labourers. They have a limited share in India’s agricultural holdings⁸ and an even more limited share in its irrigated land holdings (Kethineni & Humiston 2010: 103). Of all Indian children, Dalit children suffer the most. For example, school attendance in 1998–1999 was 65.7% for Scheduled Caste children aged 7-17, compared to 81.3% for high caste children (Jenkins & Barr, 2006). Furthermore, the completion rate of five years of schooling for Scheduled Caste from 2002-2004 was 34%, compared to 44% for higher castes (Jenkins & Barr, 2006). Women and children are primarily engaged in “civic sanitation work” (i.e., manual scavenging, even though this has been outlawed), followed by leather fraying in tanning

rates of migration among tribals from southern Rajasthan who migrate to Gujarat to work in seed cotton farms and textile markets (Katiyar 2006 and Venkateswarlu 2004). Migrant destinations are towns and cities, industrial zones, stone quarries and coastal areas for fish processing and salt panning (Deshingkar, 2006). Jobs tend to be in factories, agro-processing plants or working as porters, domestic servants, bus conductors, rickshaw pullers, street hawkers, petty traders, and construction workers. Migration is part of a mix of livelihood strategies and methods of asset accumulation adopted by households (Bird & Deshingkar 2009).

⁶ Dalit scholar Chandra Bhan Prasad claims that the market has a neutralizing effect on caste identities based on small surveys done in 2007 in a Delhi mall and at a fast food joint, questioning: a) is the logic of the market turning the traditional beneficiaries of Manu into its betrayers; b) are they seeking occupational demotion in order to adjust to the call of the market?. The surveys revealed that a majority of the workers at both sites were non-Dalits, including Brahmins, engaged in cleaning and sweeping duties like all other workers. See Chandra Bhan Prasad, “Markets and Manu: Economic Reforms and its Impact on Caste in India”, CASI Working Paper Series, Number 08-01, January 2008.

⁷ See Dalit activist Mr. Ram Kumar’s views on the CASI study reported by Santosh K. Roy, Live Mint, “Study claiming Liberalization helped Dalits stokes Debate”, 02 December 2009.

⁸ Most often, the powerful upper castes encroach upon Dalits’ lands and resistance is met with violence. About 75% of Dalits are considered completely landless (Human Rights Watch, 2007). The poor access to resources also holds true in the case of civic amenities. For eg. only 9.84% of households belonging to a Scheduled Caste have access to sanitation, and 20% lack a safe source of drinking water (Human Rights Watch, 2007).

and footwear manufacturing; many Dalit men are agricultural workers.⁹ Of the 1.3 million Dalits employed as manual scavengers, most of these are women Dalits. Those who engage in scavenging are seen as the lowest of the Dalits, being discriminated against within their own caste (Human Rights Watch, 1999).

Moreover, entrepreneurial opportunities are extremely limited for Dalits as they lack both capital and the collateral to secure loans. Even if they are successful in opening small businesses, non-Dalits will not patronize those shops (Artis et al., 2003). The limited access to land and capital due to the ongoing discrimination against Dalits has resulted in greater levels of poverty among this group. For example, the level of poverty was reported to be 60% among agricultural laborers, a vast majority of whom are Dalits (Thorat, 2002).

5. Constitutional Provisions and International Human Rights

The Indian Constitution, in its Bill of Rights, guarantees all citizens basic civil and political rights and fundamental freedoms. In addition, the Constitution has special provisions prohibiting discrimination based on caste. These provisions are found under the Right to Equality (Articles 15, 16, and 17), the Right against Exploitation (Article 23), Cultural and Educational Rights (Article 29:2), and prohibition against disenfranchisement in elections based on one's religion, race, caste or sex (Article 325).¹⁰

6. Dalits and International Migration

Literature on Dalits and their international migration experience is limited. While some studies claim that caste identities get blurred in the course of international border crossing, there are others that claim that dreams of a “casteless society” in foreign lands are hard to realize. For instance, Lum in her work on dairy farmers from Punjab in Bergamo in northern Italy shows how the predominantly high caste Jats get the relatively

⁹ Many of the customary practices like drum beating, washing, hair cutting, load carrying, weaving, basket making, manual scavenging, traditional birth attendant, sweeping, messengers, domestic servants, cleaning and sweeping, cleaning dead animals, cow rearing, forest produce collection and processing, bamboo and cane work, rope making, stone works, farming, trolley and rickshaw pulling, brick making, etc are also done by Dalits in rural areas.

¹⁰ To fulfill the constitutional provisions pertaining to Scheduled Castes, India has passed various laws to protect their rights. These include the Protection of Civil Rights (Anti-Untouchability) Act (1955); the Bonded Labour (Abolition) Act (1976); the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act (1989) and Rules (1995); the Employment of Manual Scavenger and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act (1993); and various land-reform laws to redistribute community land to the landless. Finally, to monitor enforcement of some of these laws, the Central (i.e., federal) Government established the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and the National Human Rights Commission in the early 1990s.

high-salary jobs of cow milkers while in contrast the lower caste Ravidassia Punjabis are mostly employed in factories and in agricultural jobs such as greenhouse work. According to Lum, this internal Punjabi differentiation can be explained by the heavy reliance on caste networks in securing work: migrants recommend fellow kin and caste members to their employers, leading to both ethnic and caste occupational specialisations that have little to do with a “natural inclination” to work with cows, as a number of Italian press reports have implied, but rather with the nature of Indian social organisation, which is structured along caste lines (Lum 2012: 10). The Ravidassias complain of continuing prejudice and derogatory attitudes towards them on the part of upper-caste Punjabis that has not abated in Italy. In particular, intercaste marriages are rare, and negative stereotypes about the Ravidassias persist among both the Jats and the Lubanas (Lum 2012: 14). Studies of Dalit Punjabi youth in Wolverhampton, U.K. document caste-related bullying during schooling, considered “inexplicable” given “their location in a supposedly casteless society in the U.K” (Dhanda 2009). It however remains unclear as to how far international migration has served as a means of development and a welcome release into greener pastures for Dalits.

7. Research Questions

Despite this early research on Dalits and migration, a significant gap remains in qualitative and quantitative data on these migrants. Any attempt on the part of the Government to undertake policies that would empower Dalits in exercising their choice to migrate needs to be bolstered with evidence-based research on their numbers, the reasons that spur them to seek new pastures, the challenges faced in migrating and the overall impact of their choice on everyday life for themselves and their families. Some of the questions worth probing in this regard include:

- a) What is the Dalit perception of migration; is it an opportunity/choice or a necessary escape mechanism?
- b) Where do Dalits migrate, how, why and for how long? Are there regional differentiations in the migration pattern, if so, why? Does their internal migration predict international migration?
- c) What is the labour force participation rate of Dalits in areas that show international migration trends?
- d) What are the key occupations they are engaged in abroad and how, if at all, are these different from those they would take up in India?
- e) What are the dynamics of caste hierarchy and discrimination when they are abroad? Does discrimination follow them in foreign lands?
- f) Do new opportunities abroad open way for social mobility and greater savings?

- g) What is the experience of women Dalit workers? How does migration affect their roles and gender relations? What are the challenges they face owing to both their gender and caste?
- h) What is the impact of migration on families left behind? How is the returning migrant perceived in society and what are the prospects for a Dalit migrant upon return?
- i) How best can the rights and safety of Dalit workers, women in particular, be protected from labour abuse and other exploitative conditions?

8. Call for Research Proposals

To gain an understanding of Dalits and their migration experience abroad, the India Centre for Migration (ICM), a think tank on behalf of the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) invites proposals from scholars, subject experts and research institutions in India. Applicants are requested to include the following for consideration in their research proposal:

- a) Topic/theme and objectives;
- b) Methodology proposed for research and data sources;
- c) Time required to complete the study;
- d) Costs involved in conducting the proposed study;
- e) CV of proposed author(s), with indication of previous relevant personal or institutional work in the field.

The research questions raised in the present note are only indicative. Applicants are encouraged to explore other questions related to the subject theme. The last date for submission of research proposals is January 31st 2013. The research proposals may be sent to dalitsandmigration@gmail.com. The selection of proposals shall be made by end of February 2013. Research for selected proposals shall be commissioned through ICM.

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