

Media Impasse and Revolution: Migrant South Asian pink- collar women workers in Kuwait

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Abstract

Technological advancement has enabled media to enter hitherto inaccessible silos. Media discursively “sets the agenda” today through enhanced access to the masses through its primary role, that of information dissemination. It opens our mental gateways by sharing experiences and opinions which particularly stimulate a surge of desire amongst those who are seeking the quintessential transformation of life through upward social mobility. My paper explores this argument in the background of my research work in Kuwait in the period (2012-2014) among migrant pink-collar women from parts of South Asia (Nepal, Sri Lanka and Southern India) to the Gulf region of Kuwait. The term “pink-collar” refers to any type of work traditionally performed by women. It situates mobility in an eclectic, intersectional framework, that takes into account- class, ethnicity and caste defined status and gender norms within South Asia and in the Gulf country of Kuwait. While media articulation is fundamental to the upsurge of migrant options and possibly their destiny, for some of them their imagined landscape turns out to be a nightmare that many of them continue to grapple with. For a large section of migrants coming from South Asian suburbs, the stories of travel to the Gulf are premised on local print media stories and advertisements (of agencies facilitating migration to the Gulf) as well as hearsay. The perception cultivated amongst potential employment seekers is, therefore, more promising and glorified than real. In the age of heightened instinctive conduct and media navigated opportunity seeking, it is fundamental to implore the media revolution and its vagaries in order to redeem the conviction in open exchange of information, particularly from the standpoint of pink-collar migrant women workers for whom stepping outside their homeland to the land of the “other,” may entail unprecedented tumults.

Keywords: Kuwait, media, migration, pink-collar workers, South–Asia.

Introduction

The mainstreaming of media through the influx of digital platforms has rendered our television sets dispossessed. On the one hand, mass media has enabled a unique discretion to each one of us to exist in a “freed” virtual space, on the other hand it has narrowed the chances of collective viewership and the possibility of debate and mental stimulation that it encouraged erstwhile. Technological advancement has enabled media to enter hitherto inaccessible silos. Media discursively “sets the agenda” today through enhanced access to the masses through its primary role, that of information dissemination. It opens our mental gateways by sharing experiences and opinions which particularly stimulate a surge of desire amongst those who are seeking the quintessential transformation of life through upward social mobility. “Pink-Collar” women workers discussed in this research paper belong to such a section of women.

Objective and Method

The term “pink-collar” refers to any type of work traditionally performed by women. It situates mobility in an eclectic, intersectional framework that takes into account- class, ethnicity and caste defined status and gender norms within South Asia and in the Gulf country of Kuwait. A fundamental premise of mobility is the influence of mass media in exaggerating and popularizing

reality. This paper is an extrapolation from my research in Kuwait (2012-2014) among pink-collar migrant women workers from three regions of South Asia (Nepal, Sri Lanka and Southern India) aimed at understanding the stimulus¹ of women workers to migrate to the gulf region besides the known economic motivation. This paper problematizes media coverage, messaging and reporting, in particular amidst the staggering experiences of these transient women. Based on review of relevant literature and primary data analysis through ethnographic fieldwork, this paper highlights the scurrility of the migrant experience. The qualitative enquiry undertaken in Kuwait (amongst women workers and interlocutors from various government and private agencies) informs the basic construct of analysis of this paper. Of particular context to this paper is the finding that migrant women workers' first exposures (through the written and spoken word) within their regional idiom bear a significant influence on their decision to undertake migration. The central argument of this paper deliberates media impasse and its selectively optimized revolutionary potential amidst increased online activism.

While media articulation is fundamental to the upsurge of migrant options and possibly their destiny, for some of them their imagined landscape turns out to be a nightmare that many of them continue to grapple with. The work and life that these workers dream of, based on the "success stories" come in conflict with the reality that they are faced with. For a large section of migrants coming from South Asian suburbs, the stories of travel to the Gulf are premised on local print media stories and advertisements (of agencies facilitating migration to the Gulf) as well as hearsay. The perception cultivated amongst potential employment seekers is, therefore, more promising and glorified than real. In case of an opportunity of migration for first time migrants who possess no social connections in the country of immigration and are also "short term migrants," transnational migration to Kuwait is perceptual and undertaken as an "immediate bailout" (in the lure of dinar) from a monetary crisis. However, the unpreparedness of such migrants is unhelpful, in both, their settlement with the employer and their ability to find refuge and relief in situations of distress. In the age of heightened instinctive conduct and media navigated opportunity seeking, it is fundamental to implore the media revolution and its vagaries in order to redeem the conviction in open exchange of information, particularly from the standpoint of pink-collar migrant women workers for whom stepping outside their homeland to the land of the "other," may entail unprecedented tumults.

Literature Review

Media Rapporteur has undergone a sea change. We are grateful to the emergence of mainstream media led activism identifying "worthy victims" deriding the Bourgeoisie and expanding societal empathy. Jyoti (named Nirbhaya meaning fearless) was one of those chosen ones who generated rebound veneration for victims of objectification by the "male" in the aftermath of her gruesome "rape" and eventual death.

Merely days after the Supreme court's verdict in the Nirbhaya case confirming the death sentence for the four rapists, the rape and murder of a 23-year-old woman from Rohtak raises many questions about the reality of the Nirbhaya fulmination. The baffling silence of the media and civil society rendered the victim degenerated.

The Rohtak victim suffered almost the same barbarity as rapists pushed a sharp-edged weapon into her private parts and then killed her, smashing her head with a brick.¹ A series of incidents

¹ <https://www.deccanherald.com/content/616444/media-trial-justice.html>

followed, the greater Noida rape case, Kiran Negi's rape and murder in Dwarka, Delhi, in a manner more brutal than Nirbhaya's.²

I wonder if there exists a rapporteur hierarchy based on parameters such as "furor potential" of the news in question and/or ownership of the "body in question." I found this an interesting comparison with pre-existing dichotomies in societies based on race (blacks & whites) natives/migrants, sponsor /sponsored above the archaic but institutionalized discriminatory layering in societies based on class, caste, and ethnicity. How does the media come to naturalize some stories and revolutionize others? Stillman makes a similar case in the context of media bias as a "syndrome" taking examples from Europe, Central America and U.S.A.³

The Nirbhaya incident finds particular mention in this paper because of its veracity of media intervention, which quavered us to the spectrum of irretrievable damage to the reality of being a woman. It provided the world with much evidence to epithet researches, on the origin and perpetration of crime and criminals in an institutionalized unequal society, still steeped in class and caste-based discontent if not discrimination. The discourse generated by Nirbhaya through the media shamed some of us beyond reprieve. One wonders if we owned, mourned and atoned Nirbhaya (meaning fearless) because her own, owned her. Her father was willing to share her name openly and generated candlelight vigils. Jyoti's father remarked that her death 'lit a torch' for women's equality and fair treatment, a fitting description as Jyoti means "flame" in Hindi (Dearden, 2015). The ensuing vigils and protests "became a media *cause célèbre*" for national and international media (Durham, 2015).⁴

One wonders if Nirbhaya provoked the conscience of our society since she was a beloved daughter whose parents sold a piece of their ancestral land in their native village for her to attend college. For, in a country where girls are deemed less desirable than boys and female infanticide is common, Jyoti's parents valued their daughter (Haq, 2013; Hudson, 2010; Oldenburg, 1992; Ritter, 2015). It is the devaluing of women and their domesticity at the sending end, which contributes to the generation of an enigmatic appeal to the potentiality to migrate and the fact that there is a need for manual labor for a population that does not want to be a part of the service industry in itself works as an opportunity for the unskilled and semi-skilled workers. Manual workers are deemed buyable in an opulent society where migrant workers outnumber the local population. This in turn commoditizes the work and consequently the worker. For the worker it is double trouble, as she finds herself in an identity crisis in an alien land being marginalized and unable to integrate with the society she works in, and, also commoditized, as the work itself is devalued and derecognized (Garcia 2013).

The dissonance over migrant women workers (particularly from South Asia to Kuwait) onus by the receiving and sending states leave them in particularly jeopardizing situations. One such jeopardizing story emerged in the form of a 30-minute short film uploaded online by an American NGO activist in order to awaken his countrymen to the plight of northern Ugandan children. Stroud and Urban (2019) use the word "slacktivism" while discussing the ethicality of

² Her breasts were chopped off and a bottle was inserted into her private part. She was left to die in a deserted field where she writhed in pain for two days and then died. Her case is yet to be decided by the apex court.

³ Stillman argues that mainstream media provide audiences with a subtle instruction manual for how to empathize with certain endangered women's bodies, while overlooking others.

⁴ Lewis (2015) presents a detailed narrative of the Nirbhaya case and media activism and review of the incident, which promulgated international accountability to the cause of violence against women.

the actual usage of funds collected by the said NGO. Despite its scale, media messaging today shrouds our ability to get to the bottom of reality and thereby inadvertently or perhaps advertently corrupts our thought and action.

Right to Think

Increasing digital platforms of media adulation regionally, enhance young migrant women's proclivity to be influenced by media assertions of unreal, quick life transformation through work in the potential immigrant territories of the Gulf region reinforced by empty promises of the agents. It is pertinent to forewarn the nations of the world to reassess the quantum of information disseminated through popular media and its eminence. Ironically, these hybrid media outlets have begun to challenge our codes of law, which guarantee us the "Right to life and liberty." There is a need to amend the rights enshrined in our constitution thereby reinforcing an even more fundamental right, basically the "Right to think."

Discussion

At the heart of my work on "Migration of pink-collar workers to Kuwait from parts of South Asia" is an eclectic, intersectional approach to the study of transnational migration, motivations for mobility of women workers and their sense of belonging to their home and host society. The literal media sabotage of our minds spirals fastest to the weakest links in the chain. Weakness, not in terms of physical strength, (which perhaps is also impacted) but through the societal determinants of power, prestige, wealth and social status.

In the words of Crenshaw, "Intersectionality is what occurs when a woman from a minority group (Crenshaw 2006) tries to navigate the main crossing in the city (Crenshaw 2006). The main highway is "Racism Road." One cross street can be colonialism, then patriarchy Street (Crenshaw 2006). She has to deal not only with one form of oppression but with all forms, those named as road signs, which link together to make a double, triple, multiple, a many layered blanket of oppression." (Crenshaw cited in Yuval-Davis 2006)

This paper therefore foregrounds the significance of 'Intersectionality', which envisions a multilayered process of identification articulated along the axis of power. Class formation in itself is a global unifier, operational as the root cause for mass struggle against class privilege. In the present era of modernization, westernization, individualization and might I say "mediatization" amidst the larger neo-liberal forces of state disposition, class associations and struggle are likely to intensify.⁵ This is because the rootedness of communities to tradition on the one hand and the desire to be upwardly mobile, to be somewhere and someone else engages human beings across class levels into complicated socio-cultural challenges. This sort of struggle is apparent but somewhat neatly compartmentalized in the segmented labour market of Kuwait in the case of pink-collar workers.⁶ The complexity of the political, economic and geographical

⁵ Wright (2015) draws from the descriptive analysis of class struggle as argued by Marx that class conflicts would have a tendency to continually intensify in the course of capitalist development.

⁶ The process of labor recruitment under the sponsorship system in recent decades is not only catering to the demand for workers under the employment cycle in different sectors of work but is also functioning as a means to fulfill the obligation of a predetermined "quota" of workers who have already been traded for by agents and sub-agents in the receiving and sending countries, under the sponsorship system. Therefore, labor market segmentation is not confined to the two conjoined parameters of public-private and native-migrant worker: there exist at least two other strong segmentations, of gendered employment and informal employment (Edwards 2011).

structures is sorted in the host country by classifying segmentation on grounds of gender, where occupations are earmarked for men and women. This implies that the struggle for earning the dinar is confined to a set of occupations falling within the range of pink-collar work. The ring fencing of occupations and nationalities who may be employed in those occupations demystifies popular notions of segmented labour markets and in that sense creates new rules (rubric) of discrimination such as those based on the governance framework of the “Kafala system.” The advantage of one person over the other among the pink-collar category is based on the visa status of the worker and his /her relationship with the employer. This paper provides an insight into the lives of the “state-disowned” daughters, wives and mothers whose transnational journeys presented through their vignettes of this precise intersectional edifice renders them “heroically victimized.”

Rano and Sanju (30 and 32 years respectively), found themselves homeless and on the wrong side of law soon after seeking work as housemaids in a Kuwaiti household. They had heard stories from local agents about potential possibilities of working in the Gulf region, they were particularly attracted by some radio programs that described the grandeur of Arab households. Advertisements in the local dailies held much promise. The horror stories that they heard were often dampened by the lure for the “dinar” and possibility of transformation of their lives marred by their positioning at the lower end of class and caste differentials.

“We were three of us, all of us beaten. We then decided to run away. I had the number of this “didi” from Nepal. At midnight we sat outside the house hiding in the garden under the bushes. Half lying, half sitting position for four hours, till 4.00 A.M. We had to wait until dawn, so we could get a taxi. Later, we started walking on the pavements; we did not know where we were going. There was no taxi in sight; we had no money on us. Later, we saw a cleaner on the road, those who wear those yellow dresses and collect garbage. This man was from India. We asked him for telephone to call the “didi,” who asked us to take a taxi and reach her address and said that she would pay the taxi fare. We have not been given four months’ wages, so we are penniless. I will not lie to you sister, Kuwaitis are not good at all. I was not aware of the work, to operate the machines etc. We work with hand back home. The “Kuwaiti mama” (colloquial equivalent of mother) becomes frustrated and scolds. Kuwaiti boys are also not good and that is why I ran away. I don’t have my residency but at least I am free of torture,” said Sanju. Sanju continued her tale of torture; I held her hand, as she was continuously trembling during our conversation.

“There was a small room for “Khadamas” (housemaids) and the young Kuwaiti boys would come to grab us, they would look for opportunities when any one of us would be alone. I cannot mention enough.....bursts out crying. All three of us ran away together. Two of us are Nepalese and the third is an Indonesian. There is a lot of trouble in that house. Earlier, one of our Nepali friends had also run away from the Kuwaiti house because the boys in the house sexually assaulted her. The Kuwaiti boy in my sponsor’s house held me but I fought back and my hand became all black and swollen. We had shared all our troubles with “Kuwaiti mama” (employer’s wife) but she did not care and refused to help.”

Rano and Sanju’s predicament towards self-preservation in a strange land perhaps is one among many more unheeded stories, which resonate fear and despair from their standpoint and apathy from the side of the state. Women more than men tend to occupy jobs within the informal sector,

which is not covered by any labor legislation or social protection. They are, therefore, at heightened risk of abuse and exploitation. Also, women migrants themselves lack knowledge of their rights, fear the authorities and are not organized (Kawar 2004).

Syeda Bano and Lalita Beebi are two amongst several workers, who, emigrated to the Gulf region with support from unregistered agents based on hearsay and media propagated imagery of upturns as a consequence of migration, especially with a desire to make some quick money in order to meet unprecedented expenses. What conspires actually, is situations beyond their control, an “engulfment” of sorts. There is absolutely no possibility of discretion by the worker regarding the kind of work that she may be comfortable with. These women workers are deprived of their elementary upkeep such as suitable clothing and basic wages, their employers abuse them physically, constantly remind them of their lack of expertise in handling electric equipment, lack of knowledge of the local language and inability to cope with the physical environment. Both women fled from their Kuwaiti employers and sought shelter with the Indian Embassy. The Embassy houses rarest of rare cases of women workers who have no other source of support and return home. The passports of these workers are more often, than not, withheld by their employers who demand either compensation or servitude (for an indefinite period of time) in return. The Embassy is usually unable to prevail upon the locals and instead provides a via media to deport such disputed run-away workers through finger printing as a one-time exit pass from Kuwait.⁷

Syeda Bano despairingly laments, “Please send me to my children in God’s name. This seems endless; my children are crying and waiting for my return. I have been called for finger imprinting, some 2-3 months ago. God knows what’s going on, I cannot work with employers who refuse to pay me month after month and upon being asked, beat me up and molest me, I had to flee and seek help from the Embassy. I do not want to work here. The system over here is not good (Kuwait ka system achha nahi hai madam, bilkul achha nahi hai).” Lalita adds, “I just want to return, I do not care about earning money any more, if I stay back I will die, I just want to leave, I cannot live here. I was taken to Saudi from the airport, and after a few months brought back to Kuwait. My finger imprints have been taken, I just want to return, I am unwell. They give food and then make me work 24 hours in the day, I cannot take it, I have no soap for bathing, no time to sleep.”

Syeda and Lalita occupy the category of women workers who are expected to be grateful to the state for sheltering them and leisurely processing their return at the cost of a five year ban to the possibility of seeking work in the gulf countries if they so desire. They must not even think of redemption from abuse by their erstwhile sponsor who now withholds their passports and is seeking compensation for his/her bad choice. Repeated abuse of these workers in Kuwait from the South Asian subcontinent highlights the all-pervasive constraints of gender in the transnational setting. These women workers are helpless recipients of much terror and agony at the hands of unscrupulous agents and unforgiving employers. These disowned women workers are then caught at the crossroads of their social location, which aggregates the intersection of nationality, language, occupation and visa status as the axes of analysis, in-fact as a continuum of increasing abuse from the point of their departure from their homeland to their current dilemma.

⁷ In the absence of legal documents as in passport and residence identification proof, in cases of dispute with the employer, the migrant workers are deported by their respective embassies after giving their finger imprints, which then qualifies them for an “out pass” for crisis deportation. This out pass enables them return, but bars such workers from employment in any part of the GCC countries for the next five years.

My focus on the individual and the household reroute the discussion to the examination of the 'manner in which women workers interpret media frames', at times of personal crisis in the regional idiom. The socio-cultural motivations and obligations for decisions such as international mobility, at the level of the household are fueled by media caricatures of success stories that sell. For instance, there is a considerable volume of literature on migration from Kerala to the Gulf countries, which until the 1990s centered on economic motivations. This literature presents international migration as a success story leading to individual prosperity. The problem of exploitation of emigrant domestic workers and providing a lifeline to Kerala's otherwise sagging economy. More recently, it has been argued that migration has contributed significantly to the "turnaround" in growth witnessed problem by Kerala's economy in the 1990s (Gok 2006).

The social impact of mass migration is rarely reported. The impact of migration on men and women and on the youth of missing parents, social problems such as substance abuse amongst youth, absentee spouses at the sending end, the repercussions on family upon the death of migrant workers abroad are few indices of the remittance driven transnational migration process. In the absence of appropriate, comprehensive and compelling reporting. There is little pressure on the government to act on some of the serious questions surrounding the export of labour. Manpower agencies within Nepal and in the Gulf States have been accused by workers of charging excessive fees and extracting bribes yet little has been done to curb their activities.

As many as 3,272 Nepali migrant workers died in the Gulf countries and Malaysia between 2009 and 2014, with 847 recorded as dying from heart failure. The question is, why do so many, most below the age of 40, suffer heart failure? Is it because of the extremely hot and unpleasant conditions? Or are there other factors at play? Comprehensive and compelling coverage of the lives of migrant workers is rare, with few journalists or media outlets having the resources, the imagination and enthusiasm to carry out the task.⁸

The print, visual and now digital media cannot be held as the sole manufacturer of stories that sell. They represent the changing times, ideological bandwagons of the moment and a reprieve of sorts for some, from extraordinary intelligence in order to form an opinion and undertake decisions. In short, the convolution of societal misgivings is subtly exaggerated rather than pacified by the pace keeping media. Research carried out by the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South program indicates an urgent need to provide migrants with information and assistance before departure, at their destinations, and on their return to Nepal. Unfortunately, there are no coherent and coordinated national or international policies to manage migration.⁹ Recruiting agencies fail to provide effective and reliable service.¹⁰

Conclusion

Centered in the debate around media impasse and media revolution is the obscuring conceptualization of realism and virtualism. Might I say, there is a need therefore to resurrect (avenge if I may say so, much like the avengers in "End Game") the realism of reality? The real

⁸ <https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/resources/publications/moving-stories/nepal>

⁹ Many problems faced by migrants is because of lack of laws or insufficient law enforcement on the part of the Nepalese government and governments of the migrants' destinations (Thieme, Bhattraï, Gurung, Kollmair, Siddhi Manandhar and Müller-Böker, 2005).

¹⁰ Thieme, Bhattraï, Gurung, Kollmair, Manandhar and Müller-Böker (2005) argue that international migration particularly of women workers to the gulf countries is steeped in media duress supplemented by unreliable recruitment agents.

is mundane, recurrent, slow-paced and slow-fast paced (implying the relativity of our social pace). The real lies in the caveat of our existential fundamentals, exposures, accessibilities and motivations. It includes information, which is codified in order to ascertain the functioning of social institutions that enable the regulation of human conduct and systems of beliefs that awaken us to the wisdom of the very purpose of life and living. This is to say that “the real” fulcrums on elementary rules preordained by codes of law and morality which determine our conduct. Media must capture this reality not as a frame but as conscientious responsibility awaiting redressal through the various agencies/agents of empowerment in the multifarious domains of governance and administration.

Media has remained the flag bearer of debate and determinism amongst the accomplices of politics, religion and capital and between the privileged and the commoners who remain at the receiving end of the social innuendoes of the privileged few. Historically, media has anchored the interface between dismal reality and future possibility. The yesteryears radio and television sets with their timely news hours brought home the cacophony of the world while also served as the sole medium of imaginative recluse. It provided information that rendered us humbler and emotionally and mentally stringed to the cause of humanity. We were information hungry thus explored the length and breadth of each available media (print, visual) to get to the bottom of this same existential reality. It implored us to seek knowledge beyond the vignette’s that the media presented and therefore informed our opinion. The conditions under which information was disseminated and received followed similar humane element which enabled some migrant pink-collar women from parts of South Asia to become the success stories that form the cornerstone of the “migrant experience”(with particular reference to Nepal, Sri Lanka and Southern India) today. Much like the chase for the “American Dream” that motivated not just Americans but also professionals from South Asia (particularly Engineering, medical and IT professionals from India in 1950’s and 1960’s after the second world war), Gulf countries were dreamt of as the goldmine for the less privileged. This is not to take away the historical symbiosis of the Persian Gulf with South Asia. It can be argued that the recent growth of immigration from the Indian subcontinent is not a new phenomenon but the resurgence of a tradition of migration dating back to the 1930’s encouraged by the rapid exhaustion of Arab Labor supplies. The Persian Gulf has had a long tradition of migration and that from the earliest part of this century, the nature of this migration, especially during the British period, was neither “natural” nor “accidental,” but was in fact shaped and transformed by conscious decisions and active agencies (Oommen and Jain 2016).¹¹

A major change that has influenced the feminization of migration over the last few decades is the increasing awareness of how words and images can be tainted, and how messages and images can be maneuvered for maximum effect—for commercials, political, religious and to meet the forces of global capitalist interest through the process of transnational migration. The cutting of phrases has been a well-known technique, today much easier than in the era of reel-to-reel tape recordings, when such editing was accomplished through physical splicing. Now such editing or altering of what Manuel Castells has called “real virtuality” is often discernable only to trained specialists. The “network society” enables trans regional ideas to be scaled down and applied to a multitude of local societies and understood in ways never originally intended. The term *algorithm* has now entered the general vocabulary, suggesting how messages and images

¹¹ Oommen and Jain (2016) provide a detailed account of the dominance of South Asia in GCC migration.

can now be crafted to reach individuals in ways not imagined by propagandists, preachers, religious movements, advertisers, or others in earlier eras. (Eickelman, 2018). This paper ignites the proverbial “fire in the belly” to urge the stalwarts to review media advocacy not merely as an instrument of scaling up predetermined phenomena and occurrences rather undertake process driven content writing and dialogue. The case studies of pink-collar women workers caught up in the then and now of this media inspired transnational migrant journey from parts of South Asia to Kuwait must be seen as appeals of helpless women workers who are awakening our conscience to the relentless Nirbhaya stories buried in the deserts of the Gulf regions.

This paper only presents glimpses of ethnographic evidence and areas that seek media vanguard. Media itself needs an intersectional overhaul in order to optimize its potential as a real agent of social change. Merely extended access to information may not do the job, media would have to discursively mainstream with the who’s who in order to be able to create ownership of our migrant women workers who ironically continue to be bearers of both biological and social reproduction of social structures centered in patriarchy.

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