

FAMILY AND MIGRATION: POLITICS OF INVISIBILITY AND IDEOLOGY

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"The Zamindar says we are too old to work. The Zamindar has given us chhutti, but the belly does not, Ma. What do we eat, and what do we feed these (the kids) with"?

The date was December 1973. The statement was being made to the Committee on the status of Women in India (CSWI), in a village several miles from Santiniketan. Phulrenu Guha's grey-flecked head obviously called out the 'Ma' address, since the speakers all looked years older. But they could not have been since their kids were still young. Where were their fathers? "All have gone, Ma - there was no work, and they cannot stand hunger. Some of the children have gone also. How can we stop them when we cannot feed them? But we are tied - can't desert these kids. So we hang around, begging for some work. Sometimes there is work for a few days - odd jobs in the houses of the *Baralok* (well-to-do-big-people). But we have been written off for our real work (agricultural labour) because the landlords think we are too weak, so they call us old".

There were many similar scenes through the year (1973-74) when the CSWI toured the country, listening to women of different classes/regions/occupations. The economic distress was too obvious. Even our own socialised image, of the typical middle class family had to be abandoned. In too many unemployed sons had gone, fathers were dead or sick, and the mothers with grown up daughters kept appealing "Please find ways by which our daughters and daughters-in-law can earn while holding their heads

* This paper was written in 1994-'95, during preparations for the UN's Social Development Summit (1995). The author was invited to an 'expert' advisory group meeting convened by the Indian Planning Commission – one of a few social activists – mostly men.

high". The Committee also met women working as domestic maids while the men stayed behind in villages as marginal farmers and labourers. The smaller children were with their mothers.

Returning to the task of writing the report, the CSWI faced the invisibility of all these phenomena in official statistics. Not having any expertise in demography, we asked Dr. Ashish Bose to prepare a draft chapter on demographic perspectives. He did give us the freedom to modify his interpretations. And we did modify his section on migration, drawing in more data from his own authoritative work on migration, raising questions that no one had raised before. Since in internal migration women outnumbered men at a ratio of nearly 4: 1, *what was the scientific basis for assuming that women migrated only for marriage and associational reasons? Why were the large streams of seasonal migration of agricultural labour not reflected in the data systems?* Bose's own study showed a steep rise in the proportion of women in the short-term and rural to rural streams across decades. Why had this not been correlated with the decline in women's economic participation rate?

In the Indian Council of Social Science's Research's Programme of Women's Studies, research on migration was one of the priority areas. Prof. B.N. Ganguly, Chairman of the Programme Committee corroborated the CSWI's queries from his own observations across several years, and hoped social scientists would come forward to face the challenge. Except for two or three young beginners, who took up micro-studies we got little response. However over the years some findings have accumulated. They challenge the glib assumptions that a) women migrate only for marriage and associational reasons; b) labour migration follows industrialisation and labour market pulls; c) migration flows result from independent choices made by

individuals/families; and. d) family migration is mainly decided by males' opportunities for employment.

Instead, studies from all the three regions of the third world - Asia, Africa, Latin America - indicate labour migration as an integral part, often with heavy social costs, of the economic growth model of development with ultimately major economic, social, political and environmental consequences. They are linked to state policies for agriculture, land development and distribution, industrialisation, consumption patterns and power generation, which accelerate regional, class, caste and gender inequalities, and precipitate not only increase in migration flows, but also create a new class of ecological refugees. Finally there are the refugees from political conflict -state sponsored violence, seeking a haven in other countries where their presence is increasing the flames of racism and. xenophobia.

A recently noticed trend from South and South East Asia is of married women and single girls migrating outside the country to Korea, Philippines, Thailand, Bangladesh , Nepal and Sri Lanka or to areas marked as Export Promotion or Free Trade Zones inside India i.e. Kerala, Maharashtra, Gujarat and elsewhere. Reasons in all the cases captured by studies include (i) rescuing the family from debt; (ii) educating children/siblings; (iii) supporting the family to acquire some assets. Young girls sent out by their families for such reasons often end up as virtually bonded labour or slaves or in brothels (Pasuk Pongpaichit, ILO, 1981; Wazir Jahan Karim - Kanita Project, University Sains Malaysia; CWD, Nepal; CENWOR, Colombo; Sheila Barse; Sudha Gogle; Roshan Jahan, Women for Women, Dacca; Sister Soledad, Phillippines; Sarathi Acharya, TISS; ISST and others). Availability of cheap female labour and. suspension of protective labour laws are two conditions generally offered by governments to invite MNCs to these zones. Acharya found that when the young women in Kandla EPZ factories tried to unionise, their effort was scotched by an unholy alliance of the Management, the Panchayat leaders through whom the recruitment had been made, and the fathers of the girls.

The Sri Lanka studies report that many of the women are forced to return abroad after completing their first contract because the families demand more money. Sometimes a woman returns because she find another woman installed in her home, while she has no savings to support herself.

In contrast studies on male migrants' families invariably report increased work-burden on the part of women left behind.; infrequency and. insecurity of remittances (or their control by male kin); harassment (including sexual) by powerful men or kin members in the village. Men are often reported as acquiring other families in their place of work - hence the irregularity in remittances (Women in Villages: Men in Towns, UNESCO, Paris, 1984).

In view of these mounting evidences from the region, AP's Expert Group's pontification on the impact of female migration (in a paper on Social Development Strategy for 2000 and Beyond) on their 'families' comes as a shock. Interestingly enough, the earlier part of the paper says all the right (or "politically correct") things. Advocating a three-pronged strategy, of a) eradication of absolute poverty, b) realization of distributive justice, and c) enhancement of popular participation; the Experts provide a rationale which sounds right and pragmatic enough. "Absolute poverty contributes to social unrest and political instability, reinforces authoritarian patterns of social organisation, which *are by. their very nature resistant to the resolution of the prevailing poverty situation*". In other words a "vicious circle" of vested interests which thrive on the problem and "sustain its blighting influence on society".

Distributive justice is critical for human rights, and to contain social conflicts.

"Women's stereotyped roles have perpetuated their subordinate status

throughout the ESCAP region. While women play a significant, and in some senses predominant role in economic and social development, their aspirations remain unmet. Gender equality in family, community and national life in the ESCAP region can be pursued effectively by ensuring that women receive equal treatment with men before the law, both *de jure* and *de facto*, that they receive equal compensation for equal work, that they receive equal access to education and training, and that their interests are considered explicitly, in all development policies, plans and programmes" .

Investment in 'careful nurturing' of children and youth, to amend their previous neglect is essential "to transform them into responsible and productive citizens" who will shape the future society. The stigma on the disabled has to be removed as it perpetuates discrimination. The paper thus challenges not merely inequalities in wealth and power but also deep-rooted cultural hierarchies based on gender, age and other social characteristics.

"For the region's disadvantaged and vulnerable social groups in particular, popular *participation offers the possibility of achieving the rights that have traditionally been denied them as a result of both formal and informal patterns of discrimination.*

..... All initiatives undertaken to enhance popular participation should be responsive to the people's felt needs and empower people to analyse and solve their own problems. They should reflect sensitivity to the diverse social conditions and cultural situations in the region and should offer solutions to local development problems that respect those differences. The ultimate proof of successful participatory development is action at the community level, based on popular awareness and local demand, in effective pursuit of the people's hopes and aspirations for an improved quality of life".

'These statements certainly reflect awareness of various experiments in alternative development from below, in which the region is rich.

The problems emerge in defining implementation strategies. 'There is a touching faith in the family, community values/institutions to resolve problems of social disorganisation, unrest and conflict. It ignores the enormous diversities in definition and operative

character of the 'family' and the 'community', and mounting contemporary evidence of the dysfunctionality, disintegration (under socio-economic pressures), exploitativeness and dehumanisation that afflict even the dominant types of these institutions in their traditional forms. *If the effective*

rights of children (especially girls) and all adolescents - (who have no participatory political rights) and women are to be treated as indices of social development, then such sweeping and unconditional support to the Family, or the Community could undermine the real objectives of social development.

The community is defined as "the broad networks of informal social relationships *beyond the family but not reaching to the level of the State,*"implying much more than kinship or its extension. "Critical aspects include residential contiguity, *consensus assignment of leadership and authority,* collaborative interdependence in production, reciprocal exchange relationships with respect to subsistence and marriage, *a sense of social identity and independence from central authority* (including law?) and a degree of economic and social self-reliance" .

The family is not defined, except for its "social provisioning role" which needs to be enhanced. The challenges eroding the family are increased social/spatial mobility, erosion of traditional ties, preference for smaller units (a size actively promoted by population control policies in most countries of the region), more flexible forms, rising dependency ratio with a rapidly aging population, growing emphasis on individual rather than collective social values and *fundamental redefinitions of traditional family - member role expectations* - rising incidence of divorce, separation, widowhood, unmarried parenthood and single-person households.

Why and how are these changing, even dissolving entities to be strengthened? Because: "The state cannot be expected to serve as a substitute for the family". The Community is

to be strengthened "to conserve, strengthen or replicate those functions of the traditional community that remain relevant in the modern world e.g. providing care of the elderly, support for the disabled, assistance to youth in responding to the requirements of adult-hood, defence against crime and relief in the wake of disasters. *The community can also serve as an effective representative of the hopes and aspirations of its constituents and thus - an important role in the promotion of popular participation*".

The suggestions contain *dangerous implications for democratic polities*, the rights of citizens and *the stability* of nation states. It ignores sectional/ethnic religious community's roles in the politics of *identify and affects women and children very adversely*. *Other biases surface in the discussion on social issues*. I am only citing some relevant for this paper.

Unemployment, underemployment and the "sprawling informal sector" are the results of 'structural transformation' - changes from labour to capital-intensive modes of production and the "unskilled" character of much of the workforce. The "roots" of crime also lie in grinding poverty, weakening of family/community ties, and "spread of individualist, materialist and consumerist values", social dislocation/alienation associated with increasing urbanisation. "Social disintegration and economic deprivation" cause drug abuse, and "poor, young, exploited prostitutes" spread AIDS.

This analysis ignores the findings of current studies on the informal sector prostitution, migrant labour and the organisation of crime. Its bias against the poor is very clear. Equally clear is the gender bias. Improvement in status of women, inevitably leads women away from the solidarity of the authoritarian family. Migration from the farm to the city or from the village to foreign countries, while opening new vistas to the migrant, inevitably creates for the dependents left behind new uncertainties previously undreamed of".

To conclude, I refer to an interesting historical study on migration of indentured labour

from India to the West Indies during the nineteenth century (Mohapatra, P.P., *The Making of the Sexual Contract: Indian Indentured Labour in the West Indies, Studies in History*" Sage). *Forty per cent of the migrants were single women, their singleness being a condition stipulated by the importing planters and the colonial state. The women thus went as independent wage earners. Thus a denial of family life and even intervention which facilitated the break up of the family. Once they were in the Caribbean, despite the fact that the women migrants performed hard physical labour on terms which were just about as harsh as those for the men and the labour contract was imposed with strict penalties, the discussion on the lives of these women developed as a discourse, on 'morals and sexuality, decrying their 'independent' behaviour. The outcome of this discourse were forced or circumstantially coerced marriages of the women to obtain 'Security' in the family. Since the labour regime in the plantations was very much integrated into the world market, the impact of all its vicissitudes and crisis were felt in the plantations and these in turn were transferred to the indentured labour. In early twentieth century a limited form of subsistence farming was promoted by the plantation owners/managers, where labour was encouraged to partially settle. The reconstituted family, with the 'wife' performing unpaid family labour on these lands emerged as a marked feature of these changes. The plantation economy thus 'reinvented' the family for its Indian population to re-organise land and labour use on its own terms. Perhaps the Social Development Summit (March 1995) too is busy 'inventing' an imagined family for the poor and the wretched of this earth.*